

A Social Study of Poverty in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, *Bleak House* and *Oliver Twist*

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ABSTRACT: The theme of poverty remains one of the central problems that Charles Dickens focuses and attempts to draw attention of his readers to. The problem of poverty becomes a serious social and economic burden of English society of the late 19th century. This is why Dickens chooses this theme as one of the central themes of his novels. The present thesis is a social study of poverty in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), *Bleak House* (1852) and *Oliver Twist* (1839). Underprivileged people including poor children in the society of the Victorian age are socially the disadvantaged members whom this research study will discuss. It is clear that Dickens noted the effect of industrialization on the Victorian society as it created a massive urban development, resulted in a higher class division. The influx of industrialization created a further division of these classes in which there emerged the capitalists or bourgeoisie, who were industrialists such as Mr. Bounderby in *Hard Times*, and working class, who were the industrial poor workers, of them many lived under squalid condition with poor sanitation leading to fatal diseases and even death. Dickens also portrays the brutal treatment of children at the workhouses. This investigation will indicate that Dickens was a critic of The Poor Law and its administration, as well as the subject of child labor because of his own childhood experience. Moreover, his repugnance is also noted in the way he creates child characters like Oliver Twist who are exploited as child workers. Findings of this critical analysis of Dickens's selected novels show that Charles Dickens can be considered as a realist and somehow naturalist writer; therefore the subject to be questioned in this thesis is the traces of realism, and naturalism in his social novels in relation to Marxism. This study also shows that although Dickens directly suggests no social reform but he was actively involved in changing the lives of underprivileged people just like a reformist.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, Realism, Naturalism, Marxism.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of poverty became a serious social and economic burden of English society of the late 19th century. This is why it is quite natural that Charles Dickens chose this theme as one of the central themes of his selected novels namely *Hard Times* (1854), *Bleak House* (1852) and *Oliver Twist* (1839). All the same, it is worthy of mention that, to a great extent, these selected texts play the role of a mirror which reflects the life of England of that epoch and the personal experience of Dickens that is realized in these novels especially *Bleak House*. Obviously, these novels represent English society of Victorian age which is full of contrasts where the poverty is next to enormous wealth, and where spiritual richness is often overshadowed by the material desperate social position of the characters of the novels.

To underscore the poverty in Dickens's works, they are to be viewed in two dimensions including real or material and spiritual. It is to say that Charles Dickens attempts to realistically depict the severe life of all layers of English society of that epoch with a particular focus on the most deprived. As a matter of fact the novels rather represent a profound analysis of the great socio-economic problem of lower classes and, what is more, these works uncover the importance of the material well-being and wealth in the life of English society. On the other hand, it seems as if Dickens poses a question whether poverty is really a sin, or something really bad that makes people fall lower and

lower in the social ladder, or probably, it is just a poor material position of individuals' lack of certain skills, abilities, knowledge, or even simple luck that do not touch the personality of individuals who sink in English society.

The main purpose of this research is to study the poverty in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, *Bleak House* and *Oliver Twist* in social lenses as well as to critically analyze Dickens's representation of characters who are the underprivileged people of an industrialized society, a phenomenon which led to emerge new class of the capitalists. This study also shows that Dickens is a realist writer whose characters have been created with devotion to the realist and naturalist mode of writing. A realist reading of Dickens's novels proves that he depicts the oppressive nature of the 19th century society and its subjection of the poor and poverty. Meanwhile examining these novels in relation to Karl Marx's social philosophy shows that the fictionalized world of Dickens parallels the main social theses in Marx's writings.

In addition to the poor, another group of underprivileged members of Victorian society in whom Dickens was interested were children. Dickens's childhood experience contributed to his sensitivity towards the oppression and neglecting the children by family and other members of society. He, himself as a victim of child labor, vehemently attacks the unpleasant experience, which shall be further explored through the course of this research study. He criticizes this phenomenon because of its debilitating effects to which he was subjected such as deprivation of education. Apart from the deprivation of education, other destructive effects include injuries sustained at the factories and exploitation through excessive working hours with little pay. His selected novels, especially *Oliver Twist*, attack the Poor Law Act and the workhouse system because of its harsh conditions which the children had to endure.

Dickens's concern for London slums, as well as his concern for the poor and his discussion surrounding the plight of children is why he has been chosen for this thesis. Dickens's novels and the issues are relevant to modern contemporary society due to the fact that these unprotected, exploited members are still the most vulnerable members in whole society. Furthermore, this research along with exploring the historical background of Dickens's works, is to criticize the industrialization and its destructive nature. This study shows also how industrial revolution effects on Dickens's through the writings and development of the Victorian novel, it shows also Dickens was a social moralist and a writer who exposed the harsh reality of industrialization using realistic and naturalistic mode of writing. Even though Dickens came from a middle class family, he sympathized with the plight of the poor, and through his writing as he sought to bring awareness to Victorian society of the injustice and harsh condition of living experienced by the poor. Consequently, this study ultimately seeks to prove that Charles Dickens's works had a social mission, to make the readers take note of the underprivileged people of the Victorian society so that they could take action to improve their plight.

The present thesis aims to socially study the poverty in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*, the novels which portray the misery of lower class of England in late 19th century vividly. Dickens as a social commentator studies and criticizes the roots and reasons of poverty and using a realistic and naturalistic mode of writing awakens social conscience. Another point is that Marxism reading of Dickens's novels is possible but his works are not merely among Marxist novels. So the following hypotheses are posed for this research:

1. Dickens is a realist writer and his works are influenced by realism and naturalism.
2. Dickens's novels are not merely subjected on Marxist view, but they can be viewed from the lenses on Marxism.
3. Society and socio-economic conditions have impact on Dickens's writings and this new born impact of industrialization in Victorian Age led the author to create works somehow related to Marxist idea.
4. Dickens's selected novels reflect poverty and social deprivation of the lower classes in England and show his view of capitalism which is the result of industrialization and urbanization.
5. Dickens's novels provide his severe criticism on adverse of industrialization and its destructive nature such as formation of class divisions
6. Dickens's language and literature, as well as his mode of writings have had a direct impact on culture, awareness of Victorian society and social conscience.

Review of Literature

Victorian Age

It is a period in British history during the reign of Queen Victoria in the 19th century; her character and moral standards restored the prestige of the British monarchy but gave the era a prudish reputation this period extends to the death of Victoria in 1901. "This age is subdivided into three phases by historians: Early Victorian (1830-40), Mid-Victorian (1848-70), and Late Victorian (1870-1901)" (1).