

CHARLES DICKENS AS A SOCIAL CRITIC

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Charles Dickens was one of the most important social critic who used fiction effectively to criticize economic, social and moral abuses in the Victorian era. He showed compassion and empathy towards the vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of English society, and contributed to several important social reforms. Dickens' deep awareness of social ills are derived from his traumatic childhood experiences when his father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison under the Insolvent Debtors Act of 1813, and he at the age of twelve worked in a shoe-blackening factory. In his adult life Dickens developed a strong social conscience, an ability to empathise with the victims of social and economic injustices.

Dickens believed in the political and ethical potential of literature, and the novel in particular, and he treated his fiction as a springboard for debates about moral and social reform. In his novels of social analysis Dickens became an outspoken critic of unjust economic and social conditions. His deeply felt social commentaries helped to raise the collective awareness of the reading public. Indirectly, he contributed to a series of legal reforms, including the abolition of the inhumane imprisonment for debts, purification of the Magistrates' Courts, a better management of criminal prisons, and the restriction of the capital punishment.

Charles Dickens was influenced by Carlyle, but he followed his teaching he exposed the ills of Victorian society. Dickens was not one of novelist to draw attention of the reading public to the deprivation of the lower classes in England, but he was much more successful than his predecessors in exposing the ills of the industrial society including class division, poverty, bad sanitation, privilege and meritocracy and the experience of the metropolis. A novelist universally associated with social issues. In Dickens' fiction, most characters have a job, but he rarely shows them at work. His novels are centrally about social relationships.

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In his novel *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) created a utopian and nostalgic vision of pre-victorian and pre-industrial England prior to a rapid industrialization and urbanization. Although the novel was designed to be comic, it is not free of Dickens' characteristic social commentary, which would become more pronounced in his later novels. The descriptions of Eatanswill (chapter 13) and the grim Fleet Prison (Chapter 41) anticipate some of Dickens' preoccupations with the condition of England, which are revealed in his subsequent novels dealing with the darker and more disgusting side of Victorian times. The following passage from *The Pickwick Papers* anticipates Dickens' life long concern with the effects of industrialization on English Society.

It was quite dark when Mr. Pickwick roused himself sufficiently to look out of the window. The straggling cottages by the roadside, the dingy hue of every object visible, the murky atmosphere, the paths of cinders and brick-dust, the deep-red glow of furnace fires in the distance, the volumes of dense smoke issuing heavily forth from high toppling chimneys, blackening and obscuring everything around; the glare of distant lights, the ponderous wagons which toiled along the road, laden with clashing roads of iron- all be tokened their rapid approach to the great working town of Birmingham [1]”.

Dickens' later novels contain some of his most trenchant pieces of social commentary. Beginning with his second novel, *Oliver Tist*, through *Nickolas Nickleby*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Chimes*, *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and ending with *Little Dorit*, Dickens totally rejected the claims of classical economics and showed his moral concern for the social well-being of the nation. His early novels expose isolated abuses and shortcomings of individual people, whereas his later novels contain a bitter diagnosis of the condition of England.

Oliver Twist (1837-39), which represents a radical change in Dickens' themes, is his first novel to carry a social commentary similar to that contained in the subsequent condition of England novels. Dickens explores many social themes in *Oliver Tist*, but three are predominant: the abuses of the new Poor Law system, the evils of the criminal world in London and the victimization of children. The critique of the Poor Law of 1834 and the administration of the work-house is presented in the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist*. Dickens gives the most uncompromising critique of the Victorian workhouse, which was run according to a regime of prolonged hunger, physical punishment, humiliation and hypocrisy. In contrast to *Pickwick*, in *Oliver Twist* Dickens shows England as a country of what Disraeli called “the two nations”: the rich and privileged the poor living in object and inhumane conditions of deprivation, misery and humiliation. Many characters of *Oliver Twist* function

as allegories. Dickens challenges the popular Victorian beliefs that some people are more prone to vice than to others. Like Frances Trollope, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, Dickens was fully aware of the victimisation of women in Victorian society. Nancy is forced into prostitution by poverty, hunger and life in a corrupt environment. John Bayley points out that: "Nancy's living is the living of England, a nightmare society in which drudgery is endless and stupefying, in which the natural affections are warped, and the dignity of man appears only in resolution and violence. It is a more disquieting picture than the carefully and methodically symbolized social panoramas of *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend*" [2].

In *Oliver Twist* Dickens presents a portrait of the macabre childhood of a considerable number of Victorian orphans. The orphans are underfed, and for a meal they are given a single scoop of gruel. Oliver, one of the oppressed children, dares to ask for more gruel and is severely punished.

This scene, which has become "the most familiar incident in any English novel" [3] strongly appealed to the Victorian conscience. Dickens challenged the Victorian idea of charity for the so-called "deserving poor". He showed persuasively that the workhouse was a failed attempt to solve the problem of poverty and unwanted children. *Oliver Twist* can be read as a text book of Victorian child abuse and a social document about early Victorian slum life. When Oliver goes with Sowerberry to fetch the body of a woman dead of starvation, he can see an appalling view of derelict slum house.

Dickens succeeded in making Victorian public opinion more aware of the conditions of the poor. He depicted persuasively the disorder, squalor, light, decay, and the human misery of a modern industrial city. Although the initial condition of England discourse changes into a sentimental moral fable on the subsequent pages, *Oliver Twist* is an important manifestation of Victorian social conscience.

