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Charles Dickens and the Critique of Victorian Society: Literature as a Catalyst for Social Reform

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Abstract:

The Victorian era (1837-1901), brought about a significant economic and social transformation, marked by the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of capitalism. Although these transformations brought with them unheard-of wealth and prosperity, they also revealed the darker side of class disparities and societal norms. Charles Dickens, a prominent Victorian writer, used his literary works to critique the oppressive features of Victorian society, particularly concerning the plight of the poor, children, and women. This research paper examines how Dickens depicted Victorian society, paying particular attention to issues like inequality in society, women's rights, and child work. The paper shows how Dickens' works acted as a catalyst for social reform and legislative change through an analysis of his books and the socio-political setting. Dickens's support of the underprivileged and his criticism of the dominant socioeconomic structure aided in the passage of legislation meant to enhance the lot of those who were less fortunate. The paper explores Dickens' influence on Victorian society and how literature may be used to critique and alter society.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, Bleak House, Hard Times, Great Expectation, Oliver Twist, Reform, Fallen women, Industrial Revolution.

1. Introduction:

The Victorian era, which spanned from 1837 to 1901, represents a pivotal period in British history, marked by profound social, economic and cultural change. Named after Queen Victoria, whose long reign defined much of the era, Victorian society underwent unprecedented changes,

largely due to industrialization. The Industrial Revolution, which began in the late 18th century, gained momentum in the Victorian era and transformed Britain's economic landscape. With the help of machinery and technological innovations, factories sprung up nationwide, leading to unprecedented mass production. This transition from an agrarian to an industrial society resulted in significant urbanization as the rural population flocked to the booming cities for job opportunities. Along with the promise of prosperity, however, industrialization also led to widespread social upheaval. A rising middle class experienced new prosperity and social mobility, while the working class suffered from harsh working conditions, poverty, and overcrowded urban slums. The era was also marked by profound cultural changes as the rise of Victorian morality emphasized values such as piety, respectability and domesticity. This moral code, shaped by religious and social norms, permeated every aspect of Victorian life, influencing everything from family dynamics to public behaviour. In addition, the Victorian era saw significant advances in science, literature and the arts, with figures such as Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood leaving an indelible mark on history. However, this period of progress was accompanied by widespread social upheaval, as the rapid expansion of industry and commerce brought with it myriad challenges and inequalities (Richard, A. 1974).

Against the background of social change, Charles Dickens emerged as the supreme figure whose literary genius and sharp social conscience defined the era. Born in 1812, Dickens grew up in the turbulent currents of industrialization and urban growth, experiences that shaped his worldview and influenced his writing. From an early age, Dickens saw the stark divide between rich and poor, the privileged elite and the poor masses in the crowded streets of London. Dickens' upbringing in the heart of this rapidly changing society influenced him. with a deep sense of empathy for the oppressed and marginalized. When starting his writing career, Dickens was inspired by his surroundings. He used his keen observation skills and excellent storytelling skills to illuminate the harsh realities of the working class, women and children of Victorian England. In his novels, Dickens aimed not only to entertain, but also to educate and provoke. His vivid depictions of poverty, exploitation and injustice served as a sharp indictment of the dominant social order, challenging Victorian society to confront its own shortcomings and strive for a fairer and more just future. From the resourceful orphan *Oliver Twist* to the bullied factory worker Stephen Blackpool, Dickens' characters became symbols of the struggles and aspirations of the Victorian population, and their stories resonated with readers across class. In addition, Dickens's role as a

social agent . . . the commentator reached beyond the pages of novels. He was actively involved in solving the pressing social problems of his time and used his platform as a famous writer to bring about reforms and raise awareness of the plight of the poor and dispossessed. Dickens' impassioned speeches, essays and public appearances made him an advocate for social justice, earning him equal parts admiration and controversy (Foster, J, 1874).

