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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIAL ISSUES IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS: A BRIEF STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Charles Dickens is considered to be one of the most representative writers of the Victorian age. The Victorian age was an age of peace, prosperity and progress. This age witnessed many drastic and sweeping changes. This age was one of the most remarkable periods in the history of English literature. Victorian age was also known as the age of faith and doubt, the age of friction between science and religion. It was the period of rise of the middle class. Queen Victoria inspired and influenced the people with love, affection and patriotism and the English empire reached to the zenith of progress and prosperity. But, unfortunately, the bright side of this age also had many social evils. Dickens had vividly presented these evils in his works. Dickens was indeed a novelist with a purpose of exposing these evils prevalent in the society and drawing the attention of his readers. As this was the period of industrial revolution, so the workhouse culture became prominent, but the condition of workers became miserable and inhuman. These workers were exploited by their masters and treated in a most callous and apathetic manner. Even the children were exploited and were forced to work in factories and industries in miserable conditions. Charles Dickens, in portraying the sufferings and pathetic condition of children, has excelled any other writer. Dickens was also known as the social reformer and a critic who has exposed the follies of his age in a meticulous way. In almost all his novels, Dickens has addressed the social issues and especially the unhappy childhood of orphans and isolated children. Charles Dickens is one of the most famous writers in English literature. In his novels, he explores the themes of exploitation, corruption, abuse, crime, injustice, inequality, etc. that were probably inspired by his own unhappy childhood. The principal qualities of Dickens as a writer are excellent descriptive power, fascinating humour and poignant pathos and wonderful art of characterization.

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INTRODUCTION

Victorian age was one of the most remarkable periods in the history of English literature. The Victorian era is named after the queen Victoria whose reign extends from 1837 to 1901. It was a period that witnessed many social and political upheavals. It was an age of scientific advancement, educational enhancement, reforms, social and religious unrest and so on. To be precise, it was an age of peace, progress and prosperity. The Victorian age relatively witnessed less wars and was little affected by them as these wars did not cause adverse effects in their lives and so it was a comparatively peaceful reign. This peace led to the material growth in terms of the progress of industrial revolution. There was a surge in the business class as a result of rise in trade and commerce. This progress in science and technology further led to the prosperity of the nation especially the middle class. Further, Charles Darwin's theory of 'Origin of Species' in the year 1859, opened new vistas of approach and philosophy for the people. A tremendous change in the intellectual outlook came as a result of the scientific discoveries especially the theory of evolution promulgated by Darwin.

It further led to the friction between science and religion. This was also a period that witnessed the transformation of the agrarian economy to that of the material or industrial economy. The rural population started moving towards the urban areas in search of new jobs and work. As a result, the industries and their workhouse culture became popular. The bright side of this progressing society also gave rise to certain social evils in the society. On one hand, the voice of the capitalist class became dominant and on the other hand, the rural population was getting uprooted. Gradually, the workhouse culture gave rise to inhuman conditions and sufferings of the poor people. The worst effect was seen in the lives of the common people during this age. Other than these, some other important characteristic features of the Victorian age were the rise of the novels, rise of the middle class, social reforms, participation of women in major sectors, growth of democracy, population growth and migration, friction between science and religion, materialism and so on. The social evils that were prevalent during the Victorian age were poverty, industrial abuses, child labour, exploitation, injustice, crime against women and so on. The major representative Victorian novelists who have presented the main currents of the Victorian age are Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, the three Bronte sisters, William Makepeace Thackeray and so on.

Charles Dickens was one of the major representative writers of the Victorian period. He was born in 1812 and brought up in difficult situation. His family faced poverty and Dickens, as a boy, had to sell his books gradually. He faced such bitter and humiliating experiences that he could never come out of that and it haunted him throughout. As a boy, he worked in Warren's Blacking factory, owned by one of his relatives. It was a dirty rat - infested old house where he had to stick labels on blacking bottles. Here, he experienced lot of humiliation and bitterness from the ones who were expected to have given him love and affection. This experience kept on haunting him throughout his life. On the other hand, he also did not get the protection from his family specially from his mother. These painful experiences during his childhood affected his psychological personality. At such a tender age, he had witnessed a world full of horrid images that had a lasting impression upon the soul of this child. At the age of fifteen, he had to leave his school and had to join a solicitor's office where he acquired the knowledge of the legal intricacies and also developed contempt for it. During his spare time, he used to visit music halls and theatres at London. He was a born entertainer and acting was one of his hobbies. He later joined the Press Gallery of the House of Commons as a reporter where he reported the parliamentary proceedings and travelled throughout the country to cover elections, political meetings and other important events. During this period, he formed a low opinion of the Parliament as he had earlier formed in case of court of law. In his personal life, he had an unsuccessful marriage with nine children. He died a sudden death in 1870. *Sketches by Boz* was his first book that appeared in 1836. The next book that made him popular was *Pickwick Papers*, published in 1837. The early novels of Dickens present the story of the protagonist usually from his childhood days following his adventures and criminal incidents of life such as kidnapping, murder, injustice and so on. In his later novels, such as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Bleak House*, he successfully created characters of heroic dignity.

