

**Impact of industrialization on child labour:
An analysis of Caroline Norton's *A Voice from the Factories***

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Abstract: The Victorian Age was a period of economic progress for England, driven by technological advancements and the expansion of power. During this era, the British Empire dominated much of the world, and the imperialists bragged that the Sun never sets on the vast empire. The main factor behind this rapid economic progress was industrialization, which was marked by the establishment of various industries across the nation. But the industrialization of Great Britain was not without its consequences; the advent of the Industrial Revolution brought with it an increased demand for cheap industrial labour. It was the poor working-class families that were brought in to supply this cheap labour to meet the increasing demands of the fast-progressing nation. Many children from such families were also hired to keep the nation's economic graph pointing upward. Child labour, thus, became a by-product of industrialization in England. While the mighty nation revelled in the glorious result of the Industrial Revolution, the poor children toiled hard, hidden away in dark, gloomy factories. This paper aims at exploring the issue of child labour during this period through the poem *A Voice from the Factories: In Serious Verse* by Caroline Norton, a prominent Victorian poet and activist. It examines the sufferings and depravity of child labourers in Industrial England as addressed by Norton and many of her contemporaries.

Keywords: child labour, industrialization, economic progress, Industrial Revolution

The process of industrialization began in Great Britain in the 18th century and then gradually spread to other parts of the world from there. The English economic historian Arnold Toynbee originally

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popularised the phrase ‘Industrial Revolution’ to characterize Britain’s economic growth from 1760 to 1840.

In the essay titled “Child Labour”, Emma Griffin (2014) argues that while Industrial Revolution was not the beginning of child labour, it certainly played a central role in the surge of child labour in Industrial England. The emergence of new factories and mines saw an increased demand for workers who could perform simple tasks, thus encouraging child labour. The resulting surge in child labour due to industrialization soon became “a new kind of problem that Victorian society had to tackle.”

This scenario of England facing the crisis of Industrialization driven child labour did not go unnoticed by the writers of the time. Many Romantic and Victorian works of literature talk about the gruelling nature of children’s work and view child labour as one of the major social evils. The well-known Romantic poet William Blake, in the poem titled “The Chimney Sweeper” published in the late 1780s, captures the sad state of child labour in England as the country rose in power riding the waves of the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, Elizabeth Barret Browning, a Victorian poet, in her poem “The Cry of the Children” accuses 19th century England of forcing labour on poor, helpless children.

A prominent Victorian author whose works exclusively centered around the sooty and depressing state of industrial London and the issue of child labour is Charles Dickens. In his works like *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, Dickens exposes the harsh realities faced by the poverty-stricken working class and criticized the treatment of the people in workhouses, which were the institutions meant to support the poor. Being a victim of child labour himself, his literary works can be regarded as social commentaries of his times where poverty, deprivation of education and orphanage were common sights in the streets of London. In one of his most famous works, *Oliver Twist*, Dickens draws attention to the treatment of children in workhouses across the country. These children were not even given enough food to eat, and often had to make do with the little food they were given. Highlighting the experiences of Oliver and the other inmates of the workhouse, Dickens (2008, 39) writes, “The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again. . . gruel that might have been cast thereon”.

Dickens uses his works as a medium to depict the plight of poor, helpless children forced into becoming child labourers. Akin to

Dickens, another Victorian activist and writer, Caroline Norton composed a poem *A Voice from the Factories: In Serious Verse* to highlight the issue of child labour. In the foreword to *A Voice from the Factories: In Serious Verse*, which was published anonymously in 1836, Caroline Norton addresses her concerns to Lord Ashley, a member of Parliament at that time. In her appeal to him, she expresses her discontentment over the ineffectiveness of the British government in addressing the problems of child labourers, and disdains the indifferent attitude of the government to these poor children.

