

CHARLES DICKENS' FICTION: DEPICTION OF THE CONDITION OF THE CHILDREN AND WOMEN DURING VICTORIAN PERIOD

Ravinder Kumar*

Dr. S.L. Paul**

The novels of Dickens belong entirely to the humanitarian movement of the Victorian Age, of which they are, indeed, in the sphere of fiction, by far the most important product and expression. He was from first to last a novelist with a purpose. Dickens set out to attack some specific abuse or abuses existing towards children and women during the Victorian era. During the Industrial Revolution, the Victorian society consisted of a hierarchial structure comprise the upper class, followed by the middle class, the working class and the impoverished under class. These different social classes could be distinguished by inequalities in areas such as politics, authority, wealth, education, culture, working and living conditions. Members of the lower class were perceived as irrational, immature, superstitious, brutal, excessively sexual and filthy. Due to the powerlessness of the lower class members, they were subjugated to exploitation and treatment similar to that of animals.

Because of poverty, children were forced into child labour and forced to work as chimney sweepers and they could crawl up the twelve by fourteen inch chimneys, some as small as seven inches square, so that they would clean out the annual average of forty gallons of soot that was deposited there. Some boys became rat catchers and they were required to use arsenic to poison the rats, but as this could be expensive they could also use a ferret to flush the rats out and kill them.¹ Children could also become messengers and it was quite common for a gentleman to ask a nearby street urchin to run errands for him. Charles Dickens depicts Jo in Bleak House, as a street urchin and he is asked by Lady Dedlock for some information concerning Nemo. Some children could also work as mud larks which meant that they had to wade into the Thames River at low tide to scrounge for bits of coal, rope, bones and copper, nails, but they had to be careful so that they would not cut their bare feet.

*Singhania University, Singhania, Pacheri Bari, Jhunjhunu, (Rajasthan)

**Retired Professor, Department of English, Kurkshetra University, Kurukshetra

Dickens is personally aware of the exploitation to which the children are subjected because of his own history of workhouse incarceration, which parallels Oliver's work house experience (James 89). Dickens' novels ultimately petition society to protect these assailed juveniles. However, the Victorian society is paradoxical because it perceived childhood as essential, yet most of its juveniles are not given the chance to safely experience growth and transition into adulthood. Gorham states: ".....childhood had great symbolic importance, but many Victorians suffered from an uncertainty about the nature of childhood and the proper relationship of children to the structure of the family and the wider society. In the late-Victorian period, many people who were concerned about the welfare of children also found themselves uncertain about how the boundaries of childhood should be defined."²

Dickens represents the actual world through his fictional characters as Rosenberg remarks: ".....the best Dickens' characters are examples of verisimilitudous representation"³. Dickens characters are not only representations of the world, but also reflections of existent beings, "..... and assumed, by virtually all readers, to be representations of people"⁴. Therefore, his child characters represent real children with actual experiences and backgrounds such as poverty, orphanage, neglect and deprivation of education. Firstly, Dickens' child characters are usually orphaned or their parentage is unclear, for example Pip and Estella (Great Expectations), Erther (Blak House), Oliver (Oliver Twist), and Sirshy Jupe (Hard Times). Estella and Esther are initially introduced as orphans, but the reader later comes to know that they are actually abandoned children as is Sirsy Jupe. All the three characters are adopted. For example, Estella is adopted by Mrs. Havisham, while Esther is adopted by John Jarndyce and lastly, Sissy is adopted by Mr. Thomas Grandgrind.

The three young ladies have a common background, that of lower class parentage, yet they are adopted by middle class guardians, therefore they eventually become members of that class. Charles Dickens' seems to suggest that a lower class member can never belong to the middle class unless the elevation into that upper class is generated by the middle class. Dickens' belief is that the lower class' dependency on the middle class is inevitable. To a larger extent, he is also suggesting that it is the middle class who can change the plight of the lower class and, therefore it is their responsibility to eradicate poverty.

