

## The transition of Dickens' social criticism as seen in his later novels

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As well as being a writer of popular entertainment, Charles Dickens is known as a writer of social criticism. Throughout his literary career of three and a half decades, his critical view of Victorian England was always reflected in his novels, but though he never ceased to criticize society, his method of social criticism seems to differ in his later novels from his earlier ones. It is often said that his novels changed greatly over the years, and grew gloomier and more pessimistic in his later years. There is evidence to suggest that his method of social criticism changed from attacks on particular abuses to the diagnosis of Victorian society as a whole. In his earlier novels he attacked social abuses and vices as part of the protagonist's adversities, and in later novels he shows these abuses are a reflection of a distorted society.

The origin of Dickens' social criticism can be traced back all the way to his first attempt at authorship, *Sketches by Boz*. The social abuses he attacks in this are the ones associated with the ugly side of the urban underworld, such as squalid slums, poverty, prostitution and lack of charity. This is not a novel but a collection of "sketches", depicting the urban scenes of London. These stories were originally contributed to periodicals, and are primarily comical caricatures, yet they contain scenes which express Dickens' indignation at social abuses.

Although Dickens' very first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), is probably best remembered as a comic novel, it contains a depiction of social abuses. It is full of funny episodes and bizarre tales experienced by "Pickwickians", as the primary characters call themselves, and Dickens' criticism of social abuses is associated with them. For example, at the Eatanswill election, "Pickwickians" witness the abuses of the newspapers supported by the two opposing political parties, the Blues and the Buffs, and their discreditable means of gaining votes. In this novel, personal vices are represented in villains such as Alfred Jingle and Job Trotter, and some social abuses practiced by the degraded professionals are condemned. He caricatures the shady practices of the medical profession in the depiction of Bob Sawyer, and the mercenary attitudes of lawyers in Dodson and Fogg. In one of these episodes, Dickens also attacks the debtor's prison, in which his father John Dickens was actually incarcerated. He discloses the appalling conditions of the prison and the misery of its inmates, and makes his readers ashamed of its existence. This prison theme reappears in a number of Dickens' succeeding novels, and is one of the major themes of his criticism of society.

With his second novel *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) and the third *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), Dickens has a clear purpose of showing more specific social abuses. *Oliver Twist* is the first novel in which he directly tackles social institutions. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834

made Dickens furious, and this is what he attacks. The novel shows the mismanaged workhouse under the new system and how the orphans and the impoverished were exploited by those who were paid to look after them. He also reveals the lives of underworld London—the lives of thieves, prostitutes and murderers—and the wretched conditions of the slum they live in. Likewise, the early chapters in *Nicholas Nickleby* reveal the degrading conditions of some of the private boarding schools. Dickens had heard of the terrible conditions of the boarding schools in Yorkshire, and he decided to disclose them in his novel. Dickens denounces the way the schoolmaster, Mr Squeers, abuses children in his school. The novel exposes how cruelty and starvation were imposed upon children, so that they were made to swallow “medicine” to spoil their appetite, made to do chores under the pretext of “study”. Prior to writing this, Dickens even visited some boarding schools in Yorkshire to gather material for the novel. The main framework is shaped by Ralph Nickleby’s miserliness. In refusing to give financial help, Ralph sends young Nicholas away to fend for himself. As is intimated in the full title of the novel, “*The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*”, this is a story of adventure. Together with *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, Dickens’ first three novels are roughly “heroic adventures”: the protagonist confronts antagonists or adverse circumstances along the way.

The *Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44) are more comparable to *The Pickwick Papers* than to *Oliver Twist* or *Nicholas Nickleby* in the sense that their criticism is not directed at any particular law or institution. Again both novels deal with personal vices. *The Old Curiosity Shop*, like *The Pickwick Papers*, roughly takes the form of a picaresque novel, and its plot is not as important as are situation and events. The grandfather lacks financial skills and is an impulsive gambler. His troubled financial situation forces him to desert his shop to get away from an inexorable moneylender Quilp. Quilp represents a ruthless parasite of society, who lives at the expense of others’ unhappiness. He, like other villains in the other early novels, is punished in the end and dies a miserable death. In this novel, London is portrayed as a sink of iniquity and corruption. While, on the other hand, the idyllic world is idealized, where Nell and her grandfather still meet kind people like the schoolmaster, where humanity outweighs self-interest.

