

The Child and Childhood as a Literary Theme in Charles Dickens's Novels

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Abstract UZSWLU

ABSTRACT: The nineteenth century saw England change from an agricultural society to an industrial civilization. During the century, the suffrage was extended to an ever greater number of people. The Victorian Era was a prosperous period for England, and London was the world's financial center.

The Victorian Age was a special period in the development of children's literature. Progressively, children's literature appeared in greater volume and with a more varied selection than before. As publishing became less expensive, cheaper reading matter, especially periodicals, was more readily available. Moreover, both publishers and critics came to recognize juvenile literature as separate from adult literature. In its broadest sense, children's literature is reading matter created exclusively for children as well as those items selected from general literature and read by the young. In other words, children's literature belongs to children either by creation or selection. (6, p.32)

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) reveals Victorian manners, class structure, and some social concerns in his writings. He was predominately an author for adults; however, his children's book *The Rose And The Ring* (1854-1855) was popular with youthful audiences. Since Thackeray was a widower, his children lived with their maternal grandmother in France; yet, despite their distance their correspondence reveals a close and warm relationship. It was their request for him to create some Twelfth Night characters that resulted in the *The Rose And The Ring*, which was finished in November, 1854, as a Christmas book.

Like Thackeray's works the majority of Charles Dickens's novels were written for adults or as family novels— where they would be read out loud to the entire family as entertainment. Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was one of the best-known Victorian authors. He was a prolific writer and was considered the spokesman of "middle-class England." His 1843 *Christmas Carol* is one of the latter. Many of his novels were popular with children as well as adults, and, in many Victorian homes, Dickens's novels were read to children. (2, p.15).

KEYWORD: image, childhood, childhood portrayal, orphans, child labor, innocence.

The works of Charles Dickens reflect a wide range of experience, but he wrote more extensively of children than any other subject. He was in fact, the first British novelist to use children as his central characters.

Dickens understood children - their minds, motives, characters, and consciences, is evidenced in all of his childhood portrayals. But most of the children in his earlier novels do not reflect the depth and quality of characterization as do those of his later period. Thus, through these portraits of children, the gradual maturing of Dickens as an artist may be delineated. For this purpose, five novels *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*,

David Copperfield, *Bleak House*, and *Great Expectations*, will be discussed in chronological order. Special emphasis will be given to the characters of Oliver, Nell, David, Esther and Pip in each novel, but minor childhood characters will also be included in order to give a clear picture of the artist as he matures. Dickens's initial conception of the child reflects his own early abilities as a writer. Both his good points and his weak ones are evidenced in his portrayals of Oliver and Nell. *David Copperfield* reflects his middle period of writing. David's characterization and the depiction of his plight thus illustrates some of Dickens's more mature elements. At the same time, some of the weaknesses seen in *Oliver Twist* are also present. While David may have more life than Oliver or Nell, he is still the culmination of the gentle heroes conceived in Dickens's earlier novels. But it is in *Bleak House* and especially *Great Expectations* that the real skill of the mature artist is evident. Technique, humor and originality may all be viewed as a part of Dickens's art. In the novels of *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations* all of these elements are present, but equally important, they are there to serve the serious purpose of social concern. (7, p. 27) Charles Dickens early abilities as a writer are evidenced in *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, especially in the characters of Oliver and Nell. Neither of these children is depicted with as much depth or skill in characterization as are many of the children in his middle and later periods of writing. But Oliver and Nell do reflect Dickens's real writing ability, and they reveal an author who clearly understands the child's mind and imagination. The characters of these children reflect the immature elements of Dickens's early period of writing just as the more mature aspects of the artist can be seen in the childhood characterizations of his later novels. As Angus Wilson states; "The development of heroes and heroines of his novels is indeed a reflection of change or maturity and a measure of his success in going beyond the great domain he has so easily mastered. To take this thought one step further, the development of his childhood heroes and heroines, and to some extent the peripheral children, reflect this change or maturity.