There were limited educational opportunities for children; therefore it was better for them to work. Child labour was an integral part of the system as the children were far paid less than adults.⁵ They worked under terrible conditions such as long hours with poor lighting, deficient ventilation and lack of protective clothing. However with social outcry and reports of child abuse, laws prohibiting child labour and the factory acts in 1864 stipulated that no

child under the age of twelve was to be employed as a factory worker. However, it is unfortunate that some of these reforms were implemented long after people like Charles Dickens had already been forced into the gruesome and traumatizing factory work at his age. Dickens also challenges the drudgery of education through the parody of Thomas Gradgrind who continuously demands facts from the school children. His rigid system of education has eliminated the innocence in his children and they have become like “remote controlled robots” who only act or think according to their father’s desire. Gradgrind’s system of education is also a reflection of the oppression of children in institutions such as the work houses and factories, hence, Dickens has created a parallelism of the two institutions; education and industry.

In the early nineteenth century, there was a high rate of prostitution which came to be known as the great social evil. Between 1848 and 1870, there were a lot of institutions working to “reclaim” these “fallen women” from the streets and at the same time restraining them from entering the respectable society by forcing them to work as domestic servants. The theme of prostitution and the “fallen woman” became a staple feature of Victorian literature and politics. Prostitution was perceived as a social problem rather than just a fact of urban life. The emphasis on the purity of women led to the portrayal of the prostitute as soiled, corrupt and in need of cleansing. Sympathetic writers raised economic deprivation as a major cause of prostitution.

The emphasis on female purity was allied to the importance of the homemaking role of women, who, by her domesticity, helped to create a space free from pollution and corruption from the city. The prostitute came to have symbolic significance as the embodiment of the violation of that divide. The anonymity of the city led to increase in prostitution and unsanctioned sexual relationship. Altick attests that “Dickens and other writers of his time associated prostitution with the mechanization of modern life, portraying prostitutes as human commodities consumed and then thrown away like refuse.”⁶

So, the status of women in the Victorian era is often seen as a discrepancy between England’s national power and wealth and what many, then and now, consider its appalling social conditions. During this period, difficulties escalated for women because of the vision of the ideal woman shared by the society. Women could not vote and they could not become property owners. The role of women was to have children and they could not hold a professional job unless it was that of being a teacher or a domestic servant. Furthermore, women were only confined to the domestic sphere and their duty was to be in charge of servants and to organize parties which would promote the prestige of their husband and

enable them to meet new people and establish economically important relationships. A woman was also required to be “good tempered”, compassionate towards the suffering and well mannered and clean.

During Victorian period, Education was viewed as the economic necessity of men only. The attitude towards women and education was that education need not be of the same extended, classical and commercial characteristics as that of men. Women were supposed to be educated in issues that involved domesticity. Subjects such as history, Geography and general literature were important, but not Latin and Greek. Women who wanted to study law, physics, engineering or medicine were satirized and dismissed. The Victorian society deemed it unnecessary for women to attend university.

However, the Victorian society appeared to be a stable society because of the lavish life style of the aristocracy and the enormous profits gained by the middle class, yet the emergence of the “bourgeoisie” also meant a massive increase in poverty and urban over population due to the rural-urban migration., Furthermore, women were also oppressed as they were confined to the domestic sphere and they were not welcome in the masculine public domain of politics and business. Children were also exploited as they were subjected to child labour and they worked under harsh conditions. The Victorian society, particularly the middle class, upheld strong moral values and morals, yet they did little to help the poor or change their condition.

Through this research paper, we can conclude that all of Dickens’ works are social critiques which attack the institutions that do not perform the roles for which they were created and thus fails to reform society. Children are susceptible to exploitation as they are very defenceless beings and Dickens successfully portrays the abuse of children in nineteenth century Britain and evokes readers sympathy to the deplorable and drab conditions of the children. The feminist study of Dickens’ female characters determines that Dickens as a male writer, was sympathetic with the plight of Victorian women. His representation of the female characters is a portrayal of the Victorian ideologies and perceptions towards women. Dicken explores the miserable condition of the Victorian women and also subtly criticizes the treatment of women by the patriarchal society. So, it can be again conclude that Dickens novels was a realistic depiction of dull and drab conditions of children and women during the Victorian era. Therefore, the Victorian novel especially Dickens, through its realistic depiction of characters and the Victorian society in general, enabled the readers to understand what was going on in England at that time.

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