This paper aims to examine the tumultuous nature of Victorian society as depicted through the lens of Charles Dickens' literature. Specifically, it seeks to explore how Dickens' works serve as a critique of the societal norms, injustices, and disparities prevalent during the Victorian era. By analysing Dickens' portrayal of poverty, inequality, child labour, gender roles, and social injustice, the paper aims to uncover the underlying issues that plagued Victorian society and the ways in which Dickens used his narratives to advocate for social reform. Through this exploration, the paper endeavours to shed light on the complex realities of Victorian life and the enduring impact of Dickens' commentary on the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the time.

2. Plight of the Proletariat: A Dickensian Critique of Industrial Capitalism

In the Victorian era, literature served as a reflection of society, especially the plight of the poor and oppressed. Charles Dickens used his works to shed light on the harsh realities faced by the lower classes during the Industrial Revolution. Through novels like "Oliver Twist," "Hard Times," and "Great Expectations," Dickens exposed the cruel treatment of children in workhouses, the deplorable conditions of factory workers, and the social injustices prevalent in society. Dickens depicted the dismal living conditions of the poor, who suffered from poverty, hunger, and lack of basic necessities like clean water. The working class was exploited by the bourgeoisie, who reaped the profits of industrialization while the workers toiled in dangerous and unhealthy environments. (David, C.,1987).

In "Oliver Twist," Dickens illuminates the plight of the proletariat through the character of Oliver, an orphan who endures hardship and exploitation at the hands of the ruling class. Oliver's journey from the workhouse to the streets of London exposes the harsh realities faced by impoverished children in Victorian society. The famous verse, "Please, sir, I want some more," encapsulates Oliver's desperate plea for sustenance and highlights the stark contrast between the meagre rations provided to the poor and the abundance enjoyed by the privileged few. Similarly, the verse

*“ . . . on a rough hard bed, he sobbed himself to sleep.
What a noble illustration of the tender laws of this
Favoured country! They let the paupers go to sleep!”*

Exposes the irony of the government's neglect of the impoverished, highlighting the harsh reality faced by children like Oliver in the workhouses. Dickens' use of irony and sarcasm in describing the "tender laws" of the country highlights the hypocrisy of a system that claims to care for its most vulnerable citizens while subjecting them to degrading and inhumane treatment (Dickens, C. 1992).

In Charles Dickens' "Hard Times," the portrayal of the working class is stark and unflinching. Through characters like Stephen Blackpool, Dickens exposes the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and capitalism on the proletariat. Stephen, described as "a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity," becomes a symbol of the plight of the working class. Despite his virtues, Stephen is trapped in a system that exploits and oppresses him, forcing him to endure harsh working conditions and social injustice. The setting of Coke town serves as a microcosm of the industrialized world, with its polluted air, stifling heat, and oppressive atmosphere reflecting the physical and psychological toll of factory life. Dickens' vivid descriptions of the factories, where workers toil amidst the deafening noise of machinery and suffocating air, highlight the inhumane conditions endured by the proletariat.

*“ The whole town seemed
To be frying in oil. There was a stifling smell of hot oil everywhere.
The steam-engines shone with it, the dresses of the Hands were
Soiled with it, the mills throughout their many stories oozed and Trickled it.”*

The above verse paints a vivid picture of the dismal environment endured by factory workers, emphasizing the physical and psychological toll of industrialization on the proletariat. Furthermore, Dickens critiques the callousness of the capitalist class through characters like Mr. Bounderby, who exploit and manipulate the working class for their own gain. The contrast between the opulent lifestyle of characters like Bounderby and the destitution of characters like Stephen

underscores the deep divide between the haves and have-nots in Victorian society. (Dickens, C. 1902).

In "Great Expectations," Dickens confronts the class divide through the character of Joe Gargery, a humble blacksmith whose integrity and kindness stand in stark contrast to the greed and arrogance of the upper class. The verse, "Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears," reflects Joe's humility and compassion, qualities that transcend social status and serve as a rebuke to the callousness of the bourgeoisie.