The main theme of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is selfishness and hypocrisy. By the time of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens’ novels lack a real hero. Mr Pickwick, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, Nell Trent are heroes or heroines with a redeeming vitality. Mr Pickwick is benevolent and merciful, *Oliver* is honest and innocent, *Nicholas* is righteous and resourceful, *Nell* is virtuous and compassionate. They all have impeccable qualities and are always a good moral influence on others. Young *Martin* lacks such vitality and is rather selfish, and does not stand out much as the protagonist among some other characters like manipulative old *Martin*, or the hypocritical, larger-than-life *Pecksniff*.

However, from his next novel *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), Dickens’ novels tackle Victorian society very differently. It is regarded by many critics as a major turning point in Dickens’ career. The majority of his later novels, if not all, have a dominant theme which makes the framework of the whole novel. In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens attempts to depict English society more realistically than in earlier novels. Flamboyant, highly caricatured characters in his earlier ones like Mr Bumble and Mrs Corny in *Oliver Twist* are superseded by more subtle, realistic

characters like Solomon Gills and Captain Cuttle. The plot is more carefully organized than Dickens' earlier novels. In previous novels, he was more concerned with institutional and personal evils—poverty, crime, hypocrisy. Now, society as a whole has become his theme.

In this novel, Dickens attempts to explain how his industrialized society makes people act the way they do. The novel's dominant theme, pride, is represented in Mr Dombey. Dickens mocks the general tendency to neglect humanity in pursuit of wealth. Like Ralph Nickleby's avarice and dishonesty led him to his destruction, Dombey's self-interest and mercantilism lead him to his downfall. By the end, he loses almost everything—his wife, son, money and firm, on account of his vainglorious pride. Dickens' point is that Dombey's pride, like Ralph's avarice, is not an inherent quality of his, but it was engendered by the pressure of his society, and he is merely the victim of it. However, what is unlike *Nicholas Nickleby* is that while Ralph is drawn antithetically to heroic Nicholas, Dombey lacks his heroic counterpart, and is the main focal point of the novel. Dombey's pride is underpinned by his sense of possessing abundant money. He believes in the power of money and indoctrinates Paul with the value of it:

'Papa! What's money?'

'Gold, and silver, and copper. Guineas, shillings, half-pence. You know what they are?'

'Oh yes . . . . I don't mean that, Papa. . . I mean, Papa, what can it do?'

.....

'Money, Paul, can do anything.'

'Anything means everything, don't it, Papa?' . . . .

'It includes it: yes,' said Mr Dombey.' Why didn't money save me my Mama?' (152-53)

The distinction between lower-class and middle-class is also emphasized in this novel. Possession of wealth is an evil. Money is the only thing that makes classes exist. Dickens attacks the arrogant attitude of upper-class people by making it clear that money alone gives them a fake sense of superiority.

Dickens' later novels, *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), and *Great Expectations* (1860-61), all have social themes. In *Bleak House* Dickens took a hint from actual incidents and reassembled them to produce his diagnosis of society. It is an allegory, and by illustrating the ills caused by the Court of Chancery, Dickens attempts to show the degraded morality of Victorian England. The Chancery's inefficient, corrupt handling of its Jarndyce case goes on endlessly, ruining the lives of the people involved in it. J. Hills Miller claims in his "Introduction" to *Bleak House* that the novel "accurately reflects the social reality of Dickens's day . . . . Everything mirrors some fact" (11). The lawsuit represents a mere symbol of the depraved society as diagnosed by Dickens; the cold, damp, foggy images of the *Bleak House* of John Jarndyce mirror Dickens' perception of the bleakness of society which gave the novel its title. In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens takes up the theme of the Marshalsea debtor's prison in its full-scale, which he only briefly dealt with in *The Pickwick Papers*. As the Court of Chancery does in *Bleak House*, the prison represents Dickens' grim view of the society he lives in. F. R. Leavis in his *Dickens the Novelist* asserts that *Little Dorrit* is "something like a comprehensive report on Victorian England—What is life, what are the possibilities of life, in

this society and civilization” (228).

*Hard Times* is a direct indictment of Utilitarianism. Utilitarianism was first advocated by Jeremy Bentham and modified by John Stuart Mill; its doctrine is that the best action is the one that will result in the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. This virtually promoted self-interest and practicality, and is the underlying ideology of the Industrial Revolution. The novel is essentially a clash between two opposing ideologies. The practical tendency of Utilitarianism caused antipathy among people who might be called “anti-Utilitarianists”. These people are “idealists”, whose ideology was descended from the early Romantics. They denounce that society’s excessive pursuit of money and mechanical mode of thinking, and deplore its lack of humanity.

