

Children in Dickens's Novels

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Abstract: *He was the most popular of the 19th century English novelists, the quintessential Victorian author - one who is fondly remembered and read even today, by innumerable readers around the globe. Here is a small personal tribute to Charles Dickens, my favourite social novelist. In his novels, Dickens depicted the disorder, squalor, blight, decay, and the human misery of a modern industrial city. It was from the late 18th century, that Britain was gradually getting transformed from an agricultural to an industrial society, as the population moved from country to industrial cities, seeking better wages if not better living condition. Victoria's England was a child-dominated society. Throughout her long reign, one out of every three of her subjects was under the age of fifteen. The population explosion that occurred during this period was accompanied by a tremendous amount of industrialization and urbanization; by the end of the century, a vast majority of children lived in towns rather than rural communities. Poor children who survived infancy were often put to work at an early age. In the 1830s and 40s, poor children labored in textile mills and coal mines, where working conditions often proved deadly. Child labor was not new, but as industrialization continued it became more visible, as masses of ragged, stunted children crowded the city streets. This paper discusses the tragic condition of children and child labour in Victorian England, a condition, prevalent in our society even today.*

Keywords: *child labour, workhouse, poverty, orphanage, Victorian England, Industrial Revolution*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dickens's novels present a portrait of the macabre childhood of a considerable number of Victorian orphans. A social commentator and critic his novels revolve largely around the motif of child abuse. This piece of writing, which focuses on children and child labour in Victorian England, pays homage to a great novelist on completion of the bicentenary year of his birth in 2012.

My association with Dickens's writings first began as a student of standard six in the convent school where I studied. The book 'David Copperfield', which was a part of our curriculum, first introduced me to the world of Dickens. And since then and all through my growing years, I have been an avid reader of his literary works. His novels combine sharp, realistic, concrete detail with romance, farce, and melodrama; the ordinary with the strange. I loved to read Dickens not just because he was a man of his own times, but because he was a man of our times as well. He tells us things about ourselves by portraying personality traits and habits that might seem all too familiar. His messages about poverty and charity have travelled through decades, and we can learn from the experiences of his characters almost as easily as we can learn from our own experiences.

2. CHARACTERS IN DICKENS

All of his novels share distinct characteristics that mark them as "Dickensian." I find myself very emotionally engaged when I read Dickens. I've believed in most of his characters. He had the instinctive ability to place humanity under a microscope – meticulously probing, dissecting and analyzing – to collect the fodder for his life's work. His characters play into popular Victorian stereotypes: the innocent orphan, the unscrupulous businessman, and the sleazy criminal. They

speak with a strong social conscience, and remind everyone that the much-heralded progress of the Industrial Revolution had left many people in the gutter.

3. A SOCIAL CRITIC

Dickens unambiguously criticized the system of workhouses, debtor's prisons, and orphanages that kept England's poor virtually enslaved.

A social novelist, Dickens focused on the poverty-stricken parts of London, where lived a whole lot of grief-stricken people, neglected, unloved and forever suffering. Sad faces of children; cold and hard hearted adults, appear everywhere in his novels. His writings called for reform at every level of society and he showed us how a warm heart could relieve the pain of cruelty and mindless indifference of society.

The children in his novels represent the real children of the actual world with actual experience and a tragic background – they experience poverty, orphanage, neglect and deprivation of education. They are a reflection of Dickens's own childhood experiences – he could well understand the pain of oppression. “Dickens believed that his own imagination – in fact, his overall well-being depended on the contact he kept with his childhood.” He had abiding faith in the innocence and magic of children. The characters he created were thus very close to his heart. With great resentment, he penned down vehemently the condition of these helpless children in Victorian society – his novels were social commentaries of his times.

4. CHILD LABOUR IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Child labour at the time was synonymous to slavery. Children were subjected to inhuman torture, exploitation and even death. These child labourers were forced to work in factories and workhouses at the insistence of their parents and workhouse guardians. Child labour, in Victorian England, was part of a gruesome system which snatched children of their childhood, health and even their lives. Many children in Dickens' times, worked 16 hour days under atrocious conditions, as their elders did. Philanthropists, religious leaders, doctors, journalists, and artists all campaigned to improve the lives of poor children. In 1840, Lord Ashley (later the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury) helped set up the Children's Employment Commission, which published parliamentary reports on conditions in mines and collieries. Nevertheless, as the century wore on, more and more people began to accept the idea that childhood should be a protected period of education and enjoyment. However slow education reform was in coming, it did come.

Poverty however was found to be the root cause of child labour during this period. A victim of child labour himself, Dickens criticizes the debilitating effect to which he was subjected. With his father's imprisonment for debt in 1824, at the tender age of twelve he was sent to the 'blacking' factory in Hungerford Market London, a warehouse for manufacturing, packaging and distributing 'blacking' or 'polish' for cleaning boots and shoes – in order to support his family.

His early life is a recurrent element in most of his novels. The bitter experiences of his childhood helped him to empathize with the deplorable condition of children in Victorian society. He therefore writes: “No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day, what I had learned and thought and delighted in and raised my fancy and emulation up by was passing away from me..... cannot be written.” As a child labourer, he would dine on a slice of pudding and for his twelve hour daily labour, receive a meager wage of six shillings a week.

