

**A STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATION OF CHILDHOOD IN WILLIAM  
BLAKE'S "THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER" AND CHARLES DICKENS'  
HARD TIMES**

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**Introduction**

The research paper concentrates on the treatment of Childhood influenced by Romantic discourse in "The Chimney Sweeper" by William Blake and the Paradox of Utilitarianism and Dystopia in *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens. It examines the treatment of Childhood on the background of Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century England. The aim of the paper is to critically study the effects of child labour. The dangerous and exhausting work undertaken by children in factories and mines led to a dramatic increase in the time of Industrial Revolution. The paper also wrestles between Romanticism and Utilitarianism and literary responses of writers which include William Blake and Charles Dickens.

**Body**

In 1837, Britain was still a rural population with eighty percent of the population living in the countryside. New machines were invented that could do jobs in a fraction of time. This left many people out of work so they moved into the towns and cities in search of work. Most of the work was in the factories and many of the factory workers were children. The new factories and mines were hungry for workers and required the execution of simple tasks that could easily be performed by children. The result was a surge in child labour – presenting a new kind of problem that Victorian society had to tackle. These are the children of evolution. The children built Victorian England. The children's relation to the world of work was complex. Their employment helped build up Britain's Industrial power. But it also contributed to the modern notions of childhood and there were many children who signed up for work without really knowing what they were letting themselves in for. Work was a substitute for social welfare. Children would work for fourteen to fifteen hours a day possibly of overwork time, fortunately or unfortunately they would get little money or they weren't paid. Child labourers led very hard and grossly disgusting lives of filth. Employers most often hired children over adults because children were powerless and would not revolt. The factory system split up families for as much as fourteen hours. The time they did have together were either spent in eating or sleeping.

One of the most brutal form of child labour was chimney sweeping. Young boys and girls learnt how to climb inside chimneys to clear off the soot. However there were many dangers like burns, falls and suffocation. The chimneys were usually very narrow and twisted. Children often got stuck or froze with terror in the cramped darkness. If this happened the Chimney Sweeper would simply light fire underneath to 'encourage' them to get on with their work. The work was often dangerous and painful and some children died of suffocation. On the other hand textile mills were crowded and poorly ventilated causing diseases such as fussy jaws, black lung and other fatal lung diseases. The lack of machinery caused workers to be crushed or beaten to death.

Occasionally they would be chained, belted or harnessed like dogs. They became saturated with wet soot and more than half naked, crawling upon their hands and knees, and dragging their heavy loads behind them. The widespread employment of very young children in factories and mines marked a break with traditional practice, and was something that some contemporaries found distasteful. It triggered a series of Parliamentary enquiries into the working conditions of children in mines and factories. The campaign against child labour culminated in two important pieces of legislation – the Factory Act (1833) and the Mines Act (1842). The Factory Act prohibited the employment of children younger than nine years of age and limited the hours that children between nine and thirteen could work. The Mines Act raised the starting age of colliery workers to ten years. In effect, these two Acts brought the industrial districts into line with the rest of the country and brought an end to the systematic employment of young children.

The nineteenth century concept of childhood in certain respects were not dissimilar than that of the child who had the misfortune of being born prior to the Renaissance. The child was not assigned any special category distinct from the adulthood much before the nineteenth century. If every infant however comes to participate symbolically in the life of the Christ, then sacrifice is the inevitable outcome. If one had to choose the image most closely associated with the Victorian novel, the orphan would rank high on any list. There would appear to have no greater percentage of orphans among the middle classes that provided the bulk of the audience for the nineteenth century novel. Characters representing orphans appeared in several other Dickens' novels, most memorably in the form of Oliver Twist, with his narrow escape as the apprentice of Mr. Gamfield the chimney-sweep, and in *David Copperfield*. *David Copperfield* was based loosely on Dickens' own experiences of starting work at Warren's Blacking factory at the age of twelve following his father's imprisonment for debt. The child without parental guidance or support exists partially in a metaphoric level. To probe the popularity of the emblem is to find out how the concept of child invaded the consciousness of the Victorian era.

The orphan came to symbolize all the discontinuities that faced the age. Although child abuses were rampant during the Victorian period, the phenomena corresponding to workhouses and chimney sweepers could be found in any period in history.