Although *Oliver Twist* is Dickens's second novel, Oliver's story is a first for Dickens in many respects. It is his first planned novel, and it is the first novel in which he uses a child as his center of focus. Further, through the child he exposes social ills. Oliver's story shows the results of the New Poor Law of 1834 and also the miserable reality of crime in nineteenth century London. This is the beginning of a technique to be seen again and again in Dickens's later novels. In *Bleak House*, for example, the children are used to expose the failures of the British system of law.

From the very first chapter of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens's penchant for biting sarcasm is evident. At the workhouse the birth of a baby is so far from being worthy of note that Dickens refrains from even mentioning his name. He refers to him merely as an "item of mortality ". This very neatly sets the tone for the treatment the workhouse orphan is to suffer at the hands of a hostile adult world.

Oliver Twist, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield* (1850), *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *Great Expectations*- the novels which reflect Dickens's social concern and where also the child characters play decisive roles in the progression of the themes. Other novels where the child characters do figure, as Jo in *Bleak House* and Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the action of these novels cannot move around them. Oliver, Nell, David or Pip move from one location to another and encounter various evil aspects of society which deepens their sufferings and this helps in illustrating and examining the darker aspects of society. Oliver, David, Amy Dorrit, Louisa and Tom Gradgrind, Paul and Florence Dombey find themselves in a society which has gone out of order. Dickens projects the sufferings of the child heroes and heroines to establish the fact that society was in dire need of reformation. Children are shown to be loyal and loving to their parents and guardians but Dickens tries to register that it was not always so in the reverse order. The society in Dickens's time was a materialistic and industrial one and the children are shown to be trapped in the selfishness and ambitions of the adults-be it the parents, guardians, teachers or employers. Thus the frailties of the society are perceived through the eyes of a child. By showing the kind of miseries a

child is compelled to undergo, Dickens affirms his faith in a society where childhood is respected and not rejected. He was one with Wordsworth in defining the child as the Father of Man.

Thematically Dickens preferred to write about parents and their children, about the love existing between the members of the family. At times there are traces of self-sacrifice in the love, as in the case of Nell and her grandfather, Amy Dorrit and her father William Dorrit. His novels abound in devoted daughters, dominating fathers and helpless mothers.

