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Dickens' Reform Purpose in the Child Characters of His Novels

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DICKENS' REFORM PURPOSE IN THE CHILD CHARACTERS OF HIS NOVELS

By

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CHAPTER I

A SURVEY OF THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EVILS OF DICKENS'S TIMES

No writer is so typical of his age and social class as Charles Dickens, yet no one was more antagonistic to it than he. ". . .he was born into the swiftly accelerating period of the industrial revolution, and lived on through its culmination into the period of conservative self-congratulation which immediately preceded the passage of British capitalism into its imperialistic phase..."¹ This period saw the rise of the great middle class with its prestige of wealth and complacency to recompense for its lack of other redeeming qualities. "He lived to become in all externals, and to some extent in the tone of his mind, a characteristic member of this privileged society, but his criticism of its foibles, and of its grave shortcomings never ceased."²

Dickens's popularity is still outstanding. His records and criticism of social abuses are read as if he were a great historian or a great reformer. His historical knowledge is, however, a combination of fact and fiction, of caricatures

¹ T. A. Jackson, Charles Dickens, the Progress of a Radical. (New York: International Publishers, 1938), P.23.

² George Gissing, Charles Dickens. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1924), p. 2.

and jokes, of humor and pathos that no respectable historian could permit. Nevertheless many readers who would be bored by the report of the Poor Law Commission or Garratt's Suggestions for a Reform of the Proceedings in Chancery can find in Oliver Twist and Bleak House pictures of the times and suggestions for the cure of the evils they portray.³ Perhaps more than any other writer he is the advocate of suffering childhood, and in his fiction he was always consciously speaking to an age remarkable for its stupidity and heartlessness in its treatment of children of the poorer classes.

The generation following the French Revolution effected a long series of economic developments which changed the face of modern society. It was not a mere industrial revolution or capitalistic production; commercial or industrial freedom.⁴

"Side by side with mechanical invention, the rising power of capital, the extension of economic freedom, and the expansion of international trade, went an astonishing growth of population and more still - a partial introduction of the methods and results of exact science into economic affairs."⁵

³ Humphrey House, The Dickens World. (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 9.

⁴ Cambridge Modern History, Vol. X (New York: Mac Millan Co. 1934), p. 727.

⁵ Loc. cit.

This period was also characterized by the strong growth of Liberalism which stalked through the countries of Europe and placed in the hearts of the Englishmen a great fear of uprising. Therefore, any popular movement was labeled "Jacobinical" and almost immediately subdued by the prevailing spirit of conservatism. Notwithstanding the aristocracy's dread of innovation, two new elements made their appearance, the capitalists and the working class. The former were the new rich men who took their places with the landed aristocracy and the city merchants. Their fortune was obtained by investing money in industries such as factories, mines, railways, and steamships. As a class, the capitalists' great power lay in their ownership or control of the machinery of production upon which thousands depended for their very sustenance. The middle class greatly increased in numbers and influence. Opportunities formerly inconceivable presented themselves to the shopkeepers and professionals which assured them of prestige and influence.⁶

The Reform Bill of 1832 gave new impetus to the democratic movement, although in the beginning its purpose was merely to abolish the "rotten boroughs", and give more

⁶
J. Salwyn Schapiro, Modern and Contemporary European History. (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), p. 37.

proportionate representation to the various counties. As was inevitable, it played its part in advancing the cause of the "petite bourgeoisie", and in initiating legislative action in its favor.

Soon other results of the industrial revolution became apparent. There was a definite shifting of the population from the crowded southern section to the northern part of the country. From the most sparsely settled region the latter became the most densely populated. Where formerly there were farms, hamlets and an occasional town, there now sprang up large factory cities teeming with production. This naturally affected the character and magnitude of the population. For centuries the peasants had tilled the soil with monotonous regularity. After the enclosing of the commons by the landlords, they were left destitute with no apparent means of earning their livelihood until the factories afforded them the opportunity of securing work. They flocked to the manufacturing cities in ever increasing numbers where they constituted a large supply of cheap labor. For a time the artisans of the town struggled against the rising supremacy of machinery, but soon they were forced to take their place in the factory.⁷

⁷

Ibid. pp. 34 ff.

The Industrial Revolution came so rapidly that much that was evil grew up before regulations sufficiently stringent checked the mad rush for wealth at the expense of the lower classes, of the children, and of the national health.⁸

The most tragic phase of all this was the breaking up of the home. The father was no longer the main support of the family, because women and children, who were more amenable, worked longer hours for less wages, were employed in factories in preference to men. The work was simple and could as easily be accomplished by them. In fact, hundreds of pauper children were bought by contractors and shipped to the mills where they labored all day and often far into the night. After a few hours of so-called rest, and sustained only by the smallest amount of unpalatable food, they were driven again to the machines where without respite they labored.