Dickens was not only a genuine story teller but was also a social reformer. He was not only one of the greatest entertainers of his age but was also the conscience of his country. The popularity of Dickens could be assigned to two major factors, the literary as well as social. On the literary front, Dickens' works were published when the English fiction was gaining popularity because there was so much that could be depicted in the novels. The industrial revolution led to the rise of the middle class and growth of the town life. The enhanced interest of the middle class in fiction stimulated the popularity and growth of this genre that took it to its zenith. As we know that every aspect has two sides, so, the economic growth due to advancement in science and technology also had a dark side. This darker side was the social evils that existed in the society of Dickens. Charles Dickens has vividly presented these social evils in his works and diverted the attention of his readers towards these evils and thus became a social reformer as well. It is said that behind his themes and stories, his personal experience works. He presents the plight, sorrows and fears of children other than vices, crimes, social abuses, legal injustice, degrading politics and so on. He also attacked the social structures. Through his novels, Dickens tried to divert the attention of the public towards slum conditions and miseries of the lower strata of the English class. He also attacked the industrial abuses, the evils in the legal system the workhouses and the prisons. He was surely a social writer who believed in the basic goodness of human character. He advocated humanitarianism and his name is closely associated with the humanitarian literature. His basic themes were the downtrodden and the oppressed. Dickens was the novelist of London life. Dickens had a strong power of description who provides a panorama of the contemporary English society. He was known as a pictorial artist. Dickens added morality and pathos to his narrative with a tinge of humour. Compton Rickett puts it in his *A History of English Literature*, "Dickens has touched with pity and tenderness the springs of our national life, and English life no less than English letters, is the saner, the sweeter, and the sunnier for his presence" (506). The first book of Dickens was by *Sketches by Boz* published in 1836. His next work and first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, published in 1837, established him as a popular writer. Dickens had addressed a very serious issue in this novel, the injustice in the legal system of justice.

He projects the insincere lawyers and politicians who rather than serving the people are merely self centered who think about themselves. In this novel, he also presents the sufferings of the poor people who find themselves unable to escape from their poverty. Dickens also brings to the surface the problems related with love and marriage. During the Victorian age, or even today, matrimonial alliances took place for financial and social stability rather than for love and togetherness. These kinds of marriages usually do not succeed and cause disturbance in the personal lives of people. This is a major social issue towards which Dickens had tried to draw the attention of people. Dickens' second novel, *Oliver Twist* presents the story of a boy who was born in a workhouse and who lost his mother soon after his birth. In this novel, the novelist had attacked the industrial abuse, the inhuman and miserable conditions of the poor in workhouses, injustice in the legal system and also the so called prosperous people's immune behavior towards the paupers and downtrodden and exploitation of children. Dickens had also exposed the insanitary and filthy conditions of the city, London and had explored the terror of the criminal world. This novel is a pathetic story of an orphan who is exploited, ill treated, misguided by people. His life begins from the callous and apathetic environment in his workhouse and moves through the criminal world where he gets caught but finally ends on a happy note when Oliver is adopted by a gentleman, Mr. Brownlow. Through this novel, Dickens brought social reforms and established his reputation as a social reformer and a critic.