In the novel, this Utilitarianism is epitomized in Mr Gradgrind. He is an exaggerated caricature not unique in Dickens’ novels. He raises his children on this principle and runs his school on the same one. From the very beginning of the novel, Gradgrind emphasizes the Utilitarian mechanical mode of thought:

‘Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but the Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will be of any service them. . . . Stick to Facts, sir!’ (15)

Bitzer, Mr Gradgrind’s favorite pupil, blindly follows Gradgrind’s principles. Sissy Jupe, on the other hand, stands for anti-Utilitarianism and Romantic humanist principles. To make these two a clear antithesis, Dickens deliberately draws Sissy devoid of mechanical aspects, and Bitzer of humanistic ones. Sissy fails to answer Gradgrind’s question when she is asked to define a horse, the very animal her father deals with. On the other hand, Bitzer’s answer to the same question consists of nothing but “scientific” facts:

‘Give me your definition of a horse.’  
 (Sissy Jupe thrown into the greatest alarm by this demand.)  
 ‘Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!’ . . . . ‘Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals! . . . . Bitzer, yours.’ . . . . ‘Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. . . .’ (17-18)

Dickens further contrasts the “warm-bloodedness” of Sissy and “lifelessness” of Bitzer with an imagery of colour. The deficiency of colour equals deficiency of humanity. While Sissy is “so dark-eyed and dark-haired” and seems to receive a “deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun”, Bitzer is “so light-eyed and light-haired” and looks “as though, if he were cut, he would bleed white” (18). Sissy, even after she has had a general picture of what Gradgrind wants pupils to believe, timidly defies him. It is her resistance to be emotionless and lifeless:

‘Suppose you were going to carpet a room. Would you use a carpet having a representa-

tion of flowers upon it?' . . . . Only a few stragglers said Yes; among them Sissy Jupe. . . .  
 'Why would you?'  
 'If you please, sir, I an very fond of flowers . . . . I would fancy—'  
 'Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn't fancy,' . . . quite elated by coming so happily to his point.  
 'That's it! You are never to fancy.' (20)

Bounderby is also a man of practical mind, but he is more grim and inexorable than Gradgrind, incapable of relenting. Gradgrind, seeing his failure of marrying Louisa to Bounderby and his son Tom's knavery, realizes his imperfect principles and softens in the end. Bounderby, however, brags that he rose from "the gutter", and is entirely given to the pursuit of wealth. Bounderby, like Gradgrind, is a firm believer in a "hard philosophy", and has nothing to do with such things as fancy or humanity. Dickens portrays him with "inorganic" imagery: "A big, loud man, with a stare and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material . . ." (27). What Bounderby stands for, is then, a model of *laissez-faire*.

*Laissez-faire*, a governmental policy of noninterference on economic matters originally advocated by Adam Smith, was the prevalent way of thinking in the early nineteenth century. England, having experienced the Industrial Revolution earlier than any other country, exported all kinds of heavy goods and was called the "workshop of the world". Britain's ostensible economic success was achieved with a great expense of her working force. It was widely believed that *laissez-faire* was the driving force of the prosperity, and this is what Thomas Carlyle harshly denounced. In essence, this was the policy not to interfere with the way employers employed their workers: they were allowed to exploit their employees without any regulations. *Laissez-faire*, in Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*, Carlyle accuses, is "Donothingism", and is "the source of all these miseries" (79). He advocated that the government needed more control to sustain order. Dickens, having dedicated *Hard Times* to Carlyle, obviously had in mind an accusation of *laissez-faire* from the inception of the novel. Dickens, being Carlyle's ardent follower, is enraged at seeing the miserable conditions of the workers, and reveals them to the reader. Dickens' anger at the exploitation of the policy is demonstrated through his mouthpiece Stephen Blackpool, a victim of *laissez-faire*. He tells Bounderby of the miserable condition of the workers:

'Deed we are in muddle, sir. Look around town—so rich as 'tis—and see the numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein heer, fur to weave, an to card, an to piece out a livin' . . . . Look how we live, an wheer we live . . . look how the mills is awlus a goin, and how they never works no nigher to ony dis'ant object—cepting awlus, Death. Look how you considers of us, an writes of us, an talks of us, and goes up wi' yor deputations to Secretaries o' State 'bout us, and how yo are awlus right, and how we are awlus wrong, and never had'n no reason in us sin ever we were born. Look how this ha growen and growen, sir, bigger an bigger . . . .' (152)

This last part of Stephen's comment encapsulates the diseased state of Victorian England, and that the oppressed have no justice, and this is what gives the title *Hard Times* its very

meaning.