Let anyone who is prone to glorify the commercial history of nineteenth century England search upon dusty shelves for certain Reports of Commissioners in matter of children's employment at this time of Lord Ashley's activity, and there read a tale of cruelty and avarice which arraigns the memory of a generation content so infamously to enrich itself. Those Reports make clear that some part, at all events, of modern English prosperity results from the toil of children (among them babies of five and six), whose lives were spent in the black depths of coal pits and amid the hot roar of machinery.⁹

⁸ Howard Robinson, A History of Great Britain. (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), p. 673.

⁹ Gissing, op. cit., p. 6

Poverty and acute misery had so hardened the sensibilities of parents that they were driven to the most heartless extremes.

At the time now under review, it became known that parents sold their children to excessive labor; and it has since become known that a considerable number have sold them to death through Burial Clubs--actually poisoned them for the sake of the burial money, after entering clubs for the very purpose.¹⁰

The only person to protect against these conditions in Parliament was Lord Ashley (afterwards Lord Shaftsbury) For his unselfish pains he was labeled a fanatic, and considered a traitor to British interests for evaluating life above mercenary gain, and for considering children human beings with rights and privileges.

Along with unprecedented luxury and refinement for the upper classes the industrial revolution had ushered in a period of the most revolting callousness and cruelty ever known in the treatment of children of the lower class. The second generation of mill-owners grew up--too 'gentlemanly' to participate in the actual work of running the mill or in the actual flogging of the emaciated and exhausted child slaves, but not too gentlemanly to demand increases in the thousands of percents that made the fortunes of Lancashire and Yorkshire. These increases could be obtained only by greater intensification of the cruelty and enslavement of

10

Harriet Martineau, The History of England During the Thirty Years' Peace. (London: Charles Knight, 1846), p. 90.

these child slaves and of their parents as well--the habit of cruelty became fixed and exalted into a moral obligation. George Gissing writes of this unfeeling attitude that had become a habit, almost a cult in England. He says:

Members of the reformed House of Commons were naturally committed to sound economic views on supply and demand; they enlarged upon the immorality of interfering with freedom of contract; and, when Lord Ashley was guilty of persevering in his antisocial craze, of standing all but alone, year after year, the advocate of grimy little creatures who would otherwise have given nobody any trouble, howling insult, or ingenious calumny, long served the cause of his philosophic opponents.¹¹

In spite of the fact that the Intellectual Revolution had opened new worlds of thought, and the Industrial Revolution had introduced new subjects such as Political Economy, Political Science and Sociology, education was considered a luxury reserved for the well to do and the scholarly. It was believed that education of the masses was not only a danger to society in general, but a positive evil for the people themselves.

When in 1807 Samuel Whitbread first proposed in Parliament that the public should support popular education, he was vigorously opposed. One member protested that:

It would be prejudicial to the morals and happiness of the working class; that it would teach them to despise their lot in life instead of making them good servants

¹¹

Gissing, op. cit., p. 6.

in agriculture and other laborious employments to which their rank had destined them. . . .¹²

Even such schools as had been established through private enterprise left much to be desired in the matter of environment, curriculum, and discipline. The true purpose of education as development of the whole man was neither understood nor practiced.

It is little wonder that crime flourished, especially in large cities. Theft and pick-pocketing were cultivated as an art by professional thieves. Hungry little ragamuffins who ran the streets made excellent pupils for such masters.

Not until 1829 did Sir Robert Peel establish the Metropolitan Police Force. "It had never occurred to the 'age of common sense' to find a substitute for the fumbling old watchmen, who preserved unimpaired the traditions of Dogberry and Verges."¹³ Even then they were functioning only in London.

Crime was discouraged by encouraging informers. A sum of two hundred dollars was paid for information that led to conviction for a serious offense. Dissolute characters actually encouraged young persons and even children to commit minor crimes in the hope that sooner or later they would be guilty of worse offences, when they would hand them over to

¹²

Trevelyan, op. cit., quoting Mr. Giddy, p. 162.

¹³

Ibid., p. 199.

the police.

In the courts of justice there was great injustice. Death was the penalty for about two hundred and fifty crimes. Because property was valued above life, a man could be hanged for a minor theft as easily as for a murder. Because of the excessive severity of the laws injured persons would frequently refuse to prosecute, our juries would not give a verdict of guilty even though the evidence was perfectly clear. The laws could not therefore be enforced, and their own objects were defeated.¹⁴

Another great abuse was the debtor's prison. They were jobbed by officials who charged exorbitant fees for the barest necessaries of life. Those who could not pay at all suffered unmercifully.

In the prison of the Court of Requests at Birmingham, according to Parliamentary papers of 1844, eight years after Pickwick was written, the male prisoners slept in an attic eleven feet long by sixteen broad, on platforms littered with loose straw. For exercise at Kidderminster, they walked in a yard thirteen yards square, and their room was without even a fireplace. For food they were allowed one quarter of a loaf of bread, and were allowed two jugfuls of water for drinking and washing.¹⁵

Thousands of people in London alone were imprisoned for debt and most ridiculous of all were denied any opportun-

14

Edward P. Cheyney, Readings in English History, Drawn from the Original Sources. (Chicago: Ginn & Company, 1908), p. 673.