In "Great Expectations," Charles Dickens presents Joe as a beacon of goodness amidst the moral decay of nineteenth-century society. Joe's simplicity, kindness, and purity of heart stand in stark contrast to the greed and corruption prevalent in the industrialized world. With his fair appearance, gentle demeanor, and uncertain blue eyes, Joe symbolizes an ideal of innocence and decency untainted by the harsh realities of the time. Through Joe's character, Dickens suggests that despite the negative impacts of industrialization and social stratification, there are still individuals who embody the virtues of compassion, honesty, and integrity. Joe's unwavering goodness serves as a reminder of the potential for justice and harmony in a modern, industrialized world, offering hope amidst the darkness of societal ills.

By juxtaposing Joe's character with the morally bankrupt elites and the exploited working class, Dickens underscores the importance of preserving human decency and empathy in the face of social inequality. Through Joe's portrayal, Dickens evokes a sense of pathos in the reader, compelling them to empathize with the plight of the underprivileged and advocate for social justice. Ultimately, Dickens uses Joe as a vehicle to explore themes of morality, class, and human nature, challenging readers to reflect on the values that define a just and equitable society. In doing so, he ignites a sense of awareness and solidarity among his audience, inspiring them to confront the injustices of their time and strive for a more compassionate and egalitarian world (Dickens, C. 1962).

The characters in Dickens' novels, such as Stephen Blackpool in "Hard Times", Joe in "Great Expectations," and Oliver in "Oliver Twist" represented the innocence and kindness of the lower classes amidst a society corrupted by industrialization. Through these characters, Dickens highlighted the human qualities that remained untainted by the harsh realities of the industrialized world. In addition, Dickens exposed the hypocrisy and selfishness of the capitalist class, who exploited the working class for their own gain. He showcased the contrast between the opulent

lifestyles of the wealthy and the bleak existence of the poor, urging readers to recognize the injustices perpetuated by the social hierarchy. Overall, Dickens' novels served as a powerful commentary on the misery of the proletariat during the Victorian era. By portraying the struggles of the lower classes and criticizing the oppressive systems in place, Dickens inspired readers to question societal norms and advocate for social change. Through his works, Dickens instilled a sense of class consciousness and empathy for the marginalized, paving the way for greater awareness and reform in the face of social inequality (Dickens, C. 1902).

3. Unveiling the Grim Reality of Child Exploitation through Dickensian Lens

Child exploitation has deeply scarred the pages of history, with Dickensian literature serving as a poignant mirror reflecting the horrors endured by innocent souls during the tumultuous Victorian era. In an era marred by rampant industrialization and unchecked capitalism, children bore the brunt of a society blinded by greed and indifference. The societal fabric, torn asunder by the relentless pursuit of profit, relegated children to mere commodities, their innocence and well-being sacrificed at the altar of economic gain. Dickens masterfully captures the dehumanizing effects of this exploitation, painting a vivid picture of children chained to machines, their youthful spirits crushed beneath the weight of relentless toil. Moreover, Dickens lays bare the stark inequalities perpetuated by Victorian society, where poverty condemned countless children to a life of hardship and deprivation. Denied access to education and basic rights, these children were trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, their futures bleak and uncertain.

Dickens vividly portrays this grim reality through his narratives such as in "Oliver Twist," Dickens exposes the brutal exploitation of orphans in Victorian England through the character of Oliver Twist himself. Born into a workhouse and later sold into apprenticeship, Oliver endures a life of hardship and abuse at the hands of his caretakers. His portrayal vividly illustrates the vulnerability of children in a society where they are viewed as disposable commodities, exploited for labour and subjected to inhumane conditions. Oliver's journey, marked by suffering and resilience, serves as a poignant indictment of the systemic injustices that perpetuate child exploitation (Dickens, C. 1992).