Just as Stephen Blackpool represents an antithesis of Bounderby, so does Sleary's circus troupe of Gradgrind's school. It symbolizes the Christian and humanitarian values which are neglected by a "hard philosophy" of Utilitarianism. Sleary's circus exists outside the industrial society and produces nothing tangible, offers no indispensable service required by industrial society. It is a marginalized, superfluous entity in the eyes of Industrialism. However, Dickens' point is that the world of Sleary's circus, entirely unlike Gradgrind's school, abounds in personal love and charity. Sleary arranges for Tom to escape, and declines to receive money for it on his account. He is the philanthropic "Christian Father" figure, loved by everyone in the troupe. Even Sissy's father's dog Merrylegs comes back to Sleary after the apparent death of its owner. This episode is in the chapter appropriately named "Philosophica", which teems with Sleary's anti-Utilitarian philosophy. Regarding Merrylegs, he tells Gradgrind that the dog teaches a person two things:

'. . . one, that there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-interethth after all . . .  
t'other, that it hath a way of ith own calculating or not calculating, which thomehow or another ith at leathth ath hard to give a name to, ath the wayth of the dogth ith!' (284)

By this time, Gradgrind is a changed man, but Bitzer, his once model pupil, sums up the whole system of Victorian society: "you know that the whole social system is a question of self-interest. What you must always appeal to, is a person's self-interest. It's your only hold" (279). Underneath this Utilitarianism, and Bounderby's laissez-faire, there are values of Liberalism: industriousness, self-reliance, self-help, earnest endeavour. In pursuit of those values, Dickens criticizes that a society is forgetful of the values which are associated with those of Christianity, such as charity, moral conduct, and good faith in human relationship.

In comparison to *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, or *Little Dorrit*, *Great Expectations* has a less obvious way of offering criticism of society as a whole. This is what is often called an "education novel", a novel in which the protagonist learns a moral lesson. Dickens' criticism is gradually projected through the process of the hero Pip's realization. It is a moral fable, criticizing the class structure of England. Pip is not a morally infallible hero throughout the novel like Oliver or Nicholas. Pip's morality changes over many years through a series of events. He changes from a timid little boy who stole food and a file for a convict to a vain, snobbish young man as soon as he has money, and then to a more Christian-like philanthropist after he has learnt a lesson. It is, as it were, a kind of "Cinderella unrealized" story: the protagonist gets money and social position, but loses them soon; he thinks he is going to marry a princess, but she marries someone else. However, the plot of *Great Expectations*, of course, does not end there.

From the point of view of realism, it has a very unlikely ending. Dickens changed the ending completely in the last moment at the suggestion of a friend, and this makes Estella's character unrealistically inconsistent. Estella is too pretentious and vainglorious to love Pip seriously, and she always mocked Pip's affection toward her. To most readers, Estella's sudden change of loving him is more than they can comprehend. This Estella's change no doubt would have

displeased Aristotle who in his *Poetics* argued characters must be true to life and be consistent, or if inconsistent, they must be consistently inconsistent. However, Dickens' true intention seems to lie elsewhere. For him, it is much more important to show the interaction between peoples from different classes. He shows that the way one acts towards another is associated with the class to which one belongs, and there is a characteristic morality and code of ethics unique to each class. He indicates that there are also victims in all classes, who are blinded by greed and vanity.

Pip's boyhood is inundated with greed and vanity. It is initially Mrs Gargery who puts into his head that Miss Havisham will reward him handsomely, and it is a conspiracy between Estella and Miss Havisham that they encourage Pip to love Estella only to break his heart. Pip's sense of inferiority takes a decisive form when Estella scornfully expresses her reluctance to play cards with him: "With this boy! Why, he is a common labouring-boy" (89). After this, he despises the working class, and aspires to be a gentleman and believes he could become one if he had money. His arrogance and contempt for the working class typify the feelings of the middle-class. As Pip gets money and becomes a "gentleman", he goes down in morality. It is an irony that the more and more he thinks he comes closer to becoming a "gentleman" in one sense, the further and further he goes away from it in another sense of the word. Pip's fear of Joe's coming to see him in London mirrors not only Pip's diseased state of mind but also that of the whole middle-class:

Not with pleasure, though I was bound to him by so many ties; no; with considerable disturbance, some mortification, and a keen sense of incongruity. If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money. My greatest reassurance was, that he was coming to Barnard's Inn, not to Hammersmith, and consequently would not fall in Bentley Drummle's way. . . . Drummle, whom I held in contempt. (240)