15

Frederick J. Foakes-Jackson, Social Life in England. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916), p. 225.

ity of reestablishing their credit. Unless a man failed in trade he was not permitted to claim bankruptcy. His property could not be divided among his creditors, so an absurd situation was created by which both parties suffered without any hope of relief.¹⁶ When prison reform finally attracted attention, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction and criminals frequently enjoyed luxuries denied law-abiding citizens. In this case as in many others, only by extremes was the happy medium achieved.

The procrastination of justice as well as its proverbial blindness was exemplified in the Court of Chancery. The delay and expense involved in some of the simplest cases, not only frequently devoured the entire fortune, but brought suffering and ruin to all involved. "The division of responsibility between the various departments effectively checked the possibility of getting anything done."¹⁷

Harriet Martineau, writing at that time, sums up the situation:

Chancery reform, and many improvements in our judicial system besides were needed and demanded. The severity of our Criminal Law had been for many years condemned, and one relaxation after another had been procured; but much more remained to be done than had yet been effected. The infliction of punishment was still perniciously

16

Ibid. p. 226

17

House, op. cit., p. 187

uncertain, from the law ordaining severer penalties than the tribunal choosing to inflict; and a complete revision of the Criminal Law, in order to bring it into harmony with the spirit of a new age, was a great work pressing to be done.¹⁸

Poverty, the result of many abuses, and the cause of others, was ever before men's eyes. In 1795, the nation had faced the danger of wholesale death by famine, as the French wars prohibited the importation of corn. The population had been increasing rapidly, and with the food shortage, the situation was critical. To remedy the condition the magistrates met at Speenhamland for the purpose of regulating and enforcing a living wage in relation to the price of bread. Unfortunately, this happy solution was abandoned in favor of the idea of supplementing wages out of the parish rates. This dole system had a degrading effect on the labouring people, as wages were kept low at the expense of destroying the workers' self respect. As Trevelyan says, "pauperism became the shameless rule instead of the shameful exception." . . . for they had "small economic motive for industry, sobriety, independence, and thrift."¹⁹

The New Poor Law of 1834 was an attempt to remedy the evils brought about by out-door relief. The dole was

¹⁸ Martineau, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁹ Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 148-149.

discontinued, and henceforth the indigent who applied for relief were to be cared for in workhouses. In theory this was a reasonable solution, but unfortunately there was no distinction made between the deserving poor who desired only independence, and the undeserving who were content to be dependent upon the state for relief. Such measures could not escape the charge of harshness as countless families were deprived of the weekly rates for each child, on which their livelihood depended. Justice in the form of a living wage, not charity was needed. Naturally, many of the poor would-- and did-- starve rather than endure the existence offered them in the workhouse. Food was of the plainest and poorest possible, living conditions were, at best, institutional in atmosphere, and the officials were chosen for economy rather than efficiency. It was definitely the purpose of the commission to make the life of the pauper more unbearable than that of the independent labourer.

Pauper children were bound out as apprentices by the parish who was glad to be relieved of their support. The conditions under which these poor little creatures labored as slaveys, chimney sweeps, and drudges in other occupations marks another shameful page in the history of this era.

It was an age in which the English character seemed bent on exhibiting all its grossest and meanest and most stupid characteristics. Sheer ugliness of every-day life reached a limit not easily surpassed; thickheaded

national prejudice, in consequence of great wars and British victories had marvellously developed; aristocracy was losing its better influence, and power passing to a well-fed multitude, remarkable for a dogged practicality which, often as not, meant ferocious egoism. With all this, a prevalence of such ignoble vices as religious hypocrisy and servile snobbishness.²⁰

All the complexities of the industrial revolution were coming to a head. An undercurrent of fear ran through society, fear of a popular uprising such as the French Revolution, and a fear of an epidemic of cholera, due to the filth and dirt everywhere prevalent. These fears quickened the desire for reform, but no party was able to win the lasting support of the people who were left with a vague desire for improvement.²¹

One movement known as Chartism was a futile struggle on the part of the working men who hoped to obtain universal suffrage. Its original plan was to achieve success by peaceful agitation; but when the People's Charter was summarily rejected in Parliament, first in 1839 and again in 1842, the radical element gained control. The riots that followed were ruthlessly subdued. "Sympathy had been alienated from a movement of which the aim was political, but which was too "class conscious" to be political success."²²

20

Gissin, op. cit., p. 9.

21

House, op. cit., p. 90.

22

Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 252.

The conditions within a country produce the men of its age. So it was, that Charles Dickens, a dynamic moral force wielding a pen in preference to filibustering in Parliament, painted vivid pen pictures of the degradation of English life. No one has touched the heart of a people more effectively than he.

