

A comparative Study of the Orphan in Dickens' Oliver Twist, David Copperfield and Great Expectations.

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Abstract: *The paper aims at analysing of Dickens three novels, and their three child heroes, David, Oliver and Pip. They were all orphaned, and experience a series of ordeals through their childhoods. Dickens depicts social problems such as child labour, orphanage, and education through the episodes in which children encounter such social and cultural hardships. The main characters exhibit certain resemblances with the author in the novels. By illustrating the orphaned child heroes' journey, Dickens evokes his painful memories, and addresses the necessity of social reform to cure problems which originate from child labour, urbanization and education.*

Key Words: *David, Pip, Oliver, Orphaned, child heroes, social reform.*

1. Introduction:

Dickens achieved the most vivid picture of life ever portrayed and in his novels the picture is faithful and exaggerated. In the nineteenth century in England, the industrial revolution became the main cause of reform in the human society. It made a deep and significant impact on English Literature. Subsequently, child became one of the primary personae, who customarily appeared in the nineteenth century English novel. Such novels became a medium to deliver crucial messages regarding child as an independent identity. The British novelist Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870) implemented the dialog discourses of children personage in hand with other characters to reveal the drawbacks of social economic, and cultural systems. It is evident that Dickens attempted to depict the historical, social, and cultural landscapes of the early and mid- Victorian period through his novels. In David Copperfield (1849-1850), Oliver Twist (1837-1838) and Great Expectation (1860-1861). Dickens narrated children whose destinies are seriously influenced and determined by capitalism and industrialization. A.K.H. Boyd stood against the common belief that “childhood is our happiest time” and “the unhappy past was a great reality.” [1] Dickens writings offer us a portrait of England in the nineteenth century that has extraordinary richness and complexity.

2. The Orphan in Dickens Novel :

Like other Dickens's heroes, Oliver, David and Pip are in the “orphan situation.” For Dickens, the orphan situation is best suited for the presentation of his hero's moral and social achievements. Here Gold, very well explains the effect of being orphaned, “The parent less child is both freer and more in urgent need of becoming as it were, his own parents.”[2]

Dickens presented various types of social and cultural phenomena which emerged during the rising epoch of capitalism and industrial revolution. His child heroes were orphans, factory workers or students in private schools. In the initial parts of his novel Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, and Great Expectations, Dickens child heroes David, Pip and Oliver each suffer a symbolic fall to earth. In other words, they faced significantly severe life circumstances. Thus, they grow up in unusual circumstances where they would not be if their parents are still alive. All of them become orphans who are disgraced or deceived through interactions with other characters. Deprived of parental love and support, most of these children are rudely cast out into the alien adult world, to fend for themselves. They are not only lonely but neglected as well. In Oliver Twist, Dickens hero is an orphan who, though raised in an abusive environment, manages to transcend the immorality and squalor of this setting through an inborn propensity toward moral action. Dickens makes it clear that Oliver, despite being born and raised in the poorest of conditions, has attained the middle class morality of his mother and father; hence, he is a misfit in the workhouse system and an incongruity in the criminal underworld of Fagin's gang.

The novel Oliver Twist powerfully evokes the sense of abandonment, of being utterly lost in the enemy territory. The keynote is struck when Oliver's idyllic life with Mr. Brownlow suddenly gets cut short; he goes out on an errand, and is recaptured by Sikes and Nancy. Oliver is parent less, and society is more to blame for his sufferings than any individual. Bumble and Mrs. Mann are society's official representatives; Oliver faces worse at their hands than he does from its sworn enemies, Fagin and his gang. There was of course, much disagreement about the justice of his attack on The New Poor Law, and certainly he made no attempt to understand the motives of the reformers or the economic consequences of the new system. The vivid account of the criminal underworld of Saffron Hill, into which Oliver can

be swallowed up and lost without trace, was instructive readers such as, public-spirited reformist Member of Parliament, Sir Francis Burdett, who wrote at the time: “Weather anything like it exists or no I mean to make enquiry for it is quite dreadful, and, to society in this country, most disgraceful.[3]

Dickens portrayal of the feelings of a rejected child, who has been harshly treated is best seen in David Copperfield. David returns home from the delight of Yarmouth to find Mr. Murdstone installed as his mother’s husband. He dislikes Murdstone and feels jealous of this intruder who has usurped his mother’s affections. The Murdstones stand for ‘firmness’- another name for tyranny, as David discovers. Murdstone gives him terrifying daily lessons, into which he soon introduces a ‘lithe and limber cane.” The blind, shabby, haunted garret rooms and staircases mirrored the frightening, cluttered, dark recesses of David’s unconsciousness.

