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MLA 102

Professor Paulson/Robinson

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### Child and the Family: Psychological Impact of Child Labor During the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Industrialization is often regarded as the most significant practical achievement of the enlightenment era. It is the force that powered the engine of capitalism and ushered a new age of technology and innovation. Though the story of industrialization has been dominated by the narrative of progress, its history lies in exploiting the most vulnerable of society. Britain, where factories first cropped up in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, had its economic growth fueled by families sending their children to toil away in what Dickens described as 'satanic mills'. For my essay, I want to focus on the psychological impact of factory work on children through the lens of family ties. Inspired by Marx's heart-rending description of children in the factory system in *Das Kapital* and worker autobiographies, I want to examine the family conditions prevalent in the early industrial era that promoted child labor and highlight the resulting emotional trauma in children. Also, in the course of my research, I want to critically examine some alternate opinions on child labor and the 'good' it brought to their families.

My early research points to abject poverty in rural families as the main driving force of child labor. Inability to support large families on small farms would force people from villages to move to cities in search of employment. Demands of the city life would then make the parents see their kids as extra pairs of hands that can earn money to feed themselves. Parents' attitudes directly impacted the children's psyche, who grew up with the same mentality and put their

children through a similar grind. What followed was a major change in the family dynamics of the period causing estrangement from family members. However, a few scholars have pointed out that moving to the city actually helped the poorest of families financially and prevented their collapse. I want to examine these claims in more detail to evaluate their overall merit. In conclusion, exploring the mentality of battling poverty by employing children will shed much light on a child's emotional development.

In addition to the general poverty, male-bread winner frailty contributed towards child labor and exposing children to the pressures of running a family from a young age. Relegating mothers to household chores and over-reliance on the father as the sole provider resulted in low-income households. The father's death or abandonment only exacerbated the already dire financial situation, creating a need for children to find employment in any shape or form. Labor from a young age deprived many of the chance to live a normal childhood, and supporting the family became their primary objective in life. Personal accounts from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century highlight the depression children faced due to leading such a demanding life. There is a scholarly opinion that the same circumstances also developed a feeling of agency and pride in the children elevating their confidence, but the overall psychological impact is tough to evaluate without further research. With the help of papers analyzing autobiographical evidence, I want to understand the psychological impact of compensating for male-bread winner frailty and determine whether it had a net positive or negative impact on children.

Where the pressure to substitute the income of a male head made life hell for children, family separation due to being sent to residential workplaces only made the trauma worse. Harrowing recollections from some autobiographies talk about the loneliness, absence of parental care, and ever prevailing bleakness of life. Few moments of joy when parents would

come to meet their children made the subsequent separation even more heartbreaking. Again, some reports talk about these residential factories providing basic necessities to children in the form of lodging and food, something their parents would have been unable to give. Hence the cost of separation seems to be offset with the cost of survival. Gathering more data on how many children bettered in life by living and working away from parents may lend some credibility to this opinion. However, I do not doubt that longing to meet parents while keeping pace with the grind of the machine will leave deep psychological scars in the mind of a child.

A child's bond with his/her family is the most important component in his development, and any factor impacting the family will invariably affect the child. My argument for the essay is that the socio-economic conditions of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, changed the family dynamics forever and produced a generation of psychologically traumatized kids. The slant that I have developed so far from my reading is that the horrors of child labor forever strained the family bonds and that damage never got undone. I plan to read more books on childhood and labor and find support for my claim through published research. Autobiographies from the period will also be vastly helpful in illuminating the emotional component of the story. However, my biggest challenge is the slew of alternate opinions which claim that the changed dynamics were actually beneficial for the family and, in some ways, positively impacted the psychology of the child. My commitment is to analyze all the material on the topic critically and at the same time enlightening myself of the demands and desires of childhood in the changing times of early industrialization.

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