

Charles Dickens : A Social Critic of the Victorian Era and of our Times

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Everything that happens “shows beyond mistake that you can’t shut out the world- that you are in it to be of it- that you get yourself into a false position the moment you try to sever yourself from it- and that you must mingle with it, and make the best of it, and make the best of yourself into the bargain.” Dickens in a letter to his friend Wilkie Collins dated September 6, 1858 writes of the importance of social engagement and the ultimate impossibility of fleeing from the responsibilities of this social world into some kind of private refuge.

Charles Dickens was one of the most important social critics 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 at the age of twelve worked in a shoe- blacking factory. In his adult life Dickens developed a strong social conscience, an ability to empathise with the victims of social and economic injustices.

Ever a keen observer of reality, Dickens depicted what he saw with precision in his novels and journalism. Since what he saw in the world fell far short of the ideal to which he aspired, his writings are charged with indignation at the social conditions surrounding him. He considers the plight of abandoned, neglected, and abused children in virtually all of his novels, but perhaps most powerfully in such books as *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Dickens reveals the human cost of drug and alcohol abuse in many works, notably *David Copperfield*, and *The Mystery Of Edwin Drood*. In *Little Dorrit*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend*, he examines issues of social class, snobbery, and prejudice, foundations on which a great deal of social injustice and cruelty rest. And in *The Pickwick Papers* Dickens exposes hypocrisy and selfishness, which lie at the root of various kinds of social evil.

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.

Oliver Twist (1837-39), carries a social commentary similar to that contained in the subsequent condition of England novels. Dickens explores many social themes in *Oliver Twist*, but these 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 *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. 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. Dickens was fully aware of the victimization 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*" ¹.

His exposure of the Yorkshire schools, where unwanted children were confined with the promise to parents that there would be no vacations, is central to *Nicholas Nickleby*. Dickens found inadequate education abhorrent, and he returns to the theme frequently, depicting cruel, incompetent, and unimaginative educators in such novels as *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. (In *Hard Times*, he satirizes utilitarian educators who stifle the life and creativity of their students by giving one of those teachers the appropriate name of Mr. M'Choakumchild.) The Yorkshire schools have disappeared -- but public education continues to fall far short of what it might be.

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. 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 judgments. 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 Bog. "Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green ants 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”².

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.”³ 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.”⁴ Coketown, the city of fact, foreshadows the emergence of a monstrous mass urban society based on 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. 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.

Dickens' social criticism and engagement with the world extended beyond his fiction. He often gave readings for charitable causes and gave dozens of speeches on behalf of a wide variety of organizations. He organized amateur theatricals for charitable purposes and served as an officer or trustee on a variety of charitable boards such as the Guild of Literature and Art and the Royal General Theatrical Fund. He generously contributed his time and money to hospitals, mechanics' institutes, and soup kitchens; he campaigned tirelessly for health and sanitary reform, emigration schemes, prison reform, and a host of other causes. With the help of the wealthy philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts, Dickens devoted countless hours to the creation and management of Urania Cottage, an institution for homeless and "fallen" women, offering them a positive alternative to the prostitution and crime that would otherwise be their lot.

Dickens' imaginative world is large, complex, and densely populated - just as the real world is. He understood the importance of living in the world rather than trying to escape from it. Through his keen observation and criticism of society in his richly imagined novels, Dickens helped to make the world a better place - and his work continues to challenge us to do the same today and will inspire generations to do so.

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