5. CHILD CHARACTERS IN DICKENS

The rise of industrial capitalism created a huge demand for cheap labor, which children certainly were. Forced to fend for themselves, many families endured such extreme poverty that their children's wages were indeed crucial to their survival.

In his novels, Dickens revealed an intense concern about the vulnerability of these children. Dickens's child characters are either orphaned or their parentage is not clear. His novels are full of neglected, exploited, or abused children: the orphaned Oliver Twist, the crippled Tiny Tim, the stunted Smike, and doomed tykes like Paul Dombey and Little Nell. We find Pip (Great

Expectation), Esther (Bleak House), Oliver (Oliver Twist), David (David Copperfield), Estella (Great Expectation) and Sissy Jup (Hard Times). The children he depicted in his novels are vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation. He also brings to the foreground how children were deprived of education due to their social status. Jo, Pip and Oliver are abandoned children who receive no education in the early stages of their life.

Great Expectations, the favorite of many, is immensely popular for its self-portrait of the author and for the warmth, feeling, and reality that it imparts to what is essential in human experience. Because of the deep impressions his own childhood made on him, he presents children, especially Pip, with sympathy and understanding, creating a sensitive orphan boy with whom every reader is able to identify. 'Great Expectation' tells the story of the unfortunate life of Pip Pirrip, an orphan, raised by his harsh older sister. It also features the child Estella, herself an orphan adopted by the embittered Miss Havisham. 'Christmas Carol' depicts Tiny Tim, the most famous characters of Dickens's work. A sickly and mild boy, Tiny Tim is fated to die if his family cannot afford medicine and better food. It is claimed that the character is based on the invalid son of a friend of Dickens who owned a cotton mill in Ardwick, Manchester. Cecilia (Sissy) Jupe in Hard Times is abandoned by her father, mother and all her family and lives in a care home with her nasty brother-in-law Peter, a circus performer. Grad grind offers Sissy the chance to study at his school and to come and live at Stone Lodge with the Grad grind children and dog daisy. At first she is the outsider in this household and is considered to be stupid, because she is guided by feelings of love, and has an emotional, fanciful nature. Later, however, her values are recognized by Grad grind and Loo. When Mrs. Grad grind dies she largely takes over the role of mothering the younger Grad grind children. 'Oliver Twist' portrays the miseries and degradation of destitute children. Oliver's life is characterized by loneliness and lack of potential care. A victim of child labor, Oliver is sold to an undertaker, later escapes the horrid experience and goes to London where he is exposed to criminal activities of a gang led by Fagin. 'The Old Curiosity Shop' is a tale of the virtuous and lonely Neil Trent, who through the gambling, debt and nervous breakdown of her grandfather is dragged into a fugitive's existence. Again 'David Copperfield' brings forth the miseries of David's life, the mistreatment of his stepfather, his life at boarding school and as a child factory worker. These characters represent living personifications of universal feeling.

6. CHILD LABOUR TODAY

Even today the lives of the poor children have not changed much; they are forced to work in deplorable condition, in many countries around the globe. There are 250 million child laborers aged 2 to 17 worldwide. In 1990, every country in the world except Somalia and the United States signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides the strongest governing language prohibiting child labor, but does not make it entirely illegal. Raids in recent years on factories in India and Liberia have revealed children as young as 5 years old operating machinery and working in illegal embroidery and tyre factories.

7. CONCLUSION

As we take up the cause of child labour in our society today, two hundred years after Dickens, we realize that here was a man, much ahead of his times. 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. We therefore need to read his novels because they tell us, about universal themes in the grandest possible way, with meticulous and timeless detail.

Dickens could foresee how child labour would gradually be a part of a social disorder and finally culminate into a social curse through centuries. He could foresee what curse evils such as 'child labour' could bring to society. It could only lead to the degradation and indignity of humanity. Children, we know are defenceless and gullible beings, and in his writings he successfully portrays the sufferings of little children in 19th century Britain. A tremendous critic of all social evils and a humanist, I fondly remember him, as a novelist with intense human sympathy, great

emotional power and extraordinary humanitarian zeal. His novels are truthful depiction of his life and times.

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Author's Biography



Dr. Anindita Dutta is an Asst. Professor of English, at NITMAS (Neotia Institute of Technology, Management & Science,) Kolkata, teaching at the Undergraduate level for more than a decade. A prolific writer, a dedicated teacher and a researcher, her papers are regularly published in various **national** and **international journals** of repute, 'ELT for the future Engineer', 'Integrating Literature into Language Teaching', 'The Story behind Words', 'Re-reading Bronte's *Jane Eyre*', 'Language Teaching through Films', to name a few.

She was a **BEC** examiner & trainer for **Cambridge ESOL** examination for many years, and was closely associated with the British Council.

Dr. Dutta has conducted several workshops, seminars and training programmes on **ELT** for students as well as teachers both within her Institute and outside, **ELT** being her area of specialization in **Ph.D**. She is widely popular among her students for her innovative and experimental teaching. Even beyond the classroom she is there for her students and helping them out through emails and blogs. A **doctorate** in **ELT**, she is **Masters in English** from **Jadavpur University** with a **B.Ed** from **Calcutta University**.