Dickens had a weapon more efficacious than mere honest zeal. He could make people laugh; and if once the crowd has laughed with you, it will not object to cry a little, nay it will make good resolves, and sometimes even carry them out.²³

He did not set out to find what the people wanted, but he wrote about what he wanted. He knew from bitter experience what it meant to be poor, to be deprived of a normal home life, to be associated with the degrading atmosphere of Marshalsea Prison. As a child, he knew what it meant to work for one's living in a harsh, unsympathetic world. As a young reporter in Parliament he acquired that life-long contempt for anything connected with the governmental system. When fortune finally favored him, and he became a famous and successful writer, he never forgot his early experiences. His whole outlook on life was profoundly affected by them.

Even when those hardships had been left behind, Dickens could never forget them. It was this dim memory at the secret core of his very life-success, that

23

Gissing, op. cit., p. 8.

continued to sustain the energy of his effort to secure his material independence against all risks. It helped to intensify as well, the multiple suggestion of active charity which made Dickens an apostle, and tuned his work into a gospel of humanitarianism.²⁴

24

Emil Legouis, Louis Cazamian, A History of English Literature. (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1927), p. 1166.

Chapter II

FACTORS INFLUENCING DICKENS'S TREATMENT OF CHILD CHARACTERS AND DEVICES HE EMPLOYED TO PORTRAY THEM.

One of the most important factors influencing Dickens's writing was his childhood experiences. These recollections were guarded so jealously that not until he was a grown man did he ever speak of them to anyone, and then they were confided to John Forster with the deepest secrecy.

He was born at Landport, in Portsea, on February 7, 1812. His father was a clerk in the Navy-Pay Office which necessitated the family's moving about frequently. Shortly after Charles birth, the family moved to Norfolk Street, Bloomsburg, and then finally settled for a time in Chatham. Here Charles received the most lasting of his early impressions, and it was at this time that he conceived his love and admiration for God's Hill Place that later became his home.

As a child, Charles was sickly and delicate so that he was barred from joining the sports which the other boys enjoyed, although it afforded him great pleasure to watch, usually with a book in his hands, while the lads played. In a letter to Washington Irving, he described himself as

a "very small and not-over-particularly taken-care of boy", which implies that he was rather neglected by his parents. It was his mother, however, who taught him to read, and who awakened in him the desire for knowledge.¹

His father had a small collection of books to which he had access and these volumes had an important influence on his later writing. Frequently he unconsciously or otherwise refers to them. Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, The Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas and Robinson Crusoe became his familiar friends. The Arabian Nights and the Tales of the Genii held him in their magic spell.

He and his sister Fanny for a time attended a preparatory day-school in Rome-lane. During his last two years in Chatham he was sent to a school in Clover-lane, conducted by Mr. William Giles, a young Baptist minister. During that winter John Dickens was transferred to London, but Charles was left behind to finish the winter term. When the time came to leave he found it difficult to leave the scene of so many happy memories, and the companionship of

¹ John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens. Vol. I. (London: Chapman and Hall, 193, Piccadilly, 1872), p. 6.

his friend and teacher who had given him so much encouragement, but since he was needed at home, his father arranged the transportation. This was a painful journey for the boy, for he says he was sent, "like game, carriage paid". "There was no other inside passenger, and I consumed my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness, and it rained hard all the way, and I thought life sloppier than I expected to find it."²

It was a great shock to him to discover on his arrival in London, how really poor the family was, and to learn that he must abandon his idea of attending school. He soon became familiar with the adjacent neighborhood, and thus early in life began to acquire that astounding intimate knowledge of London. It delighted him to visit his godfather who was a rigger, and a mast, oar, and blockmaker; and his mother's eldest brother who was laid up with a broken leg. The latter gentleman resided over Manson's, the book seller, in Gerrard Street. Here the lad had an opportunity to further his reading as the book seller frequently lent him books. Miss Porter's Scottish Chiefs, Holbeiri's Dance of Death, and George Calman's Broad Grins were among them.

2

Ibid., p. 12

His first efforts at description were made at this time. Though he had not the courage to show any one his sketches of the old barber who shaved his uncle and who simultaneously rearranged all Napoleon's campaigns, and his picture of the deaf old housekeeper who made delicate hashes with walnut-ketchup, he secretly felt they were good.

At home, the situation was not so pleasant. John Dickens's financial affairs were in very bad condition. Although his father had little idea of the value or management of money, and involved his family in much suffering and humiliation, Charles always had only the fondest admiration and affection for him.

We can find no excuse in his ancestral record for the failure of Charles Dickens's father to keep his own head above water or submerge his children in a sea of poverty. His circumstances were not so very good, but they were not so bad as inevitably to bring him to destruction or his family to neglect. The clue to his misfortune must have lain in his own habits or character.³

Dickens's description of the genteel, shabby Wilkins Micawber who was always expecting "something to turn up", is an excellent picture of John Dickens. Perhaps it was at this time that he conceived the determination to secure a

3

Una Pope-Hennessy, Charles Dickens, (New York: Howell, Sasin, Publishers, Inc., 1946), p. 3.

solid foothold which a steady income alone can insure.