Norton's poetry is thus aimed at bringing public attention to this topic. Lord Ashley, to whom Caroline Norton dedicated her poem was a prominent figure in the British parliament. He led the 'Ten Hour Movement', a campaign to limit the working hours of children aged below thirteen to ten hours, which eventually led to the British parliament passing the Factory Act, 1833. This new Factory Act prohibited the labour of children under nine years of age and restricted the working hours of children aged nine to thirteen, to nine hours a day. Much later, he also introduced the bill which prohibited the employment of children as chimney sweeps. In 1842, as a result of his investigation into the conditions of workers in mines, the Mines and Collieries Act was passed which prohibited all women, girls, and boys under the age of ten from working underground.

Caroline Norton published her poem three years after the implementation of the Factory Act, 1833. Despite the passing of the Act, it was not enforced properly. Children were still working like slaves in the factories. It is against this backdrop that Caroline Norton wrote *A Voice from the Factories: In Serious Verse*, a plea to improve the lives of the children toiling away their lives in labour. Through the poem, she exposes the miserable lives of child labourers working in various professions including factory workers, performers and chimney sweeps.

Norton believes that childhood should be a phase of one's life that is free from all the burdens of adulthood. In her poem, she terms childhood as "the weary life's long happy holyday" (Norton 1836, 11). Reminding the readers, of the true essence of childhood, she says that the word "CHILDHOOD" invokes in us the images of hope, happiness, innocent joy, prayer, sleep, and smiles.

Because at that word, CHILDHOOD, start to birth
All dreams of hope and happiness serene –
All thoughts of innocent joy that visit earth –

Prayer —slumber — fondness -smiles — and hours of rosy mirth.
(Norton 1836, 14)

But these images are nothing, but a distant dream for the children of working class. Norton expresses her disapproval of children being made to work for the gain of others who are cruel enough to snatch away the innocence of these creatures by putting the heavy burden of child labour on their tiny shoulders. She urges the adults to recall the carefree and enjoyable childhood they had. She says that this very childhood is denied to the children who are made to work all day long. In the poem, she laments that for the child labourers "...no flowers spring up, no wild bird sings/ No moss-grown walks refresh their weary feet..." (Norton 1836, 16) Their reality is far removed from the adventures and joys of an ideal childhood.

This cruelty of prematurely snatching away the phase of childhood, she says is not limited to the employers alone; the people who simply sit and watch as spectators are also equally guilty. She takes the spectators who watch a child performer as an example. As the sad and frightened child stares at the crowd which has gathered to watch his performance, the audience keeps applauding in amazement at the performance. Watching the helpless child stage his performance in front of them provides them with the entertainment they have come to seek.

...And with a stare of numbed and childish fear
Looks sadly towards the audience come to gaze
On the unwonted skill which costs so dear,
While still the applauding crowd, with pleased amaze,
Ring through its dizzy ears unwelcome shouts of praise. (Ibid., 13)

An essay by Marah Gubar (2005) from the University of Pittsburgh titled "The Victorian Child, c.1837-1901" states that during the Victorian era, children were often used for stage performances in "pantomimes, ballets, operettas, straight dramas, minstrel shows, music halls, and circus acts." Taking examples from the nineteenth century, Gubar brings our attention to the magnanimity of the situation:

By the 1880s, Drury Lane Theatre was hiring 150-200 children per pantomime. Child prodigies like Jean Davenport and Lydia Howard astonished audiences by playing multiple roles in the same evening, while numerous companies routinely ran all-child productions. For example, the

famous D'Oyly Carte Opera Company had a children's troupe which put on Gilbert and Sullivan operettas without the help of a single adult performer.

Gubar, in her essay points out that as children began to be seen in theatres frequently, the question of whether or not performing on stage constituted child labour arose. Millicent Garrett Fawcett and other educational advocates believed that children under ten should be prohibited from full-time theatre labour, just as they were from industries and crafts. The famous author Lewis Carroll and the poet Ernest Dowson, among others, as well as theatre professionals and artists, vehemently disagreed. They insisted that acting is an art and not a chore, and kids profited and had fun doing it. However, Gubar cites Dowson's article published in 1889 titled "The Cult of the Child" in which Dowson contradicts himself by admitting that it is the adults who are delighted to watch the children perform as watching children perform on stage provided them relief from the complexities of life.

