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Social Issues in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*

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Abstract

Charles Dickens' novels mirror his age. His purpose was to focus attention on the various evils of his time. Dickens has described in his novels the bitter issues of life, especially those of children. He has attacked the prevailing evils of his day as a satirist. He has thrown light on the dark haunts of vice, crime and suffering. He has lime lighted the poor state of education, the miserable condition of jails, injustice, bureaucracy, nepotism, laissez faire, acquisitive worldliness and many others evils. He is specially the novelist of the London life, and has described the disparity of life- the life of the slums and the life of the wealthy persons in whom the wealth of the nation is concentrated.

Keywords- *Child life, Wealth, Education, Crime, Injustice*

Introduction

Charles Dickens believes not in art for art sake but in art for life sake. He would not write a single line without any purpose. He is a social critic. He has thrown light on various aspects of Victorian age, some of which transcend his age. They serve as the themes of his novels. Some of the important issues of his novels are child suffering, education, wealth, crime and punishment, justice and cruelty. Let us discuss them briefly.

Child Life

One of the important themes of Dickens in almost all his novels is child life. Dickens has depicted in *Great Expectations* the depression, alienation and isolation of Pip, who is the protagonist of the novel. Nowhere else has he expressed the overwhelming and intense poignancy of a child more fully than he has done in *Great Expectations*. It is a matter of great irony that the orphan Pip runs away in fear from both, the convict and his own real sister. Once, Pip went to churchyard where he met a convict. He gets scared of the convict when he asks him to bring for him victual and file on

pain of death. He gets scared of his sister when on the Christmas Day she goes to bring from the kitchen the pie which he has already given to the convict. Not only Pumblechook and Wopsle but even his sister condemns him out rightly. Except for Joe and Biddy, Pip has no friends in the world. He has no sense of home. It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home. And this is exactly what happened to him. His own sister ill-treated with him so much that he felt he had no home. He says, "Home had never been a very pleasant place to me, because of my sister's temper".

He is a helpless orphan, castaway on the wide world. He is a bundle of shivers in a country which is to him like a graveyard. There is no one except Joe who can help him and whom he can call his own. He is ashamed of his existence, surrounded by convicts, criminals and demons. He feels that destiny has heaped injustice on him. Destiny has thrown the already grief-stricken boy in the way of "cruel Miss Havisham and the cold Estella." Miss Havisham has determined to wreak revenge on the men-folk through the beautiful, disdainful Estella. And destiny throws the poor lost soul on these two witches. And the rest in way of havoc is completed when poor Pip is enamoured of Estella. The lost soul also becomes a broken soul. Estella calls him "a common labouring boy." The sensitive boy is ashamed of not only of his rough hands but also of his coarse boots. He becomes restless to become uncommon. He goes to school and endeavours to learn alphabets by the help of Biddy, so that he may partly be uncommon. When he works at the forge, he fears lest Miss Havisham should see him drudging there at his commonest and blackest moments. He has been completely possessed and obsessed by the two false goddesses, Estella and Miss Havisham. And at the very name of them his sensitivity rises to its highest pitch. Such is the miserable condition of the lost, broken soul which Dickens depicts very aptly.

There are more tears in store for Pip. He weeps on two occasions. On the one occasion, Estella serves him bread and meat as insolently as if he were a dog. Pip was humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry and sorry. It was a mixed feeling of smart. He began to weep. The moment he shed tears, Estella looked at them with a delight in having been the cause of them. When she was assured that she had wounded him, she gave a contemptuous toss, and left. And when she had gone, Pip looked about him for a place to hide his face, and got behind one of the gates in the brewery lane, and leaned his sleeve against the wall there, and leaned his forehead on it, and cried. As he cried, he kicked the wall, and took a hard twist at his hair; so bitter were his feelings, and so sharp wall the smart without a name, that needed counteraction. It is doubted if Dickens has expressed such intensity of poignancy elsewhere.

This sensitiveness and poignancy has not been expressed even by Blake, Wordsworth and Lamb. We have some such of poignancy in Dream children. But it is Lamb's, not child's and there is not Pip alone who cries. There are such children in almost all his novels. There are Oliver Twist, Neil,

Barnby Rudge, Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit, Florence, and above all, David Copperfield, who belong to the family of Pip. The depiction of child life – his psychology and suffering- is the most important issue of Dickens. Truly has Compton Rickett observed, “Dickens is capital at baby.”