Mrs. Dickens attempted to establish a boarding school for young ladies to relieve the financial situation, but no scholars were forthcoming. Mr. Dickens's creditors at last became very insistent and he was taken to the debtors' prison, the Marshalsea, eloquently declaiming that his sun was set. Sorrowfully, Charles pawned everything in the house to obtain a little money for the support of the family. His books he found hardest to part with, but they went, one by one.

Now began for the sensitive boy the hardest and saddest experiences of his life. For twenty five years after, he never mentioned them until Forster one day innocently asked him if he knew a Mr. Dilke. Dickens replied very shortly that he had met him once, but Forster continued that the gentleman seemed to have known him quite well at one time, when Charles was employed in some warehouse near the Strand. Upon one occasion he had given him a half-crown for which Charles had thanked him with a low bow.⁴ The incident was apparently closed, but some weeks later Dickens confided the whole story to his friend. These memoirs

⁴
Forster, op. cit., p. 27.

were written at first for an autobiography to be published after his death, but Dickens later used the material for David Copperfield.

James Lamert, the step-son of his mother's sister had obtained work for Charles in Warren's Blacking warehouse, for six shillings a week. The parents eagerly accepted the offer, but the boy was heart-broken.

"It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me, that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me, a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally, to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out. No one made any sign. My father and mother were quite satisfied. They could hardly have been more so, if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a grammar school, and going to Cambridge.⁵

He settled into drudgery in the crazy, tumbledown, rat-infested warehouse, pasting labels on blacking bottles in the company of well meaning but coarse men and boys who called him the "little gentleman".

For a while they lived in the all but vacant house in Gower Street, until the family moved into the Marshalsea with

5

Ibid., p. 31.

Mr. Dickens. Charles was boarded with a fierce old lady whom he later immortalized as Mrs. Pipchin. His sister Fanny had won a scholarship and was studying music. On Sunday they went together to the prison, but during the week he was on his own, feeling hopeless and abandoned. Finally he remonstrated with his father at being estranged from the family and an attic room was found for him near the prison. Now he could enjoy breakfast and supper in the prison with his parents, brothers, and sisters. They were much more comfortably settled there than ever before.

Eventually Mr. Dickens inherited a small legacy which enabled him to pay his debts and move his family to the boarding house where his son had formerly boarded, until they settled in a small house in Somers-town. The blacking factory moved about this time too, but Charles continued working there until his father and James Lamert quarreled. Lamert dismissed him, but Mrs. Dickens was very insistent that Charles return to work. Fortunately Mr. Dickens was firm in this matter and said that Charles should go to school. "I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can

forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back",⁶ he wrote later.

Never again was any mention made of this period of his life by his parents. It may have lasted a year, more or less, but it was a closed incident for a quarter of a century.

Until old Hungerford market was pulled down, until old Hungerford stairs were destroyed and the very nature of the ground changed, I never had the courage to go back to the place where my servitude began. I never saw it, I could not endure to go near it.⁷

These experiences inflicted in Dickens a wound from which he suffered all his life. Some of his critics charge him with excessive self pity in connection with these hardships for he worked in the warehouse less than a year.

But one must realize that during those months he was in a state of complete despair. For the adult in desperate straits, it is almost always possible to imagine, if not to contrive, some way out; for the child, from whom love and freedom have inexplicably been taken away, no relief or release can be projected.⁸

The influence of his childhood and youth on his life and writings cannot be exaggerated.

The years between 1816 when he was four, and 1836 when he began to be successful, could bring his imagination to such a state of intense creative excitement

⁶
Ibid., p. 49.

⁷
Loc. cit.

⁸
Edmund Wilson, The Wound and the Bow, (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, 1941), p. 21.

that he was sometimes tempted to draw on that time mechanically when other capital failed or else in a moment of hesitation a scrap would shoot up from his memory and bring a whole dull page to life.⁹

The work of his whole career was an attempt to digest these early shocks and hardships, to explain them to himself, in relation to them, to give an intelligible picture of a world in which such things can happen.¹⁰

Another important influence on his work was his love of the drama which became apparent at a very early age.

He told a story offhand so well, and sang small comic songs so especially well, that he used to be elevated on chairs and tables both at home and abroad, for more effective display of these talents.¹¹

As he grew a little older and became acquainted with the storybook host, he lived in a world apart, with them for his companions. In the portion of *David Copperfield* that is autobiographical, he says:

It is curious to me how I could ever have consoled myself under my small troubles (which were great troubles to me,) by impersonating my favorite characters in them. . . . I have been Tom Jones (a child's Tom Jones, a harmless creature) for a week together. I have sustained my own idea of Roderick Random for a month at a stretch, I verily believe. I had a greedy relish for a few volumes of voyages and travels--I forget what, now--that were on

9

Humphrey House, The Dickens World, (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 21.

10

Edmund Wilson, op. cit., p. 9.

11

Forster, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 10.

those shelves: and for days and days I can remember to have gone about my region of our house, armed with the centrepiece out of an old set of boot-trees: the perfect realization of Captain Somebody, of the royal British Navy, in danger of being beset by savages, and resolved to sell his life at a great price.¹²

At Chatham he wrote a tragedy called Misnar, the Sultan of India, inspired by the Tales of the Genii. James Lamert encourages him in little private theatricals, and was the first person to take him to the theater where he became acquainted with Shakespeare's masterpieces.