The next novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*, published in 1839 addresses the issue of children in schools. The novelist not only attacks the education system but also registers his concern about the future of these children who will later become the young representatives of their nation. The novel is about the inhuman attitude towards the needy, arrogance and ignorance of people. The protagonist, Nicholas had to struggle to seek his fortune and to save his family from the exploitation and greed of his Uncle. His other novel, *Barnaby Rudge* is set on the backdrop of the Gordon Riots of 1780. This novel projects the oppression, violence, rebellion of the people against the government, between the masters and servants. The theme of greed for money is projected in the novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which the protagonist is an old rich man who has hired a nurse for his care and who is on the verge of death. The novelist has attacked the selfish behaviour of people who, as it seems, have forgotten all values of humanity. The novel, *Dombay and Son* deals with the issues of cruelty and betrayal. The protagonist, Mr. Dombey is full of jealousy and considers money as his greatest priority. The novelist has also touched the issue of prostitution; he was known to have great compassion for female sufferings as well. Here, Dickens has also satirized the education system as he feels that it is not fruitful for the students. His masterpiece work, *David Copperfield* published in 1850 projects how the powerful exploit the weak. In this novel, Dickens focuses on the plight of orphans, women and the differently abled. Throughout the novel the novelist criticizes the view of the society that wealth and class are the deciding factors in judging a person's value and character. According to Dickens, a person's character should be judged on the basis of his deeds and qualifications. In his next novel, *Bleak House*, the novelist attacks the delayed justice system that causes lot of suffering to people. He criticizes those who neglect their own family for doing the charitable work of taking care of the other families.

Hard Times, another novel by Dickens is a novel that remarkably presents a realistic account of the miserable condition of the poor who faced oppression especially due to the disparity in the social setup in the Victorian age. The novel attacks the social evils inherent in the economic structure, caste and class distinctions and also the educational system which had a profound influence on the economy of England. Dickens gives due representation to the aristocratic class in this novel through the characters of Mr. Grandgrind and Bounderby who highlight the spirit of Industrial Revolution and pleasures of life. Life, during the Victorian age, was considered to be a balance sheet of profit and loss and the eternal values of faith, honesty, trust, love, friendship were discarded as worthless sentiments.

The novelist has projected the materialistic approach of the characters. *A Tale of Two Cities* is a historical novel published in 1859 that explores the themes of duality, rebellion, resurrection, necessity of sacrifice, tedious process of justice, social inequality and class conflict, etc. The novel, *Great Expectations*, published in 1860 belongs to the mature phase of Dickens. In this novel, the novelist deals with the issues of ruthlessness of law, lack of love and empathy among human beings, corrupting power of money and wealth, criminal world and imprisonment, insecure and unhappy childhood. This story is about the journey of a helpless child from his unhappy childhood days to his maturity when he gets fortune from his benefactor, Magwitch, who tries to make him a gentleman. Pip's snobbery after getting fortune from his benefactor is reflected in the story. In the novel, *Little Dorrit*, the novelist portrays the problems of debtors and their prisons. The class conflict, the miserable condition of the poor and the apathetic and indifferent treatment of the rich towards the poor are presented in this novel. Charles Dickens is a wonderful story teller. He writes with a purpose, to wring the conscience of his audience through his novels. While considering him as a representative novelist of his age, we cannot overlook the early painful experiences through which Dickens himself had gone through. His purpose in writing novels was basically to focus attention on various social evils prevalent in the Victorian society. His humour and pathos gives a new dimension to his faculty of imagination. Dickens was not only a great humorist but also a master of sentiments of pity. His novels completely belong to the humanitarian movement of the Victorian age. Dickens was one of the first novelists who had tried to draw the attention towards the problems and plight of children who later become the representatives of their nation. The important social issues that he had depicted in his novels are exploitation of children, women, poor and the oppressed, class conflict, corrupting power of money, faulty education system, miserable conditions of workers in workhouses, industrial abuses, terrors of the criminal world injustice in the legal system, the materialistic approach in the industrial age and so on.

His novels have brought many reforms establishing his reputation as a social critic and a social reformer. In fact, no other writer has touched the daily life of the English society with pity and tenderness as Dickens has done in his works. He was the spokesman of the masses and the novelist of the humanitarian movement and the democratic world. He is considered to be a representative novelist of his age who has portrayed the contemporary problems of especially the middle class. Dickens was a great expert in drawing child characters. In fact, he excelled everyone in depicting the problems and plight of children in the contemporary society. In his novels, Dickens has tried to satirize the social, economic and political evils prevalent in the contemporary society. He had portrayed the characters with virtues more successfully than the characters with vices. In the words of Compton Rickett, one of the "cause for his popularity lay in the fact that he was not merely a story-teller but a social reformer who used fiction as a platform for his social appeals ; and who proved to be that rare type of reformer who could moralize with a smile on his lips, and mix his sermonic powders in such excellent jam, that his contemporaries did not realize for a while that he was doctoring them for their good"(499).

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