The wretched figure of the child sweep is a key emblem in William Blake's poems of social protest. Not only are the sweeps innocent victims of the cruelest exploitation but they are associated with the smoke of industrialization, thus uniting two central Romantic preoccupations: childhood; and the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the natural world. Blake categorizes the readers mode of perception that tend to coordinate with a chronology that would become the standard of Romanticism. Childhood is a state of protected innocence rather than of original sin, but not immune to the fallen world and its institutions. To do away with the childhood is a way to relieve parents of an important obligation: it makes every child an orphan in role whether he is in fact or not. It means every parent participates only vicariously in the upbringing of the child. To make every child a "little adult" has two effects: first every adult participates in childhood fantasy freely, since there are no longer barriers separating the subject and object and secondly there is the threat of real damage to the family structure, since every individual adaptation becomes a function of his adaptation. The poem "*The Chimney Sweeper*" is set against the dark background of child labour that was well known in England in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Blake writes these poems to let the reader know that many kid's lives are being exploited in the cities of England. He expresses his disgust about the plight of the majority of the chimney

sweepers and how the society and church turn a blind eye of their sufferings. In the society they live in, innocent children are in anguish because of the harsh treatment of the adult population. While it endorses hope, the reader must acknowledge that something needs to be done to improve the lives of these children. The chimney sweepers are in a sense destitute since their parents sell them to sweep the soot. The following lines explain the soot that sticks on their body is so choking that the boy in his dream views it as a coffin.

And so he was quiet, and that very night,

As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight!  
 That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,  
 Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black.

*Songs of Innocence* opens with the child like voice of the chimney sweeper.

When my mother died I was very young,  
 And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
 Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!  
 So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

The first words of the poem seem to contradict its categorization as innocent, mentioning a mother's death. Blake's view in the second line reinforces this feeling as the child was sold by his father when he was very young. But the parents of the sweeper in *Songs of Experience* are still alive, but have gone to the Church to pray. However, the experience version begins by describing the boy as "A little black thing", dehumanizing him completely.

A little black thing among the snow,  
 Crying 'weep! 'weep!' in notes of woe!  
 'Where are thy father and mother, say?' —  
 'They are both gone up to the Church to pray.'

The fact that he stands "among the snow" is a great contrast to his appearance. The snow is also symbolic of bleakness and death surrounding the child and possibly also the cold, uncaring world in which he lives. In "*The Chimney Sweeper*" from *Songs of Innocence*, there is an immense contrast between the death, weeping, exploitations and oppression that Tom Dacre endures and his childlike innocence that enables him to be naive about his grave situation and the widespread injustice in the society. Tom Dacre's imagination takes him on a lovely journey with his ultimate hope of being nurtured and cared for by his Father in Heaven.

In the following lines William Blake creates sympathy and sharp awareness for Tom Dacre, who represents other neglected children in poverty, by introducing his personal tragedy at the beginning of the poem. Tom Dacre's innocence is being forcibly stolen from him.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,  
 That curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd: so I said

His sacrificial life to society is emphasized as William Blake shares a narrative of Tom Dacre's hair that symbolizes lamb's hair, is shaved off. Even deeper the lamb symbolizes the Christian theme of Christ's purity.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
 And he open'd the coffins and set them all free;  
 Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,  
 And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

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The middle of the poem brings heartfelt smiles for the children and the children filled with laughter and happiness. The poem also throws light upon the miserable life of young children who are subject to inhuman treatment in the society of industrialized England. Tom's dream is a realistic picture of his life.

That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,  
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black.

The coffin of soot in which he saw his fellow workers locked up is nothing but the coating of soot that stuck on their body when they came out aftersweeping the chimney. The term "coffin" also suggests the danger of death that lurked in the work the little boys did. Tom dreams that the sweepers are shut up and locked in a black coffin but they are not locked up forever. The angel with bright keys liberates them and they begin to play and revel in the air. Their innocence is preserved with the help of God. The "little black boy" who suffers injustice on earth, gets justice in heaven. The chimney sweepers also suffers much on earth but will be free to sport on clouds when they are liberated by the angel. In this study we see that Tom's dream makes him hope that a wonderful life waits for him.

'And because I am happy and dance and sing,  
They think they have done me no injury,  
And are gone to praise God and His Priest and King,  
Who make up a Heaven of our misery.'

His faith in God is so strong that it becomes his only constant source of hope and inspiration. In a sense this last stanza is not just a conclusion of his dreams and hope but Tom's desperate desire for freedom and life. The optimistic outlook, which is real to Tom, is revealed to be unrealistic on earth. In *Songs of Experience* the child lays all the blame for his condition on his parents, which is understandable as children in their fully dependent state, naturally view their parents as virtually all powerful. A child chimney sweeper was abandoned in the snow, while his parents were in the Church. Blake's target is not parents who force their children to work, but rather the rich and powerful who exploit the poor and weak. The King enjoys his wealth and comfort at the expense of his subjects. The Priest enjoys his work. And God as creator ultimately is responsible for this unjust world. As the child is abused by his parents, indirectly they are also abused by "God and his Priest and King". Thus Blake condemns the injustice of both late eighteenth century British society and a world in which such injustice is allowed to exist. The sweeper's parents are really no help towards their own child. If they are worshipping god, the source of good doings, why do they chose to ignore their own child? They would rather turn their heads the other way and instead find love at church. The duty of parents is to protect the children from harm and troubles. But here the parents of the chimney sweeper neglect their child and go to pray.

