

Reflecting Social Evils In Victorian Era Through Novels Of Charles Dickens

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Abstract

Social evils always cause disillusionment, anxiety, distress and depression. Evils always remain exist in every phase throughout history. Victorian era not left untouched with social evils. This research paper tries to reveal the social evils prevailed in the Victorian society which reflects in the novels of Charles Dickens. Although Victorian age was an age of wealth and urban development but at the same time, it has sordid side too. Through his novels, Dickens tries to portray the darker side of society. Dickens also draws our kind attention towards the social evils such as Child Labour, Exploitation of working class, False system of Education and Social Injustice which was the cause of disillusionment among the marginalised section of society. Charles Dickens was a great Victorian novelist who truly represents the age. He was a social critic also and wrote several important novels such as “Hard Times”, “Oliver Twist”, “Bleak House” and “Great Expectations”. Dickens achieved worldwide fame through his novels. His novels reflect the contemporary social issues and in this way show a mirror to the society. Hence Dickens can be called a realist writer. In his novels he emphasizes on the matters that require a great concern. Dickens bitterly criticizes Industrial Revolution as it leads to great class division. Dickens was very much familiar with the pain of poor as he himself felt the same pain in his childhood. He belonged to the working class and worked in a factory in his childhood. In this way, Dickens skilfully showcased the challenges faced by poor people of Victorian age. He puts light on the harsh condition in which poor has to work. He criticises the evil of child labour in “Oliver Twist”, criticises contemporary education system in “Hard Times” and social injustice in “Bleak House”. This research paper analyse the social evils depicted by Charles Dickens in his novels.

Keywords: Industrial Revolution, Social Injustice, Class Division

Introduction

Charles Dickens was often called ‘Magic lamp of London’. He was one of the prominent novelist and social critic of his time. His novels depict the true

picture of Victorian society. Attack on the social evils is one of the major characteristics of his novels. As he himself belonged to the working class, therefore was very much familiar with the difficulties faced by unprivileged people. His novels deal with the themes of poverty, exploitation, hunger, social injustice, class struggle and gender inequality prevailed in the Victorian society. In other words, he presents sinful life in his novels. Commenting on his genius, David Cecil writes: “He is the one novelist of his school whose books have not grown dusty on the shelves, where popularity has suffered no sensible decline (Cecil 251).”

Miserable conditions of working class in *Hard Times*

In his novel *Hard Times*, Dickens describes the pathetic condition of working class that has been shaped by Industrial England. Although Industrial Revolution led to great wealth to the nation but at the same time it had harmful consequences too as it deteriorates the living conditions of working class. Due to Industrialisation in England, the value of machines was enhanced as compared to humans. The people of working class had to work under most drastic and adverse conditions which sometimes became the reason of death for several workers. The result of Industrial Revolution was development of horrifying slums. Industrial workers had to work without health benefits or vacation. Almost half of the children died before the age of five due to malnourishment. The Industrial Revolution also created a great class division.

Stephen Liverpool is the representative character of working class in the novel. He worked in a factory owned by Mr. Bounderby, a wealthy old man who was only work oriented. He called his labourers as ‘hands’ which is a symbol of his utilitarian thinking. Stephen Liverpool ultimately meets an tragic end in the novel.

Criticise False system of Education

Dickens criticises false system of education prevailed in the society in his novel *Hard Times*. There is a strong case in the novel that education is not simply the classroom experience of memorising facts. Mr. Gradgrind imposes the study of facts and neglects the role of imagination. He imposes the same study on his own children. This will ultimately results the downfall of his children in the end of novel. Ultimately, Mr. Gradgrind realises his mistake when his son Tom commits the crime of robbery and leaves home. His daughter meets failure in her marriage with an old man Mr. Bounderby. She commits the mistake of marrying an old man as she follows the philosophy of her father. The only outcome of their education is that they are unable to make decisions in their life.

Now what I want is facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but 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 ever be of any service to them. (*Hard Times* 3)

Lost Childhood in Oliver Twist

Dickens' novels provide a historical representation of the sufferings faced by the poor. *Oliver Twist* is about the life of an orphan boy living in the city. Dickens portrays how the poor children have to work in warehouses and they were provided meagre food. They have to work in worst conditions which results in several fatal diseases. The novel shows life journey of a boy from a labourer in warehouse to the path of crime. The boy is tortured when demands more food and ultimately choose the path of crime. Victorian society witnesses the spoilage of lives of many poor children. They were deprived of education as well as from other basic facilities. They have to work in factories as labourers, as chimney sweeper or in coal mines which leads to deterioration of health, depression, hopelessness. Dickens describes the horrible effects of child labour as:

Let the tears which fell, and the broken words which were exchanged in the long close embrace between the orphans, be sacred. A father, sister and mother were gained and lost in that one moment. Joy and grief were mingled in the cup but there were no bitter tears: for even grief arose so softened, and clothed in such sweet and tender recollections, that it became a solemn pleasure, and lost all character of pain. (Oliver Twist 51)

Condition of Women in Victorian Era

It is evident that Victorian society was highly patriarchal. Women were strongly confined to domesticity. Women were expected to remain pure and virtuous. On the one hand Dickens creates women characters who are the 'Angel in the house' and on the other antitypical women who comprises of prostitutes. The women have to learn various skills such as weaving, cooking, washing and cleaning to become good housewives unless they were of a wealthy family. Women are only thought as an object of pleasure and their work is to rear children. In *Hard Times*, Sissy is largely portrayed as the incapable girl, who believes that flowers should be cast upon the floor. Women are supposed to be compassionate and polite, never arguing. In the same way Louisa, the daughter of Mr. Gradgrind who later becomes Bounderby's wife depicted as emotionless. She is not able to refuse the decision of his father to marry her with an old man. Ultimately her marriage proves to be a failure. Through various female characters, Dickens suggests that feminine pity is crucial to regain social harmony.

Conclusion

Dickens' novels try to analyse the nature of industrial society through the medium of fiction. Dickens feels the strongest sense of responsibility towards and his aim was to present the social evils of Victorian society and leaves some moral message in order to reform the society. He criticises tyrannical school masters and corrupt government officers. His novels reflect his

personal experience and views on poverty, child labour, social injustice and other social evils.

Works Cited

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