Caroline Norton acknowledges that the sight of a toiling child invokes sadness. She complains about the child workers who did not get to enjoy an ideal childhood. Norton bemoans the fact that there are so many child labourers around. The sight of children pining away at work, she says is "an unnatural and mournful sight" (Norton 1836, 15). She emphasizes that their eyes should be shining bright with joy, and their smiles should be happy and carefree. Norton wonders why these children are made to throw away their happy days and pushed into the depths of misery.

This widespread occurrence of instances of child labour was a characteristic feature of Victorian England. As Jane Humphries (2013) in the article titled "Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution" rightly points out "the topic is peripheral to the study of the industrial revolution." She believes that if we go by the suggestions of historians, child labour in Industrial Britain spread much beyond the usual mills and mines shown in the classical records. In the article, she stresses, Child labour as a predominant factor in Britain's industrialization. She comes up with this statement after analyzing numerous memoirs of men who worked as child labourers during the industrial revolution in Britain. Her analysis concluded that 1790–1850, the classic era of British industrialization, saw an upward spike in child labour.

Jonathan Saville was one of the victims of child labour in Industrial England whose autobiography was analyzed by Jane Humphries. In his

autobiography, *Memoirs of Jonathan Saville of Halifax*, Saville talks about his experience of being hired as a child labourer. He says:

I was then bound apprentice to a man . . . I had to go at six in the morning, and did not return home till six in the evening. The hardships I endured were very great. After working hard all day, I had to go two or three miles with the picks [mason's tools] to sharpen, or to spin at home till bed-time. (quoted by Humphries 2013, 396)

Saville was only one of the hundreds of children who had to live out their childhoods in misery. His accounts reflect the lives of several children employed as labourers in nineteenth-century Britain.

Victorian England witnessed a baby boom which was one of the leading reasons for the rapid advancement of the ongoing Industrial Revolution. Children were made to work in factories, coal mines, railroad constructions, farms etc. Many children were employed in textile mills during the Victorian Era. This was partly because of the small size of children who could easily reach parts of the machinery which adults could not. But work in mills was monotonous and exhausting. Children pined away in the dark, damp and dirty factories without seeing proper daylight. Caroline Norton addresses this issue when she writes about the experience of a factory-working child. Their sorrow knows no bounds and their wretched conditions in factories make their heads dizzy. They are shut in the darkness, away from the happy skies:

Beyond all sorrow which the wanderer knows,
Is that these little pent-up wretches feel...
Stamp on each sallow cheek their hateful die,
Line the smooth open brow, and sink the saddened eye.

(Norton 1836, 16)

Norton then proceeds to draw our attention to the bright season, i.e., summer. During summer, we enjoy bright flowers, birds singing, 'moss-grown walks', the soft sound of the flowing river, green meadows, etc, all of which rejuvenate us. But to the children doomed to work in mills, these refreshments are only an illusion. For them, summer only brings "A double curse of stifling withering heat" (Norton 1836, 16). While the children free from the clutches of child labour sleep peacefully, the child labourer "stands and weeps" (Ibid., 17), yearning for the leisure that is out of his reach. In silence, he goes to work at the crack of dawn. His co-workers, like him proceed to work with sad faces.

The result of this intense labour, Norton says is the decline in moral values of children. With no one to guide them in the right direction, these children succumb to moral decay, which is impossible to set straight later on. In the poem Norton quotes "...Untaught, unchecked, they yield as vice invites...Fast spreads the moral plague which nothing new shall cure" (Ibid, 18).

Child labour contributes not only in the decline of moral values among children, but also affects their physical well-being. Many child workers, especially those working in coal mines are prone to chronic illnesses. The coal dust is harmful to the kids and can result in respiratory infections. Besides, many of these children working in mines are risking their lives as explosions or cave-ins could seriously cripple or even kill them.