They clothèd me in the clothes of death,  
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

Even the clothes that the parents provided for the child are the clothes of death and not any protective covering. As the child has done no injury, the parents go to worship God and praise the priest and king who make a heaven out of the miseries of the child. Blake has portrayed two very different ideas by describing the situation of a chimney sweeper. Both the sections prove that the life of the child is dismal and unfulfilling, in a cruel and uncharitable world, portrayed through Blake's use of symbols. His *Songs of Experience* presented a very dark

and pessimistic world. This poem also seems to be very judgmental and gives motives for everything, but unlike *Songs of Innocence*, the sweeper in this poem does not free himself from his misery. During this time many children were dying from being, either overwork or from malnutrition. Neither the state nor the church did anything to stop this and is obviously why Blake has so much anger towards them. The sweeper's parents were not careful about their children. They would rather turn their heads the other way and instead find love at church. In his *Songs of Innocence* Blake suggests that there is a life after death which will make up for the chimney sweeper's hardship, encouraging him to stay positive. *Songs of Experience* clearly shows Blake's anger towards society. He used many of his poems to make people aware of the suffering of people. This study also presents that, Blake wrote two separate books to give a fuller effect. *Songs of Innocence* presents a collection of poems that shows happy and innocent perception in pastoral harmony but poems like "*The Chimney Sweeper*" presents a subtle danger and vulnerable state of children. Whereas *Songs of Experience* presents a state of being marked by the loss of childhood vitality, by social and political corruption and by the manifold oppression of the Church, State and the ruling classes. Both Chimney-Sweeper poems show Blake to be a radical critic of the social injustices of his age. His indictment of desperate material conditions and those institutions which perpetuate them is passionate and powerful, but his greatest anger is reserved for the forces – the established Church and uncaring parents that restricted their vision and prevented them from understanding both their oppression and the infinite possibilities of true perception.

In an essay on *Hard Times*, Northrop Frye states,

It is clear that *Hard Times* . . . comes nearest to . . . dystopia, the book, which like *Brave New World* and *1984* shows us the nightmare world that results from certain perverse tendencies inherent in society getting free play. The worst effects of dystopia are likely . . . certain features in his society that most directly threaten his own social function as a writer. The cult of facts and statistics is a threat . . . to unfettered imagination. (Frye, *Humors* 82, 83).

*Hard Times* as a representative Victorian fiction presents the inhumanities of the Victorian civilization sanctioned by hardcore facts and subtle emotions. There is a constant foreshadowing of tussle between Romanticism and Utilitarianism. While Utilitarianism focuses on hard facts and calculations, Romanticism is more spiritual, tends towards the artistic and the poetic and makes aesthetic valuations that Utilitarianism finds irrelevant. The Utilitarian philosophy of education and life unwittingly enters into the minds of pupils who struggle to come to terms with the meaning of good and evil, life and death, happiness and sadness. Dickens does not in any way attempt to present a moral teaching but concretizes the reflection of a Victorian Industrialist society in and through Coketown and brings to life English characters from his environment. The literary representation of dystopia as portrayed in the *Hard Times* is also a mirror to the incredible adversity and penury Dickens himself underwent in his childhood. *Hard Times* presents the transition Industrial Revolution caused the British Society. Coketown is a representative of industrial society. Industrial society was pragmatic, materialistic and self-interested. The spiritual sphere is completely neglected in this type of society. People have, therefore, undergone a process of alienation: they have been transformed into machines that do the same actions repeatedly. They have been deprived of their human warmth and lost their

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emotions and sentiments. And this situation is exemplified best in *Signs of Times*, where Thomas Carlyle states:

Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practices the great art of adapting means to ends. Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance. For the simplest operation, some helps and accompaniments, some cunning abbreviating process is in readiness. (Carlyle, *Signs of Times*, pp. 1-9)

The grotesque, materialist inclination of the city is explained in words like “red brick,” “smoke and ashes,” “unnatural red and black,” “painted face of a savage,” “interminable serpents of smoke,” “never got uncoiled,” “black canal,” “ill-smelling dye,” “vast pile of buildings full of windows,” “rattling and trembling,” “steam-engine worked monotonously,” and “elephant in a state of melancholy madness.” The utilitarian education denied any vent for emotion and creativity. *Hard Times* illustrates the plight of a mechanized society—physical and mental mechanization—symbolized in its fictional characters. Mechanization of the society begins with school enveloped in facts and facts alone. Where the power of education is treated throughout the novel, and the balance between leisure and diligence is definitely dependent upon the methods of force and power demonstrated.