The motif of child abuse in the context the Victorian education system is continued in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39). The novel contains a serious social commentary on the conditions of schools where unwanted children were maltreated and starved. Nicholas is sent to Dotheboys Hall, a school run by the cruel and abusive headmaster Wackford Squeers. Dickens was critical about the Victorian education system, which is reflected not only in *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Hard Times* and *Our Mutual Friend* but also in his journalism and public speeches. In *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens describes abusive practices in Yorkshire boarding schools. However, Dickens does not only criticize the malicious education system, but he is

primarily concerned with the fates of these unfortunate children who are representatives of the most vulnerable portion of the society.

Bleak House (1852-53) is Dickens' finest novel, although not his most popular, it exposes the abuses of the court of chancery and administrative incompetence. For Dickens, the court of chancery became synonymous with the faulty law system, expense court fees, bureaucratic practices, technicality, delay and inconclusiveness of judgements. Dickens also criticizes slum housing, overcrowded urban graveyards, neglect of contagious diseases, electoral corruption, preachers, class divisions, and neglect of the educational needs of the poor. The book opens with the famous description of London in fog. "Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green meadows and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great city.... Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds" [4].

This fog is also very symbolic. It stands for institutional oppression which penetrates into every segment of Victorian society. Dickens sees London as a place of human misery, and the world he perceives is governed by greed and money. *Bleak House* also carries a warning against the excesses of the laissez-faire economy. The descriptions of streets, buildings and people are realistic and reflect the living conditions of England in the mid 19th century. The colours in the novel are predominantly grey and black, and the fog becomes one of the central symbols of the novel.

In *Hard Times* (1854) the social consequences of industrialization and urbanization are perhaps most persuasively depicted, which Dickens wrote at the prompting of urgent external circumstances. *Hard Times* is more than any other of his condition of England novels influenced by Carlyle's social criticism. It deals with a number of social issues: industrial relations, education for the poor, class division and the right of common people to amusement. It also draws on contemporary concern with reforming divorce laws. Cazamian sees Dickens in *Hard Times* as an "intermediary link between the social thought of Carlyle and Ruskin." [5] Raymond Williams described *Hard Times* as "a thorough-going and creative examination of the dominant philosophy of industrialism of the hardness that Mrs. Gaskell saw as little more than a misunderstanding, which might be patiently broken down" [6]. Similarly, in his study, "The Rhetoric of *Hard Times*", David Lodge wrote: "On every page *Hard Times* manifests its identity as a polemical work, a critique of mid-Victorian industrial society dominated by materialism, acquisitiveness, and ruthlessly competitive capitalist economics. To Dickens, at the time of writing *Hard Times*, these things were represented

most articulatively, persuasively, by the utilitarians [7]. Dickens, like Thomas Carlyle and many other contemporary intellectuals, criticized utilitarianism, although they confused utilitarian ethics with Laissez-Faire industrial capitalism, which, like utilitarianism, was based on the self-interest principle.

In *Hard Times* Dickens created a condition of England novel, which directly engaged with contemporary and social issues. Dickens echoes many of Carlyle's arguments against the power of social machinery and materialist consciousness. However, contrary to Carlyle, Dickens shows that the positive aspects of human nature are not easily destroyed. Fancy, imagination compassion and hope do not disappear completely. They are preserved in which characters as Sissy, Rachael and Sleary. Even Mr. Gradgrind revealed eventually some traces of humanness. Ultimately, Dickens did not take up Carlyle's favourite theme of the aristocratic hero as the saviour of a disintegrating society. Coketown, the city of fact, foreshadows the emergence of a monstrous mass urban society based on a rationalism, anonymity, dehumanization. The dominant feature of the town is its inherent ugliness. Its inhabitants lack individuality and are the product of an inhuman, materialistic society.

"It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves forever and ever, and never got uncoiled." [8]

In *Hard Times* human relationships are contaminated by economics. Dickens is concerned with the conditions of the urban labourers and the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism. He exposes the exploitation of the working class by unfeeling industrialists and the damaging consequences of propagating factual knowledge at the expense of feeling and imagination. However, although Dickens is critical about utilitarianism, he cannot find a better way of safeguarding social justice than through ethical means.

Hard Times proves that fancy is essential for human happiness, and in this aspect it is one of the best morally uplifting novels. Dickens avoided propagating employer paternalism in the manner of Disraeli, Charlotte Bronte and Gaskell, and strongly opposed commodification of labour in Victorian England. *Hard Times* was in fact an attack on the Manchester School of Economics, which supported laissez-faire and promoted a distorted view of Bentham's ethics. The novel has been criticized for not offering specific remedies for the condition of England problems it addresses. It is debatable whether solutions to social problems are to be sought in fiction, but nevertheless, Dickens' novel anticipated the future debates concerning anti-

pollution legislation, intelligent town-planning, health and safety measures in factories and a humane education system.

Dickens as a social critic exerted a profound influence on later novelists committed to social analysis. It can be noted that Charles Dickens' works played tremendous role in the implementation of social policies that changed the lives of the poor. Apart from his works, Dickens' active involvement in promoting social reforms raised public awareness in the fight against poverty, deprivation of education, child labour and prostitution. So, Dickens was a great social reformist as well as a great social critic of Victorian period.

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