Similarly, in "Great Expectations," Dickens explores the impact of poverty and neglect on the lives of children, particularly through the character of Pip. Raised by his abusive sister and her husband, Pip experiences first-hand the dehumanizing effects of child labour and the callous

indifference of those in power. Despite his innate goodness and resilience, Pip is thrust into a world of exploitation and deceit, where his dreams are overshadowed by the harsh realities of Victorian society. Dickens' portrayal of Pip's struggles highlights the pervasive nature of child exploitation and the profound injustices faced by vulnerable children (Dickens, C. 1962).

In "Hard Times," Dickens offers a searing critique of utilitarian education and its detrimental effects on children, as exemplified by characters like Louisa Gradgrind and Sissy Jupe. Louisa, raised in a household devoid of warmth and compassion, is deprived of her innocence and forced to conform to her father's rigid ideology. Sissy, on the other hand, embodies the resilience of the human spirit, resisting the dehumanizing effects of utilitarianism and embracing empathy and imagination. Through these contrasting characters, Dickens exposes the corrosive impact of a society that prioritizes profit over humanity, shedding light on the dire consequences of child exploitation and neglect (Dickens, C. 1902).

Additionally, in "Bleak House," Charles Dickens delves into the theme of child exploitation through the character of Jo, a destitute street urchin navigating the unforgiving streets of London. Jo's tragic story epitomizes the plight of countless children living on the margins of society, vulnerable to exploitation and neglect. As an orphan without familial support or protection, Jo is forced to fend for himself, eking out a meager existence through begging and odd jobs. His lack of education and social connections leaves him vulnerable to exploitation, as he becomes easy prey for those seeking to take advantage of his vulnerability. Throughout the novel, Dickens portrays Jo's struggles with empathy and compassion, shining a light on the harsh realities faced by marginalized children in Victorian England. Jo's interactions with other characters, such as Esther Summerson and Mr. Jarndyce, serve to highlight the profound injustices and inequalities inherent in society, particularly regarding the treatment of children.

Charles Dickens also critiques the rigid and empathy-lacking education system through the character of Thomas Gradgrind in "Hard Times". Gradgrind's strict adherence to facts and figures over emotional intelligence and creativity reduces students to mere automatons, devoid of humanity. Dickens parallels Gradgrind's utilitarian approach to education with the oppressive conditions of workhouses and factories, where children are treated as commodities. Through characters like Sissy Jupe, Dickens illustrates the detrimental effects of Gradgrind's education system on children. Sissy, raised in a nurturing and imaginative environment, struggles to adapt to Gradgrind's fact-based institution, where emotions and creativity are suppressed. Dickens contrasts

Sissy's genuine humanity with characters like Bitzer, who exemplify the soulless products of Gradgrind's education, driven solely by profit and lacking compassion. Moreover, Dickens condemns the exploitation of children in both education and labour, depicting the grim realities faced by impoverished youth like Sissy. He exposes the physical and emotional toll of child labour, as well as the societal indifference that allows such exploitation to persist. Through his poignant portrayal of characters like Sissy and Louisa, Dickens calls attention to the urgent need for reform and compassion in both education and social systems.

Through these characters, Dickens confronts the societal injustices that perpetuate child exploitation, challenging readers to confront their own complicity in perpetuating systems of oppression. Through his vivid portrayals of suffering and resilience, Dickens shines a light on the darkest corners of human experience, urging readers to recognize the inherent dignity and worth of every child. His scathing critique of utilitarian education and the devaluation of human emotion serves as a stark reminder of the moral bankruptcy that accompanies the relentless pursuit of profit.

4. Echoes of Oppression: Charles Dickens' Depiction of Women's Plight in Victorian Society

The Victorian era was defined by a strong emphasis on the home as a central aspect of culture, shaping relationships between husbands and wives as well as between men and women on a larger scale. Domesticity was highly valued, with middle-class women often seeing it as a replacement for productive roles. However, the Poor Law Act of 1834 in Britain mandated public relief for those in need, including widows and the unemployed, who were placed in workhouses with brutal treatment. The Industrial Revolution brought economic hardships for many, leading to a shift from rural to urban areas and fierce competition in a capitalist society. Prostitution emerged as a prevalent social ill during the nineteenth century, with efforts made to "reclaim" fallen women and restrict their freedom by compelling them to work as domestic servants. The status of women was reduced to entertainment and recreational beings, leading to prejudices and stereotypes. Female purity was closely linked to domestic work, creating a barrier against city pollution and corruption. Prostitution became a recurring issue in literature and politics, highlighting societal views on gender roles and morality (Friedrich, E., 1987).