When he resumed his studies, he was enrolled as a pupil in Wellington House where he directed his fellow students. Dr. Henry Danson says of him in this connection:

We were very strong, too, in theatricals. . . . Dickens was always a leader in these plays which were occasionally presented with much solemnity before an audience of boys, and in the presence of the ushers.¹³

As a lawyer's clerk he used to frequent the neighborhood theaters of London. Nothing delighted him more in after-life than to engage, very successfully too, in benefit performances and private theatricals. His public readings were a very natural outcome of his passion for the drama.

¹²
Ibid., pp. 9-10

¹³
Ibid., p. 63.

While in Canada he was invited to play with the Coldstream Guards in Montreal. The lively account of the performance that he wrote to Forster is valuable because it reveals the same precision and attention to detail that was characteristic of his writing.

I am not however, let me tell you, placarded as stage-manager for nothing. Everybody was told they would have to submit to the most iron despotism; and didn't I come Macready over them? Oh no. By no means. Certainly not. The pains I have taken with them and the perspiration I have expended, during the last ten days, exceed in amount anything you can imagine. I had regular plots of the scenery made out, and lists of the properties wanted; and had them nailed up by the prompter's chair. Every letter that was to be delivered, was written; Every piece of money that had to be given, provided; and not a single thing lost sight of. I prompted, myself, when I was not on; when I was, I made the regular prompter of the theater my deputy; and I never saw anything so perfectly touch and go, as the first two pieces.¹⁴

Thus it may be seen that the stage was the most important influence on his art. The plots of several of his novels are frequently those of the old melodrama. In Oliver Twist, the basic plot is the old theme of the lost child, the destroyed will, and the lost heir who finally triumphantly enters into his own, despite the machinations of his wicked, but in this case legitimate, half brother.

14

Ibid., pp. 395-396.

The plot of *Nicholas Nickleby* is another old favorite that of the cruel uncle who endeavors to use for his own ends the innocent children of the brother whom he had defrauded. Again virtue triumphs and the villain foils his own plans and destroys himself.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop* the basic idea is again familiar; that of the old crazy gambler who ruins himself and his beloved grand-daughter by his mad dreams of winning a fortune that will make her a lady.¹⁵

There are numerous references in his works to the theater. It is noticeable that

. . . his sympathy with the theater includes the mere showman of the lowest order, or, in other words that his love of stage folk coincides with his championship of the poor and destitute, which is always a conspicuous feature in his work.¹⁶

Little Nell is befriended by Mrs. Jarley who owns "the only stupendous collection of real wax works in the world," and Sissy Jupe's father was a clown in Mr. Cleary's troupe.

Dickens the author frequently reacted to his audience as Dickens the actor would. He always wrote with a

15

T. A. Jackson, *Charles Dickens: The Progress of a Radical*, (New York: International Publishers, 1938), p. 102.

16

J. B. Van Amerongen, *The Actor in Dickens*, (London Cecil Palmer, 1926), p. 180.

view of giving the public what they wanted, at least in presentation. When his Master Humphrey's Clock failed to please his readers, he conceived the idea of having Master Humphrey introduce the story of Little Nell and her old grandfather. He consulted Forster on the probable reaction to his having Walter Gay turn out badly, and whether or not the people would enjoy another number with Florence and Walter at their present age, or would prefer to see them older. To please his public, Great Expectations has a "happy ending" with Pip and Estella reunited, rather than his original and more artistic idea of leaving Pip a solitary man.

To sustain interest and suspense, he frequently makes use of contrast. There is contrast in character; Susan Nipper is snappish but kind-hearted and loyal to her mistress, Florence Dombey; Mr. Grimwig is as gruff an old gentleman as his name suggests, but he is a true friend to little Oliver Twist.

There is contrast in scenes and situations. For example Mr. Creakle's school is a contrast to that which

David Copperfield next attends, Dr. Strong's establishment. In Oliver Twist the child is removed from Fagin's den of vice to the secluded and refined homes of the Brownlowes and Maylies.

Death is frequently contrasted with the joyful and homely aspects of life. Dickens had a horror of the mummery that accompanied the funeral ceremonies of his day. In the undertaking scenes of David Copperfield and in Dombey and Son, he makes the surroundings cheerful and pleasant. The Omers even made a "little trip" of the delivery of Mrs. Copperfield's coffin. When Jenny Wren's father died, "many flaunting dolls had to be gaily dressed" to pay for the simple funeral expenses. The mason who chipped P - A - U - L on the tombstone sang and whistled as he worked.

Particularly effective is the contrast between social extremes, as that of proud Lady Dedlock and the outcast Joe,¹⁷ or Pip the gentleman and his benefactor, the convict Magwitch.