By showing Pip's uneasy feeling about meeting Joe again after long neglect, Dickens illustrates his point that it is difficult to sustain fellowship over the boundary of class distinction. More importantly, this last quoted part of Pip's words shows that he is more concerned about "keeping a facade" among polite society than meeting Joe itself. This attitude represents the vanity of the whole of the middle and upper-class, reflecting Dickens' anger at their unjustifiable sense of supremacy. Pip continues to be too blind to see his own arrogance until he learns the devastating revelation that his money came from Magwitch the convict, not Miss Havisham. Pip's disdainfully heartless reception of Magwitch is another example of the difficulty of sustaining fellowship over the class division:

'Keep off! If you are grateful to me for what I did when I was a child, I hope you have shown your gratitude by mending your way of life. If you have come here to thank me, it was not necessary. . . . surely you must understand that . . . I can not wish to renew that chance intercourse with you of long ago, under these different circumstances. . . . our ways are different ways . . .'" (334)



Dickens points out in Pip's repulsive manner that it is a typical attitude of "gentlemen" that they want to have nothing to do with criminals regardless of their present status or moral values.

After the shocking revelation, Pip is like Scrooge in *Christmas Carol*, a morally reformed person. His attempt to help Magwitch to leave England, taking care of him to his last breath, all show his Christian-like doctrine of "do as you would be done by". But the man who makes Pip realize the true meaning of a "gentleman" is Joe. Joe is a vehicle for Dickens' ideal morality. The role he plays in *Great Expectations* is similar to that which Sleary plays in *Hard Times*, representing Christian values such as charity and human love. His devoted way of looking after Pip all the way through his illness, and even paying Pip's debt, all prove him to be a true gentleman.

Dickens also shows that there is no justice for the poor. In trials, where everything is expected, and believed to be fair and just to all, the one who wins is the one who pretends to be a gentleman and has money. Magwitch is a scapegoat of society, for he was more sinned against and punished, than sinning. In Magwitch's reflection of the trial of himself and Compeyson, he relates how the court was manipulated and deceived. Compeyson obviously managed to find a lawyer to do unfair business against Magwitch, producing spurious evidence and putting on a sympathy-attracting appearance:

'I noticed first of all what a gentleman Compeyson looked . . . and what a common sort of wretch I looked. When the prosecution opened and the evidence was put short, aforehand, I noticed how heavy it all bore on me, and how light on him. . . . And when it come to character, warn't it Compeyson as had been to the school, and warn't it his schoolfellows as was in this position and that . . . .' (365)

That Compeyson went to school should have nothing to do with the true nature of his character, and still less to do with the crime they are charged for. When it comes to what his schoolfellows do, it is preposterously irrelevant. Dickens mocks this prejudice against the poor; it is a hubristic myth among the wealthy that the people who do not have money to go to school must necessarily be morally corrupt. Compeyson represents two things; one is a hungry, blood-sucking predator, the other is a pretentious, insincere double-faced "gentleman". It is the latter quality with which he deceived Miss Havisham, who, in turn sought revenge on all men. Miss Havisham's logic might seem far-fetched, but Dickens shows that she was, like Estella whom she wronged, only victimised by the pressure of the society to be vain and heartless. Her diseased mind is the product of a hollow society. Likewise, Magwitch is also a victim of society, but his behaviour in his last few years of his life since he returned to England, is the outcry of the abused. It is another significant aspect of the morality of the novel that justice can not be suppressed for ever.

Through the opposition between classes, *Great Expectations* offers a comprehensive view of Victorian society. The different levels of strata in society are brought together on a large canvas to show how they act and react on each other. If *Hard Times* is a clash between a "hard philosophy" and a more humanitarian one, *Great Expectations* is a clash between the world of



the respectable and that of the disrespectable. The novel appears to convey two major messages. One is that where there is a class distinction, justice and respect are only for the rich, and none for the poor, gentility equals money. The other is that the fellowship between man and man can not exist over these divisions. Also the falsehood of gentility and the superficiality of the middle-class are shown, representing Dickens' view that Victorian society is hollow in its excessive pursuit of money.

Unlike his earlier novels, Dickens' later novels, from *Dombey and Son* onwards, have a dominant social theme. In these novels, the confrontation between two divisions of society forms a major framework. It is the confrontation of the privileged and the unprivileged, one philosophy and another, the rich and the poor. In his earlier "adventure stories", Dickens focused more on particular abuses, and suggests solutions are possible through a characters' benevolent influence or through poetic justice. Villains are punished or become repentant, some abuses are rectified by a heroic character. In later novels he deplores the general tendency of lack of humanitarianism and suggests no such simple solutions to it. He shows that social ills are caused by diseased society, and even villains are merely the victims of it. Dickens' diagnosis of Victorian society as exploitative and devoid of human feeling as a whole suggests that what we really need to regenerate society is for everyone to adopt Christian-like morality.

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