In the tumultuous landscape of Victorian society, Charles Dickens also wielded his pen as a potent weapon to illuminate the plight of women, exposing the injustices and struggles they faced amidst societal upheaval. Through his novels, Dickens provided a piercing commentary on the gender dynamics of his time, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges encountered by women in a rapidly changing world. At the heart of Dickens' portrayal of Victorian society was the pervasive inequality and oppression experienced by women across different social strata. From the impoverished streets of London to the genteel drawing rooms of the upper class, women grappled with systemic barriers that limited their autonomy and agency. Dickens' works vividly depicted the harsh realities faced by women, ranging from economic exploitation to social ostracism.

One prominent archetype that emerged during this period was the "Angel in the House," representing the idealized image of femininity and domesticity. Charles Dickens, known for his vivid characterizations, often portrayed women who embodied this archetype in his novels. For example, Biddy in "Great Expectations" is depicted as managing her domestic life with skill and intelligence, earning admiration from the protagonist, Pip. Despite her capabilities, Biddy remains unassuming and non-threatening to male dominance, conforming to the patriarchal expectations of the time.

Similarly, Esther Summerson in "Bleak House" fulfils the role of the "Angel in the House" as the keeper of Bleak House, demonstrating her domestic prowess and feminine virtues. Dickens' portrayal of these characters reflects his adherence to Victorian ideals of womanhood, where women were relegated to domesticity and denied power and authority in society. However, Dickens also recognized the limitations and injustices inherent in these societal norms, as evidenced by his portrayal of marginalized female characters.

Molly in "Great Expectations" and Mrs. Joe Gargery exemplify the exploitation and marginalization experienced by women in Victorian society. Molly's tragic fate highlights the plight of women trapped in abusive relationships, while Mrs. Joe's abrasive demeanor and violent tendencies are symptomatic of the frustration and resentment bred by patriarchal expectations. Dickens' nuanced characterization of these women reveals his social concern and advocacy for the rights of marginalized individuals.

Moreover, Dickens did not shy away from portraying women who rebelled against the constraints of their gender and class. Mrs. Joe Gargery, despite her struggles, defies societal expectations through her assertive behaviour and refusal to conform to traditional gender roles.

Her violent outbursts and disdain for domestic duties challenge the patriarchal norms that confined women to the home. Similarly, Mrs. Stephen Blackpool's alcoholism and disregard for her wifely responsibilities subvert traditional notions of femininity, highlighting the complexity of women's experiences in Victorian society.

Brenda Ayres suggests that Dickens both supported and opposed patriarchy through his depictions of women, endorsing domesticity while simultaneously critiquing its limitations. Dickens' portrayal of rebellious women reflects his recognition of the aspiration and struggle for equality in a male-dominated society. Characters like Nancy in "Oliver Twist" embody this rebellion, crossing patriarchal boundaries and challenging domestic ideologies. Nancy's moral complexity and defiance of societal norms serve as a powerful critique of Victorian hypocrisy and injustice.

Furthermore, Dickens' involvement in social reform efforts, such as Urania Cottage, influenced his sympathetic portrayal of marginalized women like Nancy. Through his writing, Dickens addressed taboo topics like prostitution and unwed motherhood, shedding light on the harsh realities faced by women in Victorian society. Characters like Lady Dedlock in "Bleak House" represent the consequences of societal attitudes towards female purity and morality, confronting readers with the hypocrisy and cruelty of the era.