Wealth and Economic Condition:

Money was valued highly in the Victorian Age. The title of the novel Great Expectations refers to the expectation of wealth. Wealth is one of the most important themes of the novels of Dickens. In most of the novels children are cast out on the wild deserts; they are orphans with no one to look after them, no one to provide them with the necessities of life. No one wants to spend money on them to make them gentlemen or gentlewomen. David Copperfield is an orphan thrown to the cruel Murdstones. So is the case with Oliver Twist, who is thrown among cheats, thieves and scoundrels, with no one to look after him. So are Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit, Sissy Jupe, Little Neil, cast away in this cruel world with no one to look after their financial and moral needs. Either their parents neglect them or they are orphans. Dickens emphasizes the importance of money in the society, because it is only the money that helps us to educate. But money also has a corrupting influence which Dickens does not ignore. In Hard Times (1854) he satirizes and exposes the laissez faire system of the Manchester School. He notices the corruption rampant among persons rolling in wealth, doing big business. Great Expectations deals with the respectable underworld of shady and greedy money-worshippers. Everyone fawns on Pip when he has great expectations. Pumblechook recognizes his superiority. Even Joe shares some of his illusions. There seems to be a conspiracy to treat money as an independent self-created entity, worthy of reverence. Money thus dehumanizes, man. Man can stoop sown to any evil in order to earn money. Walter Allen has observed:

Great Expectations exhibits money as an agent of isolation, because Pip has perverted natural affections and is cut off from those nearest and most loyal to him by the expectation of money. Money serves as a corrupting influence on human beings in a materialistic and acquisitive society. (94)

Pip's greatest snobbery, betrayal, meanness and ingratitude appear when he learns from Biddy's letter that Joe is coming to meet him. He confesses exactly with what feelings I looked forward to Joe's coming. 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. Pip said that if I could have kept him by paying money:

evidences to what extent money has corrupted him that he wants to purchase the love and affection of Joe by money. Money now has become the god of Pip. Through money he

will become a gentleman, and marry Estella. And when he reaches his home-own to attend the funeral of his sister he speaks to Biddy in a patronizing manner: “and Biddy... for of course I shall be often down here now. I am not going to leave poor Joe alone.

Biddy by this time has understood Pip. She knows that he will not come often. She takes him to task when she asks him: “are you quite sure, then, that you will come to see him often?” Thus she exposes and silences him. When he visits his native place, he does not stay with Joe. He stays in a hired room. Money has paralyzed his finer feelings. He is no longer humane he used to be, and does not feel that warmth for Joe he used to feel as a child. Herbert Pocket is another example of money minded person who is sincere person; he also expects some money from Miss Havisham. He is ambitions and dreams of becoming fabulously rich one day. Like the poor relations of Miss Havisham. Pumblechook also flatters Pip when Pip becomes rich. He used to treat pip harshly when he was a poor orphan. Drummle is always governed by the consideration of money and marries Estella in the hope of receiving a rich dowry. Estella also marries Drummle because he is very rich. Their marriage fails because it is based on money considerations. Compeyson is mad after money, and can stoop to any foul means to earn it. Thus Dickens casts satirical light on rank and wealth. It is remarkable that no one in Great Expectations is free from the taint of servility towards rank and wealth.

Education

Education is one of the main issues of Charles Dickens. Dickens found the condition of schools very miserable. The owners of the private schools treated their pupils mercilessly. In David Copperfield (1850) the life of David was miserable. Mr. Creackle, the Headmaster flogged the pupils, and was pleased in England, and the disregard of it by the state as men of forming good or bad Citizens. In Great Expectations he exposes ludicrously the miserable condition of education. The school, in which Pip and Biddy study, is run only in one room which also serves as a shop:

Mr Wopsle's great aunt, besides keeping this Educational Institution, kept in the same school a little general shop. The teacher dozes while the students quarrel among themselves, and tread upon each other's toes’ “the educational scheme or course established by Mr wopsle's great-aunt may be resolved into the following synopsis. “the pupils ate apples and put straws sown, one another backs, until Wopsle's great-aunt collected her energies, and made an indiscriminate totter at them with a birch-rod. After receiving the charge with every mark of derision, the pills formed in line and puzzlingly passed a ragged book from hand to hand. (*Great Expectations*, 73)

Trade and Business

Another issue of Dickens is business. Some of his novels deal with trade and business. *Hard Times* (1854) deals with a business man Mr Gradgrind. The novel deals with the corruption rampant among businessmen. The business men are hard-hearted, cruel and selfish. The son of Gradgrind, Mr Tom, robs a bank, and throws the blame on an innocent workman, Stephen. The businessmen are unfeeling. Mr Gradgrind, a hard-faced businessman marries off his daughter Louisa, to a humbug, Mr Bounderby. Dickens satirizes in Coketown and Mr. Gradgrind the laissez faire system.