*Hard Times* presents the grotesque representation of conflict between Romanticism and Utilitarianism through the characters of Cecilia Jupe, Louisa Gradgrind, Tom Gradgrind, Thomas Gradgrind and others. Sissy is an independent and imaginative person. Gradgrind fails to impress Sissy, an epitome of imagination and free thinking. She is a member of a traveling circus, we can expect Cecilia to represent “Art” and “Fancy” in contrast to M’Choakumchild, one of one forty one schoolmasters who “had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs” (Dickens, *Hard Times*). Sissy’s rejection of Gradgrind is natural because Sissy is born of innate sympathy for human beings. Sissy thinks with her heart. On the other hand, Louisa is crippled in her natural features as she is influenced by Gradgrind’s teachings of facts and logic. Louisa, after having been spied, accuses her father of unpleasant child rearing which created in her a never-ending wilderness created by the Utilitarian ambience around her. Gradgrind is an embodiment of the beliefs of industrialization. He is “a man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not talked into allowing for anything over” (4). He is an honourable member of the parliament. Dickens exercises his imagination feverishly to describe his “model” class that is devoid of imagination. In Chapters One and Two, the children are symbolized as plants, pitchers, cannon targets, and machines waiting for an electrical charge. This complex metaphor tells us that the children are depersonalized. They lose their humanity and become machines charged from without—not from within. They are objects for adults to destroy. This fanciful variety, further, tells us through irony that the objects to be denied the exercise of imagination can effectively be referred to in fanciful. Sissy’s insight is not a product

of formal schooling. It is born from an innate sympathy for other human beings. Sissy thinks with her heart. This unschooled innocent demolishes the school concepts of fact and statistic by showing up the lack of humanity in this thinking. She, in effect, gets to the heart of the social problems without logic. Her answers to Mr. Grandgrinds definition of a horse underscore the dramatic irony of the passages, for here Sissy is profoundly right without knowing it. *Hard Times* is an anti-utilitarian novel abused in different aspects of utilitarianism, such as the educational level, social and economic level. It is the condemnation of utilitarianism, materialism and the existing social order. This story is loaded with bitter dislike for Industrialism of England. Dickens also attacks the hypocrisy and false pride of the upper classes of the Victorian Age.

In the passage below:

The first object with which they had an association, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black board with a dry Ogre chalking ghastly white figures on it.

Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Ogre Fact forbid! I only use the word to express a monster in a lecturing castle, with Heaven knows how many heads manipulated into one, taking childhood captive, and dragging it into gloomy statistical dens by the hair.

Dickens takes a motif from children's literature and explicitly names the teacher as an "ogre" who is taking childhood captive, and dragging it into gloomy statistical dens by the hair. The "loophole" is a symbol of escape both mentally and physically. The symbol of contrast to the loophole is Stone Lodge, the home of Gradgrind, and most definitely a "statistical den."

Dickens's simile presents the garden "like a botanical account-book" and this sustains the underlying comparison between the statistical, grinding classifications (mathematical, metallurgical) and the freedom that one expects from nature. The children's "dissection" of the "Great Bear" constellation is a metaphor for the murder of fancy and mythology. And this is explicitly witnessed in the description of Stone Lodge by Dickens:

A very regular feature on the face of the country, Stone Lodge was. Not the least disguise toned down or shaded off that uncompromising fact in the landscape. A great square house, with a heavy portico darkening the principal windows, as its master's heavy brows overshadowed his eyes. A calculated, cast up, balanced, and proved house. Six windows on this side of the door, six on that side; a total of twelve in this wing, a total of twelve in the other wing; four-and-twenty carried over to the back wings. A lawn and garden and an infant avenue, all ruled straight like a botanical account-book. Gas and ventilation, drainage and water-service, all of the primest quality. Iron clamps and girders, fire-proof from top to bottom; mechanical lifts for the housemaids, with all their brushes and brooms; everything that heart could desire.

Mr. Gradgrind's blind face prevents him from enjoying fancy but it also prevents him from seeing the contradictions in his thought and the loopholes through which his model children might escape. And this is sustained in the images of animal "celebrities" from nursery rhymes figures which are unfamiliar for young Louisa and Thomas. Thematically, there have been several "loopholes" in the Gradgrind training. There is the loophole as peephole, which is a symbol that foreshadows a continued defiance (at least on Louisa's part); there is also the loophole of contradiction where astronomy permits the "Great Bear" but the real dog

"Merrylegs" and the painted representation of "horses dancing sideways" on a wall are forbidden.