Though both Pip and David were orphans, bullied, and otherwise hard done by, they are Dickens nearest approaches to normal children, and he is most successful when presenting their feelings and perceptions at the common, not the extraordinary, experiences of childhood. He is acute on the growing-pains and gaucheries adolescence, but the best moments belong to their earlier years up to about the age of ten, the period for which his educational ideas are most adequate or suggestive.

Great Expectations is republished as a three- volume novel. Oliver Twist is a three- volume tale too. The resemblance between the two tales are not merely the superficial one that they are both in the same number of volumes, but is also similar in subject and treatment too. Pip, is a sort of Oliver. He is low-born, fatherless and motherless, and he rises out of the cheerless degradation of his childhood into quite another sphere. Pips life is not less mixed up with the ways of convicts. He befriends a convict in his need, and henceforth his destiny is involved in that of the prisoner. In either tale, through some accountable caprice of fortune, the puny son of poverty suddenly finds himself the child of affluence.

3. Charles Dickens Children:

Charles Dickens three child characters, David, Oliver and Pip, are heroes through whom Dickens portrays the historical and landscapes of nineteenth century English society. In his novel, Dickens depicts wide spectrum of individual and sociological phenomena in Victorian society, such as education, the nature of the urban centre, working conditions of children, etc. Yet, Dickens does not describe the same phenomena in each novel. Children and childhood are at the heart of Dickens vision, both as a subject, and as a way of looking at the world. “It is a critical commonplace that Dickens handles brilliantly the child’s point of view, but the corollary is also true: Dickens succeeds with the child’s perspective because that perspective came naturally to him and is indeed a dominant mode of vision in his novels. [4] David Copperfield shows that he knew the child is father not only of the man, but also of the artist. Since Dickens borrowed a form of autobiography in writing David Copperfield, the novel focuses on the personal life of the protagonist, David. Thus, it is the most individual novel in the sense that David is depicted not only as the narrator and hero but also as the writer of the novel. The novel stresses the personal interactions of the hero with other characters. Oliver is the most socialized child personage among the three child characters in the novels. In contrast to other children, who were surrounded by their parents, relatives or friends, Oliver begins his life as an orphan. It is only after his running away from the provincial town of his birth to London, he discovers the multiple sociological facets of the city throughout the novel.

Pip, in Great Expectations, with respect to his individual and sociological background, stands between David and Oliver. Dickens makes Pip the narrator of the novel as is David in Copperfield. Pip was an orphan, raised by his sister, who is the wife of a blacksmith.

Child labor had been one of the most serious social problems in the nineteenth century British society. Most of the children of the working class families were sent to cotton or iron factories and worked there to bring money, back home. In the early stages of the industrial revolution, the child factory workers work for the same hours as adult workers. This recurrent view of childhood as pathetic has an obvious relevance to Dickens educational ideas, and almost the universal admiration it then evoked was an important element in the contemporary influence. His most prominent child characters, were denied of the stability of a living home, they were maltreated, bludgeoned by the sarcasm, bad temper and the repressive convictions of their parents and guardians.

4. The Autobiographical Novels:

Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Great Expectations occur at decisive moments in Dickens career. In David Copperfield, Dickens hero stands halfway between Oliver Twist and Pip. In choosing to write his autobiography, Dickens placed himself at the heart of things in David Copperfield. David is orphaned relatively late in the book. Dickens had summoned up the most anguished memories of youth; his wretched job in a blacking warehouse, his rejection by Maria Beadnell, and his earlier defeat within the home. At several places in the childhood chapters, Dickens shows off the religiousness of his observational faculties.[5] In Great Expectations, the final version of the evolving story of an abandoned child, we notice that Dickens was able in the large part to come to terms with the demons of his past and to

accept responsibility for the most significant character flaws he shares with the intrusive narrating Pip. The implicit psychological progression in the first person narrators reveals the evolution of Dickens attitude towards his own childhood and suggests that he did a great deal of “growing up” between David Copperfield in 1850 and Great Expectations in 1861. He wrote Oliver Twist in his twenties (1837) and split up the various parts of his self among its characters- pure Oliver, tainted Nancy. By the time he reached his fifties, however, Dickens returned to two of these characters the most extreme opposites- and, through his performances, began to enact his inability to reconcile these two major fragments of himself, with the result that such failure to find unity then inevitably led to his own utter dissolution.