A study of Dickens's use of dialogue reveals that

17

Ibid., pp. 202-203.

usually over half of the book is filled with lively conversations, grave or gay as best suited his purpose. A portion of the conversation between poor simple Maggy and Little Dorrit, when she and Clennam met her outside the prison reveals the skill with which Dickens imparts knowledge and arouses sympathy while yet amusing his readers.

"What is her history?" asked Clennam.

"Think of that, Maggy!" said Dorrit, taking her two large hands and clapping them together. "A gentleman from thousands of miles away, wanting to know your history!"

"My history?" cried Maggy. "Little mother."

"She means me," said Dorrit, rather confused; "she is very much attached to me. Her old grandmother was not so kind to her as she should have been; was she, Maggy?"

"Maggy shook her head, made a drinking vessel of her clenched left hand, drank out of it, and said, "Gin." Then beat an imaginary child, and said, "Broom-handles and pokers."

"When Maggy was ten years old," said Dorrit, watching her face while she spoke, "she had a bad fever, sir, and she has never grown any older ever since."

"Ten years old," said Maggy, nodding her head. "But what a nice hospital! So comfortable, wasn't it? Oh so nice it was. Such a Ev'nly place!"

"She had never been at peace before, sir," said Dorrit, turning towards Arthur for an instant and speaking low, "and she always runs off upon that."

"Such beds there is there! cried Maggy. "Such lemonades! Such oranges! Such d'licious broth and wine! Such Chicking! Oh, Ain't it a delightful place to go and stop at!"

"So Maggy stopped there as long as she could," said Dorrit, in her former tone of telling a child's story; the tone designed for Maggy's ear, "and at last, when she could stop there no longer, she came out. Then, because she was never to be more than ten years old, however long she lived--"

"However long she lived," echoed Maggy;

"And because she was very weak; indeed was so weak that when she began to laugh she couldn't stop herself-- which was a great pity--"

(Maggy mighty grave of a sudden.)

"Her grandmother did not know what to do with her, and for some years was very unkind to her indeed. At length, in course of time, Maggy began to take pains to improve herself, and to be very attentive and very industrious; and by degrees was allowed to come in and out as often as she liked, and got enough to do to support herself, and does support herself. And that," said Little Dorrit, clapping the two great hands together again, "is Maggy's history, as Maggy knows!"¹⁸

Dickens is a master artist in picturing his settings which often read like stage-scenery. With skillful strokes

18

Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit (New York: A. L. Burt Company, n. d.), pp. 96-97.

he creates the background against which the scene is enacted. The atmosphere is perfect for the action. A feeling of loneliness and fear is aroused by his description of the country that Pip knew.

That dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it was the marshes, and that low leaden line beyond was the river; and that distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; . . .¹⁹

The keynote of Nell's story, that of youth and goodness contrasted with antiquity and grotesque fantasy is struck in the first chapter when Master Humphrey accompanies the child to her home and is introduced to the Old Curiosity Shop.

The place through which he made his way at leisure, was one of those receptacles for old and curious things which seem to crouch in odd corners of this town, and to hide their musty treasures from the public eye in jealousy and distrust. There was suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour, here and there; fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters; rusty weapons of various kinds; distorted figures in china, and wood, and iron, and ivory; tapestry, and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams.²⁰

The clue to the whole workhouse situation in Oliver Twist may be grasped at a glance when one enters the dining hall.

19

Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, (New York: Walter J. Black, Inc. n. d.), p. 2.

20

Charles Dickens, The Old Curiosity Shop, (Philadelphia: Macrae Smith Company, n. d.), p. 5.

The room in which the boys were fed, was a large stone hall, with a copper at one end; out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at meal-times. Of this festive composition each boy had one porringer, and no more--except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides. The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper, with such eager eyes, as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon.²¹

The admirable attention to detail to which Dickens called Forster's attention in his letter from Montreal is evident in his writing. Even there, are many touches that give evidence that the stage manager is on the job.

The property is always provided; Nell's birdcage, Jenny Wren's little crutch-stick, Jo's mangy fur cap and broom, the handkerchiefs in Fagin's den, the file and convict's leg-iron that seem to continually haunt Pip, Sissy Jupe's bottle of nine oils, Trabb's boy's blue bag, David Copperfield's placard announcing "He Bites", Deputy's

²¹

Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1946) pp. 15-16.

stones are insignificant articles in themselves, yet they play their role in the story, and significantly emphasize some point Dickens wishes to bring out.

His suggestions of the attitude, gesture and business suitable to the part receive close attention. Little Jenny Wren, the doll's dressmaker affords a good study of these devices of Dickens, on the occasion of Bradley Headstone, and Charley Hexam's visit to her.

A parlour door within a small entry stood open, and disclosed a child--a dwarf--a girl--a something--sitting on a little low old-fashioned arm-chair, which had a kind of little working bench before it.

"I can't get up", said the child, "because my back's bad and my legs are queer. But I'm the person of the house."

.....

The queer little figure, and the queer but not ugly little face, with its bright grey eyes, were so sharp that the sharpness of the manner seemed unavoidable.

.....