Norton, in *A Voice from the Factories: In Serious Verse* directs her attack at those sections of parliamentarians who raise their voices in justification of child labour. Aiming her reproach at them, she writes that the men in the British Senate defend the evil of child labour. They use various methods of oratory to impose their justifications and to prove that child labour is necessary. She writes, "Yet in the British Senate men rise up...justify this great and glaring wrong" (Ibid, 19).

These men assert themselves by saying that child labour cannot be equated to slavery; child labourers, they argue get paid for their work unlike slaves. Many lawmakers had refused to support the Factories Act citing the necessity of children for the kind of work done by them. Norton rebukes them for upholding "the cause of torture and of pain" (Ibid, 19). She says that the ones who support child labour are blinded to the lesson of "Christian Charity" (Ibid 19) by the fear of material loss. The supporters of child labour argue that child labour provides a means for the poor children to earn their daily bread. Besides, it is their parents' choice to send them to work. To these assertions, Caroline Norton replies by stating that she has come to reason with herself that children of the needy should work for the betterment of the financial situation of the family. But she pleads that they should be given only as much labour as they can handle. She raises her voice against children being overworked.

We grant their class must labour—young and old;
We grant the child the needy parents' tool:
But still our hearts a better plan behold...
Not against TOIL, but TOIL'S EXCESS we pray... (Ibid., 21)

Jane Humphries (2013) in the article “Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution” uses the luxury axiom to explain the upsurge of child labour during the industrial era. According to the luxury axiom, families only send their kids to work when they are forced to do so by poverty. Children’s ‘non-work’ is defined as their participation in leisure activities or their attendance at school. For families whose adult incomes are very low, children cannot afford to be kept away from some productive activity, and they are only withheld when adult income increases. An altruistic image of parents and guardians is implied in this context. Children should not work, and the parents only allow them to do so for financial reasons. This, Humphries believes is the prime cause of many children from working-class families being sent to work in Industrial England.

To highlight this aspect of poverty-driven child labour, Norton in her poem takes the example of a working-class family. She explicates a parent’s love for their children by transporting the readers to a poor working-class household in Industrial England. As the father returns home after a long time, all the kids stop playing and rush to him for his caresses. They become envious of their sibling who the father approaches first. The father welcomes the kids and bestows his affections on the kids. Norton (1836, 28) writes, “... But, at the FATHER’s coming, start away Or smooths with tender hand the curled and shining head”.

In these lines, Caroline Norton paints the picture of a happy loving family. But their happiness doesn’t last long as one of the children has to be sent to work soon. The family’s dire circumstances force them into the confines of child labour. Norton represents the wretched fate of many children from working-class families of 19th-century England when she writes about the mother’s dread about sacrificing one of her children to the factory. Norton portrays the pain of the mother who is forced to give up one of her children, but is unwilling to do so. The mother is tormented thinking of who to send to the factory.

... Which of these little precious ones shall go
(Debarred of summer-light and cheerful play)
To that receptacle for dreary woe,
The Factory Mill... (Ibid., 30)

Norton draws our attention to the miserable lives of working-class families during the Industrial Revolution. These families have little

choice in deciding their lives. It's an either 'do or die' situation for them. If the kids are not sent to work the family will starve. But sending children to work endangers their lives. So, the families end up sacrificing the kids in order to make their ends meet as they feel that sacrificing one kid is the only option to save the entire family from starvation. Norton entreats the readers to imagine the pain of a parent as they send their children to toil in darkness. She elaborates on the sufferings of the helpless parents by placing herself in the parents' situation. The parents are tormented by the fact that their lovely children, whom they love more than themselves and who are the source of their own happiness, have to live this life of misery.

Away! The thought—the *thought* alone brings tears!
THEY labour—*they*, the darlings of our lives!
The flowers and the sunbeams of our fleeting years;
From whom alone our happiness derives... (Ibid., 32)

Though the sight of their kids labouring away their childhood is painful to watch, the parents have little choice. They can only stand as mute spectators as their loved ones are snatched away from them and carted off to inescapable dungeon-like mills.