The crucial years for the hardening or darkening of Dickens thinking were the middle fifties. The two autobiographical novels span this time almost symmetrically, and the difference in perspective and tone accurately represents the change in Dickens view of himself in his world. Great Expectations is in a sense the mirror image of Copperfield. David Copperfield, the earlier and more explicitly autobiographical novel is a success story, whose dominant mood is pathetic. Great Expectations describes a movement away from success, and its dominant mood is ironic. As for Oliver, his experiences were clearly parallel to some of Dickens perceptions of his own childhood. The connection between Dickens’s own childhood and Oliver’s is forged most strongly by the naming of Fagin. Bob Fagin was a real-life boy with whom Dickens worked at Warrens Blacking Factory. It also revealed Dickens wish that he, like Oliver, could have escaped unscathed from the experience and regained what he felt to be his rightful inheritance of middle- class respectability. The shame Dickens suffered at Warrens had compromised his sense of self for the rest of his life, dividing him between his hidden shame and his carefully cultivated public persona, while surfacing in much of his fiction. According to Newsom, in threatening and destabilizing a unified sense of self, shame can also actually rupture the self: “In experiencing shame ...the self becomes estranged or divided from itself.”[6] Great Expectations, indeed, though overtly less autobiographical than David Copperfield, is a more searching and self-critical account of Dickens own inner impulses.

5. The Social Class in Dickens Novels:

The idea of gentleman reflects the rapidly changing Victorian society. It can be interpreted as a social force in the form of needs and aspirations of the various social ranks of the Victorian society for improvement of their life. Robin Gilmour points out that a notion of a gentleman should be understood as “a cultural goal, a mirror of desirable moral and social values of the Victorian world.”[7] No one illustrates more clearly than Dickens how the Victorians were fascinated by the image of gentleman and what constituted true gentility. Dickens deals with “the lower reaches of the middle class in its most anxious phase of self-definition, struggling out of trade and domestic service and clerical work into the sunshine of respectability.” David and Pip represent the middle or lower class whose aspiration for gentlemanly status means their struggle to establish their identity or even to achieve stability in the class based Victorian society. In David Copperfield and Oliver Twist, Dickens depicts the labouring moments of David and Oliver only through a few pages. Dickens seemed to briefly inscribe the irreconcilable memory of his own child labour experiences through the childhood of the two heroes.

In Dickens study of psychological growth, Great Expectations, the psychological concerns are socially expressive: Pip’s humiliations, ambitions, illusions, snobbishness, gentle manliness, and fall and rise, are all recognizable social symbols.[8] However in David Copperfield, Dickens is closer to his hero, and in a position where he found it hard to be distanced and objective, the relation of psychology to social expression is markedly different. David often reveals or rather betrays-Victorian limitations which the author does not see but, the modern reader most certainly does. Oliver, in Oliver Twist moves with naive certainty from his childhood in the workhouse into the middle class world of the Brownlow’s. He discovers his social identity, his place in the world, by discovering his familial origin.

6. Conclusion:

Dickens painful experiences have led to the major themes of Dickens writings, which are of the abandoned, the orphaned, or the maltreated child. The secondary theme is the lower-middle class fear of being declassed. Dickens underwent social despair during his formative period in Warren’s blacking factory which he felt were socially shameful. We can find that Dickens childhood sufferings are well portrayed in some of the sufferings of his characters. He tackled important themes in this novel like poverty and orphanage and their effects on the individual. Some individuals are affected in a negative way so they suffer from psychological and social problems like Pip while some individuals do not change like Oliver and David. One can hardly find a normative establishment of family and blessed childhood. The characters are either orphans or single parent. Dickens does not glorify the parental relationship, his major figures Oliver, David and Pip were deprived of parental protection. He confirms the existence of a theory, which may have been either conscious or unconscious in his mind that mere blood ties do not imply gratitude and filial love; instead these sentiments demand more positive virtue, such as self-denial, patience and generosity. Charles Dickens gave us the impression of

himself of having better qualified to explore the psychology of orphans than of children who lived with and knew their parents.

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