In *Great Expectations* (1861) Compeyson is a selfish, cruel and corrupt businessman. He is capable of stooping down to any foul means to earn money. He gets his dirty business transacted by his subordinates so that in case the deception is exposed, the subordinates may be punished and he may go scot-free. Dickens throws light on the nature of Compeyson's business:

Compeyson's business was the swindling, Handwriting forging, stolen banknote passing, and such-like. All sorts of traps as Compeyson could set with his hard, and keep his own legs out of and get the profits from and let another man in for, was Compeyson's could set with his hard, and keep his own legs out of and get the profits from and let another man in for, was Compeyson's business. He'd no more heart than a iron file, he was as cold as death, and he had the head of the Devil. (Great Expectations, 348)

He manages his affairs so cleverly that his subordinate Magwitch is always indebted to him financially, and is always open to danger: "I was always in debt to him, always under his thumb, always a -working, always a-getting into danger. He was younger than me, but he'd got craft, and he'd got learning, and he overmatched me five hundred times told and no mercy". (187) The result was that when the foul business was detected, Compeyson was lightly punished for seven years while Magwitch was heavily punished for fourteen years.

Justice and jail

Dickens exposes and attacks the legal pretensions and the cruelties which the rich heap upon the poor. Magwitch has been. "Soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and cut by flints and stung by nettles and torn by briars." (208) He is not a natural criminal. He has been compelled to become a criminal because of poverty, and the callous indifference of the society towards him. Magwitch is a good person at heart. The sacrifice he makes for Pip raises his stature and yet the judge calls him he 'scourge to society.' He remembers the little act of kindness of Pip to his last breath, and he works hard in Australia to earn money for Pip. He has observed strict parsimony so that he may save most of the money, he has earned, for Pip. He had lived rough so that Pip should live smooth and had worked hard so that Pip should be above work. It is the circumstances that had made him a criminal; otherwise he is naturally a noble person. The milk of human kindness flows into his veins. He is a candle in a naughty world of compeysons. It is unjust on the part of the Court to punish him heavily

and to punish the hard criminal Compeyson lightly. To condemn the noble Magwitch is the ruthlessness of law. It reflects the inefficiency of the police, intelligence and the law.

Dickens has shown that in his days persons feared the lawyers as they fear fire. They thought that they had the power to throw them into jails or to have them released from them. They waited for him for hours to see their lawyers. Dickens shows how persons were afraid of them:

Mind you, Mr Pip, said Wemmick gravely, in my ear, as he took my arm to be more confidential; I don't know that Mr Jaggers does a better thing than the way in which he keeps himself so high. His constant height is of a piece with his immense abilities. That Colonel durst no more take leave of him, than that turnkey durst ask him his intentions respecting, a case. Then, between his height and them, he slips in his subordinate-don't you see? –and so he has 'em, soul and body. (*Great Expectations*, 263)

Even Pip wishes that he had some other lawyer of minor abilities.

In *Great Expectations* (1861) he also presents the miserable conditions of the jails. Sometimes old boats and ships known as hulks served as jails. Compeyson and Magwitch were imprisoned in hulks, where they fought together. Dickens writes that "at that time jails were much neglected." (134) He describes the miserable dirty condition of jail. Wemmick has taken Pip to see the jail when Pip is waiting for Estella. Pip sees the dust in the jail:

I beat the prison dust off my feet as I sauntered to and fro, and I shook it out of my dress, and I exhaled its air from my lungs. So contaminated did I feel, remembering who was coming, that the coach came quickly after all, and I was not yet free from the soiling consciousness of Mr. Wemmick's conservatory." (*Great Expectations*, 264).

Lack of Love and Sympathy

Pip experiences frustration and loneliness in life because he meets persons who are devoid of love and sympathy. He is enamoured of Estella, but he finds her icily cold. He almost worships Miss Havisham who is bent upon wreaking revenge on men-folk. Love and sympathy have dried up in them and replaced by hatred and revenge. Then there are boorish like Compeyson, Orlick, Drummle and Pumblechook, who spread poison wherever they move about

Pride, Suffering and Redemption

Pride, haughtiness, suffering and the need for redemption are some of the other important issues of the novel. The novel has for its theme Pip's false pride and his changing character. Through Pip's Dickens expresses his anguish and passions of his own personal life. It is the pathos that reigns supreme in the novel. Nowhere else in Dickens novels is it more true that here that where there is sorrow there is holy ground. It is only after the intense suffering that Pip discards the false shams of

gentility and awakens to the stark, naked reality. It is after being overwhelmed by the complete misery of Pip that the heartless Miss Havisham feels warmly for him and asks pathetically: "is there nothing I can do for you?" it is only after suffering the paroxysms of pangs at the hands of Drummle that Estella bends and breaks into a finer shape, and realizes what she missed in the sincere love of Pip. And most of the characters, who feel contrite and guilty, feel the importance of charity and love, and the need for redemption. Pip begs Joe and Biddy to forgive him. Miss Havisham kneels at the feet of Pip and begs for his forgiveness. Mrs. Joe feels repentant for her misdeeds at the time of death, Magwitch, believes that he has received his "pretense of death from the almighty", and Estella says to Pip, "but you said to me.... 'god bless you, God forgive you!'" (365) and if you could say that to me then, you will not hesitate to say that to me now-now when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be.

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