The child that has been chosen to labour his days away leaves behind all his childhood joys as he enters the workforce. As he toils in the factory, his hands mechanically heeding the instructions of his supervisor, he yearns for his lost childhood, which is now unreachable. As he reminisces about his past joys, he is woken up from his reverie by "sounds of wailing grief and painful blows" (Norton 1836, 34). The master had come to inspect their works and punish the ones slacking off. The intense labour had tired the child and produced "Exhaustion's slumber, dull and deep" (Ibid., 35). The watch hits the child to wake him and get him to work.

The children being more obedient could easily be made to work by means of punishments. An article titled "Child Labour in the Industrial Revolution" published by History Crunch (2016), states that children were preferred by factory owners as they were easier to control than adults and were more likely to accept punishments. The article states that factory overseers often whipped the children who were late for work. The article cited an interview taken in 1819 where a factory worker named John Fairbrother admitted that he had noticed his master "with a horse whip standing outside the mill when the children have come too late [and] he lashed them all the way to the mill."

Continuing the poem, Norton says that like every day, this day too has its end. As the day comes to close, the child painfully makes his way to his home where his siblings who are not forced to work are sleeping peacefully. The mother who is filled with remorse for the child she sacrificed tries to tempt him with the little food that is leftover. But the child has not even the energy to eat. He goes off to sleep without eating anything.

But the day hath its End...
Creeps to that shed, –his HOME, –where happy lies
The sleeping babe that cannot toil for Gain;
Where his remorseful Mother tempts in vain
With the best portion of their frugal fare:
Too sick to eat–too weary to complain–
He turns him idly from the untasted share,
Slumbering sinks down unfed, and mocks her useless care. (Ibid., 35)

The child is not even able to sleep comfortably as he is anxious about the next day. He is scared and waiting fearfully for the clock strike that would announce the time he has to rise and get ready for the next day's labour. He constantly enquires for his mother if the time has come for him to wake up. Norton laments, “. . . Waiting the boding stroke that bids him rise...Starts at the moon's pale ray–or clock's far distant chime” (Ibid, 36). This, stresses Caroline Norton is the life led by a child labourer. The child, Norton says, demands no luxuries–neither good food, nor toys or complete rest. All that the child wishes for is less suffering.

The article by History Crunch (2016), “Child Labour in the Industrial Revolution” cites a report from the British House of Commons according to which serious accidents continually occur in factories, but despite this frequency of accidents, care was not taken to fence the dangerous parts of machinery. One such instance of an accident due to factory machinery can be found in *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe* by John Brown published in 1828. Robert Blincoe was only seven year old when he was sent to work in a cotton mill. In the book, he talks about the horrors of working in the cotton mill. Narrating his experience of witnessing an accident, he recounts the accident of a ten-year-old girl named Mary Richards who was working on a drawing frame – “It happened one evening, when her apron was caught by the shaft...When she was extricated, every bone was found broken - her head dreadfully crushed. She was carried off quite lifeless” (Brown 1828).

As the poem comes to a close, Norton warns the tormentors that the suppression of the poor, if taken too far will end up backfiring on themselves. If the oppressors oppress beyond the limit, Norton (1836, 38) says, “the cord snaps from the bow”. The poor, if harshly ruled will learn to hate and curse the oppressive system of governance which demands the poor to serve the rich. This in turn, might give rise to an uprising. Therefore, Norton advises the people in power to rule wisely, taking into account the concerns of the common man.

Norton’s poem serves as the voice of the downtrodden in the Victorian England. Despite being the largest and the most powerful empire in the world during the time, Britain failed at protecting its own working class, many of whom succumbed to poverty and overwork. It is ironic that the country which set forth to ‘civilize’ the rest of the world had turned a blind eye to the cry of its own children who pined away their childhood in factories, and were the worst victims of the highly praised factor of economic progress, the Industrial Revolution.

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