



Social Ambience and Humanity in Charles Dickens's Novels

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to focus Dickens's criticism in making people know about the problems of the society which he pictures through his novels and making them to face the problems. In his major novels, *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Hard Times* (1854), etc. He wants people to be better inside them. Dickens was not only the first great urban novelist in England, but also one of the most important social commentators who used fiction effectively to criticize economic, social, and moral abuses in the Victorian era. Dickens showed compassion and empathy towards the vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of English society, and contributed to several important social reforms. Dickens's deep social commitment and 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 injustice.

Dickens believed in the ethical and political 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 raise the collective awareness of the reading public. Dickens contributed significantly to the emergence of public opinion which was gaining an increasing influence on the decisions of the authorities. 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. During the 1850s Dickens's interests shifted gradually from the examination of individual social ills to the examination of the state of society, particularly its laws, education, industrial relations, and the terrible conditions of the poor. Increasingly, apart from fictional plots, his novels contained a considerable amount of social commentary similar to Henry Mayhew's nonfictional narratives about the London poor. Dickens's later novels contain some of his most trenchant pieces of social commentary. 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.

Keywords: Industrialization, Urbanization, poverty, slum, labour, prostitution, prison-life, child-abuse, exploitation, orphan, social realism.

Introduction

In *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) Dickens 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's 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's 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's lifelong 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 rods of iron, or piled with heavy goods — all betokened their rapid approach to the great working town of Birmingham. As they rattled through the narrow thoroughfares leading to the heart of the turmoil, the sights and sounds of earnest occupation struck more forcibly on the senses. The streets were thronged with working people. The hum of labour resounded from every house; lights gleamed from the long casement windows in the attic storeys, and the whirl of wheels and noise of machinery shook the trembling walls. The fires, whose lurid, sullen light had been visible for miles, blazed fiercely up, in the great works and factories of the town. The din of hammers, the rushing of steam and the heavy clanking of engines was the harsh music which arose from every quarter. [632-33]

Oliver Twist (1837-39), which represents a radical change in Dickens's themes, is his first novel to carry a social commentary similar to that contained in the subsequent Condition-of-England novels. According to Louis Cazamian, "the success of *Twist* confirmed Dickens' determination to write on social topics, and the inception of Chartism means that the burning social issue of the day was the problem of the working class" (164). Dickens explores many social themes in *Oliver Twist*, 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 workhouse is presented in the opening chapters of *Oliver*

Twist. Dickens also 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. The following passage brings out thus,

“The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook’s uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity: ‘Please, sir, I want some more.’ (Ch.2.Oliver Asks For More; questions the dietary restrictions of the establishment)

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 textbook 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 houses. Some houses which had become insecure from age and decay, were prevented from falling into the street, by huge beams of wood reared against the walls, and firmly planted in the road; but even these crazy dens seemed to have been selected as the nightly haunts of some houseless wretches, for many of the rough boards which supplied the place of door and window, were wrenched from their position, to afford an aperture wide enough for the passage of a human body. The kennel was stagnant and filthy. The very rats, which here and the relay putrefying in its rottenness, were hideous with famine. (Ch. 5, p. 06) Dickens succeeded in making Victorian public opinion more aware of the conditions of the poor. He depicted persuasively the disorder, squalor, blight, 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* (1838-9). 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.

Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring, or of young lives which, from the earliest dawn of infancy, had been one horrible endurance of cruelty and neglect. There were little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with the scowl of sullen, dogged suffering; there was childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone, and its helplessness alone remaining; there were vicious faced boys, brooding, with leaden eyes, like malefactors in a jail; and there were young creatures on whom the sins of their frail parents had descended, weeping even for the mercenary nurses they had known, and lonesome even in their loneliness. With every kindly sympathy and affection blasted in its birth, with every young and healthy feeling flogged and starved down, with every revengeful passion that

can fester in swollen hearts, eating its evil way to their core in silence, what an incipient Hell was breeding here! (Nicholas Nickleby ; Ch.08, p.88)

The novel directs this ironical attack at Victorian public opinion, which was either unaware or condoned such treatment of poor children. 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. As a boy he was shocked to read reports about the cheap boarding schools in the North. 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. Dickens's novel, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), is an anti-Malthusian tale. The author shows his disgust with the Malthusian principle of uncontrolled population growth. Scrooge speaks about charity collector like Malthus, who proposed abolition of poor laws: ***"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.(A Christmas Carol': Sending the Poor to Prison, p.11)*** .

A Christmas Carol was Dickens's response to the Children's Employment Commission Report on the miseries suffered by many poor children. Dickens exposed suggestively selfishness and greed as the dominant features of his England. He described almost in a documentary manner Christmas celebrated by the working poor of early-Victorian England. Although Dickens's early works implied faith in the new commercial middle class as opposed to the old aristocracy, the writer saw the discrepancy between the ideas and practice of this new class and the principles of morality and ethic. As a social commentator, Dickens saw the need for the reform of English society; he urged that the wealthy and privileged exhibit a greater humanitarianism towards the poor and the vulnerable.

Bleak House(1852-53) is often called England's first authentic contribution to modern detective fiction, it also sharply indicts the inequities in Victorian society. Dickens's 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, expensive court fees, bureaucratic practices, technicality, delay and inconclusiveness of judgments. Apart from the critique of the Chancery courts, Dickens also criticizes slum housing, overcrowded urban graveyards, and 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 aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinches the toes and fingers of his shivering little prentice boy on deck. 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. (*Bleak House*, The London Fog)

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.

The social consequences of industrialization and urbanization are perhaps most persuasively depicted in *Hard Times* (1854), 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. 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 articulately, persuasively, (and therefore dangerously) by the Utilitarians. In *Hard Times* human relationships are contaminated by economics. The principles of the 'dismal science' led to the formation of a selfish and atomistic society. The social commentary of *Hard Times* is quite clear.

Bleak House provides not only a satirical look at the legal system in England, which often destroys the lives of innocent people, but also offers a vast panorama of Victorian England, which includes the foggy streets of London, filthy slums, the maze of the Inns of Court and also the peaceful countryside, with characters ranging from murderous villains, a "fallen woman" (Lady Deadlock) to virtuous girls and members of landed aristocracy, all of whom are affected by the flaws of the torturous Victorian judiciary system. The atmosphere, places and events are described with great authenticity. In this view Bleak House is one of the most important novels about the condition of Victorian society. Dickens describes emphatically urban poverty by the example of the slum street, where poor Jo lives, in a manner similar to the Sanitary Reports. The moral corruption of Chancery is juxtaposed with the physical decay of the slums.

Conclusion

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 (statistics) 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* 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 criticised 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's novel anticipated the future debates concerning anti-pollution legislation, intelligent town-planning, health and safety measures in factories and a humane education system. Dickens's novels combine brutality with fairy-tale fantasy; sharp, realistic, concrete detail with romance, farce, and melodrama; the ordinary with the strange. They range through the comic, tender, dramatic, sentimental, grotesque, melodramatic, horrible, eccentric, mysterious, violent, romantic, and

morally earnest. Though Dickens was aware of what his readers wanted and was determined to make as much money as he could with his writing, he believed novels had a moral purpose—to arouse innate moral sentiments and to encourage virtuous behaviour in readers. It was his moral purpose that led the London Times to call Dickens "the greatest instructor of the Nineteenth Century" in his obituary. Dickens was the first British writer of his time to try and accurately depict real life characters with all of their faults and strong points. He did not wish to sugarcoat his characters, but by showing their human sides and their squalor living conditions, he does gain empathy in spite of their hideousness.

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