No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon; it was up in the moon before it could speak distinctly. No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are! No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gradgrind having at five years old dissected the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and

driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in a field with that famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the dog who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the malt, or with that yet more famous cow who swallowed Tom Thumb: it had never heard of those celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as a graminivorous ruminating quadruped with several stomachs.

The dog, Merry legs, and the name of the public-house Pegasus's Arms are symbols of the "fancy" that Sleary's company offers, in contrast to the world of hard facts and figures Of Stone Lodge. The world of circus is a gateway to imagination and fancy where Romantic idealism revolves around, while on the other hand Stone Lodge is the epitome of Utilitarianism consisting of metallurgical and mathematical mindsets. And this philosophy of Utility is very well found in the first chapter of *Hard Times* where the speaker begins with the statement:

Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the mind of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them.

These lines sum up the rationalist philosophy where facts are important because they enable individuals to further their own interest. Ironically, while Gradgrind refers to the pupils in his school as "reasoning animals" and compares their minds to fertile soil in which facts can be sowed, he treats them like machines by depriving them of feeling and fantasy. His jarringly short sentences and monotonous repetition of the word "Fact" illustrate his own mechanical, unemotional character. In the chapter "Father and Daughter" of *Hard Times*, a similar situation comes when Gradgrind is seen advising Louisa on the Importance of facts. He is contended that Louisa has the capacity to view everything from a dispassionate ground of reason and calculation.

'My dear Louisa,' said her father, 'I prepared you last night to give me your serious attention in the conversation we are now going to have together. You have been so well trained, and you

do, I am happy to say, so much justice to the education you have received, that I have perfect confidence in your good sense. You are not impulsive, you are not romantic, you are accustomed to view everything from the strong dispassionate ground of reason and calculation. From that ground alone, I know you will view and consider what I am going to communicate.'

Dickens is naturally interested in illustrating that fiction cannot be excluded from a fact-filled, mechanical society. Gradgrind's children, however, grow up in an environment where all flights of fancy are discouraged, and they end up with serious social dysfunctions as a result. Tom becomes a hedonist who has little regard for others, while Louisa remains unable to connect with others even though she has the desire to do so. On the other hand, Sissy, who grew up with the



circus, constantly indulges in the fancy forbidden to the Gradgrinds, and lovingly raises Louisa and Tom's sister in a way more complete than the upbringing of either of the older siblings. Just as fiction cannot be excluded from fact, fact is also necessary for a balanced life. If Gradgrind had not adopted her, Sissy would have no guidance, and her future might be precarious. As a result, the youngest Gradgrind daughter, raised both by the factual Gradgrind and the fanciful Sissy, represents the best of both worlds.

### Conclusion

Both "*Chimney Sweeper*" and *Hard Times* are devoid of the natural world of fancy and imagination. While the little children as Chimney Sweepers sweep with a hope that God will come to their aid, the Grandgrinds on the other hand are constantly grinding their facts to reach a rational momentum devoid of rhymes, fiction and imagination. Lewis Carroll the author of *Alice in Wonderland* came up with the idea of the child that was natural who rises to the challenges of the weird and wonderful world. Relationship between the development of language and growth of the child has been loose particularly in Victorian England where the very concept of development was almost a myth, the kind of myth that accompanies the pragmatic and progress-oriented temperaments. The late eighteenth and nineteenth century witnessed the derogatory aspects of Industrial Revolution. And to bring about awareness writers like William Blake, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Barrette Browning and Lewis Carroll wrote extensively to probe into the disillusionment of life brought about by Industrial Revolution. Child Labour exists even at the present times. But with literary pieces like "*The Chimney Sweeper*" and *Hard Times*, one can understand the complexities and incoherent idealism that prevailed during the Victorian Times. Both Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" in Industrial England and Dickens' "Coketown" are presented as dirty, polluted, unpleasant and monotonous places to live in. They are places of suffering and exploitation. However, the solutions they propose to solve the problems they see in their societies is completely different: Blake suggests that the only way to eliminate poor people's sufferings is through a violent transformation of society, while Dickens proposes a moral change in the attitude of rich people towards the poor. Dickens is not arguing against education, science or progress. He is arguing against a mode of factory-style, mind-numbing, grad-grinding production that takes the fun out of life. But even worse than the loss fun or leisure, Dickens is arguing that art requires an inquisitive and desiring mind.

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