Moreover, Dickens' exploration of divorce in "Hard Times" challenges the Victorian ideal of women suffering silently in marriage. Through the character of Louisa Gradgrind, Dickens criticizes the societal expectations placed upon women and advocates for their autonomy and agency. Louisa's rebellion against her oppressive marriage reflects Dickens' belief in the inherent worth and dignity of women, regardless of societal conventions.

In a nutshell, Charles Dickens' portrayal of women in Victorian society offers a nuanced and multifaceted examination of gender roles, power dynamics, and social injustice. Through his richly drawn characters and compelling narratives, Dickens sheds light on the struggles and triumphs of women from all walks of life, challenging readers to confront the systemic oppression that pervaded Victorian society. Dickens' depiction of rebellious women serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and social justice, inspiring readers to advocate for change and empowerment in their own time. (Dickens, C. 1993)

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Victorian era was a time of great societal upheaval, marked by the dual forces of progress and oppression. While advancements in science and industry propelled England forward into modernity, they also laid bare the cracks in the foundation of Victorian society. The Industrial Revolution brought unprecedented wealth to some, but at the cost of exploiting the labour of the working class and perpetuating systemic inequalities. The rapid urbanization brought about by industrialization led to the breakdown of traditional social structures and the erosion of basic human relationships. The emergence of a capitalist economy prioritized profit over human welfare, exacerbating the plight of the working class, children, and women. As societal norms and values were reshaped by the demands of industrialization, marginalized groups bore the brunt of systemic injustices.

In this tumultuous landscape, literature emerged as a powerful tool for social critique and commentary. Through the lens of prominent writers like Charles Dickens' literature, we gain insight into the harsh realities faced by those who did not belong to the privileged middle class. Dickens skilfully critiqued the oppressive features of Victorian society, shedding light on its failure to support the poor, protect children's innocence, and provide equal opportunities for women. His works served as a mirror reflecting the injustices and imbalances of the age, prompting calls for social reform and change

One of Dickens' enduring legacies is his portrayal of female identity, which he depicted in both accepted and despised forms. By constructing nuanced female characters, Dickens effectively reflected the complexities of Victorian gender construction while implicitly critiquing societal exclusion and disdain for so-called "fallen women." Moreover, Dickens' writings catalysed significant social reforms in Britain, particularly in the realm of child labour. His advocacy for the rights of children led to the introduction of factory acts aimed at curbing exploitation in the workplace. Dickens' efforts to expose the flaws of the Poor Law and the mistreatment of children in workhouses further solidified his reputation as a reformer committed to effecting change.

The impact of Dickens' writings extended beyond legislative reforms, shaping public consciousness and spurring collective action. His critiques of societal injustices inspired widespread awareness and paved the way for a more equitable society. Moreover, Dickens' role as a reformer went beyond the pages of his novels, as he actively participated in philanthropic endeavours and used his public platform to advocate for change. His involvement in initiatives

such as Urania Cottage, a home for abandoned girls, and his support for social causes such as public health reform underscored his deep sense of social responsibility and his belief in the power of collective action to effect positive change.

As we reflect on Dickens' legacy, it is clear that his impact transcends the boundaries of literature, leaving an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of humanity. His timeless themes of justice, compassion, and redemption continue to resonate with readers around the world, inspiring generations to strive for a more equitable and humane society.

In the words of Dickens himself, penned in the closing lines of "A Tale of Two Cities," "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." These words encapsulate the essence of Dickens' mission as a writer and social reformer—to shed light on the darkness of oppression and injustice, and to offer hope for a brighter future.

In the annals of history, Charles Dickens stands as a beacon of hope and a champion of the oppressed, reminding us of our shared humanity and the imperative to strive for a world where justice, compassion, and equality reign supreme. It can be concluded that Charles Dickens remains a towering figure in Victorian literature and social activism, his works serving as a mirror to the tumultuous events of his time. Through his incisive commentary and unwavering commitment to social justice, Dickens challenged the oppressive foundations of Victorian society and paved the way for a more compassionate and equitable future. As we reflect on Dickens' legacy, we are reminded of the enduring power of literature to inspire change and shape the course of history.

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