However, there is a dearth of happy marriages among the middle class families in the novels of Dickens. As for the child heroes and heroines, very few of them are found to have enjoyed a happy idyllic childhood, irrespective of whichever section of society they belonged to- the rich or the poor. It was not that affluence brought happiness to children. Oliver, Nell, David, Pip, Paul and Florence Dombey, Amy Dorrit, Tom and Louisa Gradgrind come from diverse backgrounds, but the sense of uncertainty and the anguish they experience are of the same nature. In fact, his finest portrayal of childhood aptly focuses the guilts, the horrors and vulnerabilities of the young heroes and heroines. There are certain father-figures in Dickens's novels, who instead of fulfilling their paternal responsibilities tend to "lean too heavily on the frail shoulders of their little daughters." (4, p.134) The child characters in Dickens mostly lack a stable home and some like Oliver have no home at all. In many of his novels lie indicts the parents and guard! And for the fate of the children: Little Dorrit's father, Nell's grandfather, David's mother, Pip's sister, Paul Dombey's father are responsible for the painful experiences of their wards. The child heroes and heroines of Dickens fall under two broad categories, namely, those who belong to the lower and lower middle class like Oliver, Nell, Amy Dorrit and Pip; and those who belong to the upper middle class of society like David, Paul and Florence Dombey and Tom and Louisa Gradgrind, for whom money and position have not been able to procure happiness and security. Oliver, Pip and Nell are orphans; but unlike the other two Oliver is without a home and is completely unaware of his origins. David, Amy Dorrit, Paul and Florence as well as Tom and Louisa lose their parent/ parents at the various stages of their lives. Oliver Twist is the only child hero who is without any living parent or guardian to tend to his well-being. It is in Oliver Twist (1837) that Dickens for the first time takes up the role of a social reformer along with that of the novelist. He emphasizes upon the kind of influence that society can exert upon the life of a helpless orphan like Oliver. The essential element in this novel is the protest against the indifferent attitude held towards the paupers, especially to the children of the workhouse and the filth and misery of the London slums "which bred human as well as animal vermin and were the factories of the manifold crime. Dickens presents Oliver as a boy who has to face alone all the hostile forces right from the initial stage of his life. During his apprenticeship to Sowerberry, the undertaker, he is made to pass the nights among the coffins. Finding his life at the Workhouse and the Sowerberry kitchen insufferable, Oliver runs away to London with all that he possessed- a torn shirt, two pairs of darned stockings, a piece of bread and a penny. In the outskirts of the city, he comes across the Artful lodger who finds in the little boy ideal material for Fagin's gang of thieves and pickpockets, for as Monroe Engel says, it is the criminals themselves who "know best the roots and causes of crime." What Dickens tries to affirm here is the belief that poverty breeds crime. Saffron-Hill district was that area of London infested with pickpockets, thieves, prostitutes and thus by placing Saffron-Hill in the pages of Oliver Twist, Dickens was actually handling "a contemporary topical allusion with which a great number of his readers would have been quite familiar beforehand." The world of Fagin does provide shelter to a class of people who otherwise would have perished of hunger Oliver approaches death many times. In the workhouse he suffers from starvation and his condition is hardly any better in the kitchen of Sowerberry. He was faint with hunger and fatigue after he had walked for miles together to London; and it was at this particular period that the Artful Lodger provides him with a meal and takes him into Fagin's custody. Again when Noah Claypole and Charlotte come to London, Fagin promises to give them shelter in exchange of the service they would render to him. Oliver is unable to escape from the clutches of the evil forces of the society until he is rescued by Mr. Brownlow and

the Maylies where he finally finds love and solace. Thus there are three different stages through which Oliver has to pass in the course of the story - the world of the workhouse, Fagin's world and lastly the comfortable world of the Brownlows and Maylies. What Dickens intends to show is that the last one is the ideal one for a childlike Oliver, because, it is in these families of benevolent men and women that children are taken due care of and given necessary guidance and security to lead them in the right path of life. (10, p.110) The novel which follows Oliver Twist, The Old Curiosity Shop (1841)-share its basic pattern. In both, isolation and loneliness of the child become a basic feature of their early life. Exposure to evil is presented through the figure of Quilp in The Old Curiosity Shop as Fagin in Oliver Twist. Like most of the child heroes of Dickens, the child suffers from the pangs of loneliness right from the initial stage of the novel. Nell in the Curiosity Shop is besieged by a sombre world: lumber and decay, and ugly age, the beautiful child in her gentle slumber, smiling through her light and sunny dreams. "Many of Dickens's novels include a journey which the child undertakes and from which he learns about life. As the author progressed toward maturity, the journeys of his characters seemed to take on more meaning. Oliver, on his way to London, encounters the Dodger and then the world of the thieves. Clearly this was a new experience for the boy, But from Oliver's actions or attitudes, there is no indication that he has learned from or profited by this experience, Nell's journey is a much longer one. It encompasses many more of the changing scenes of life and a variety of people. She does learn something about life, but more by exposure than by any deep thought processes. Also she comes to know more about her grandfather and to be aware of his gambling mania. But she does not use this knowledge to any great extent. In Great Expectations, Pip embarks on a journey also, like Nell, he meets a variety of different characters although they are of an entirely different social classes. But most important, Pip learns from his experience and later applies that knowledge to his own daily living. In his early period of writing, Dickens has not yet been able to make his characters develop to great extent by their own experiences. Thus Oliver and Nell are far more static than the children in the later novels.

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