They complied in silence, and the little figure went on with its work of gumming or gluing together with a camel's hair-brush certain pieces of cardboard and thin wood, previously cut into various shapes. The child herself had cut them; and the bright scraps of velvet



and silk and ribbon also strewn upon the bench showed that when duly stuffed (and stuffing too was there), she was to cover them smartly. The dexterity of her nimble fingers was remarkable, and, as she brought two thin edges accurately together by giving them a little bite, she would glance at the visitors out of the corners of her grey eyes with a look that out-sharpened all her other sharpness.²²

His descriptions of the actions of the speakers are minute enough to be part of the script. As the Artful Dodger was led off to jail, the hardened young criminal put on a fine show of bravery.

"Come on", said the jailer.

"Oh Ah! I'll come on! replied the Dodger, brushing his hat with the palm of his hand. "Ah! (to the Bench) it's no use your looking frightened; I won't show you no mercy, not a ha' porth of it. You'll pay for this, my fine fellers. I wouldn't be you for something! I wouldn't go free, now, if you was to fall down on your knees and ask me. Here, carry me off to prison! Take me away!"

With these last words, the Dodge suffered himself to be led off by the collar, threatening, till he got into the yard, to make a parliamentary business of it; and then grinning in the officer's face, with great glee and self approval.²³

Much has been written about Dickens's characterization. Whatever may be said in regard to the merit, or demerit of his ability, the fact remains that his characters were very

22

Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, n. d.), pp. 300-301, Book I.

23

Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, p. 438.

real to him. His daughter Mamie tells that at one time while she was recuperating from an illness her father suggested that she should be carried to his study to be with him while he worked. He was writing busily and rapidly at his desk, she says,

When he suddenly jumped from his chair and rushed to a mirror which hung near, and in which I could see the reflection of some extraordinary facial contortions which he was making. He returned rapidly to his desk, wrote furiously for a few moments, and then went again to the mirror. The facial pantomime was resumed and then turning toward, but evidently not seeing me, he began talking rapidly in a low voice. Ceasing this soon, however, he returned once more to his desk, where he remained silently writing until luncheon time.²⁴

He associated himself with his characters; he lived each part as he wrote it. It is especially true that he suffered with his child characters.

Children are not emotionally developed so that much that might be said of adult characters would not necessarily apply to them. However children are individuals, and from earliest childhood they display strong tendencies and characteristics; therefore they must be treated and studied as such. A contemporary review has some pertinent comments

24

Mamie Dickens, My Father As I Recall Him, (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1887), p. 48.

on this subject.

Because of his extraordinary delicacy of perception, Mr. Dickens describes children characters well, but he always appears anxious to make too much of them, giving them a prominence which throws an air of unreality over the story.

It further asserts that prodigies like Paul Dombey are not children at all, but formed characters who talk philosophy and accidentally happen to be small and young. David Copperfield, Pip, Sissy Jupe and little Jacob are what they profess to be, and are depicted with unusual skill. Oliver Twist is merely a lay figure like one of Mrs. Jarley's waxworks.²⁵

In Great Expectations, Pip passes through a whole psychological cycle. In the beginning he is sympathetic, by reason of more or less natural circumstances he becomes a snob, then he becomes natural and understanding again.

Chesterton finds one of the minor child characters to be one of Dickens best. She is Dick Swiveller's little Marchioness.

She is female: (he has just described Nell as a cheerless phantom) that is, she is at once incurably candid and incurably loyal, she is full of terrible

25

"Modern Novelists: Charles Dickens," The
Westminister Review, Vol. LXIX (October 1, 1864), pp. 429.

common sense, she expects little pleasure for herself and yet she can enjoy bursts of it; above all she is physically timid and yet she can face anything.²⁶

David Copperfield as a boy is a very real and lovable child; it is only when he has passed into young manhood that he loses his freshness and vitality and becomes a rather colorless hero on the Nicholas Nickleby type.

Little Nell, Oliver Twist, Paul and Florence Dombey won the hearts of Dickens's contemporary readers. Lord Jeffrey and Daniel O'Connell wept at the death of Nell. Anthony Trollope thought that artistically Oliver Twist was Dickens's best novel. Even Thackeray, who was one of his severest critics, could not hold out against Paul's deathbed scene. Modern critics find them rather insipid but it must be remembered that at the time they were new and original, for Dickens was the first to treat children as individuals or make them main characters in a novel.

Dickens's Satire covers a broad field. "Licenced to speak his mind, he aims laughingly or sternly, but always

26

G. K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1911), p. 56.

in the same admirable spirit, at every glaring abuse of the day."²⁷

Frequently in his novels, education is satirized through types of school masters. Mr. Squeers is the brutal master in one of the notorious or infamous Yorkshire schools.

We can hardly help an amiable feeling towards the Squeers family, seeing the hearty gusto with which they pursue their minstrous business. The children who suffer under them are so shadowy that we cannot feel the wrong as we ought; such a spectacle should lay waste the heart, and yet we continue smiling.²⁸

Dotheboys was not cold-blooded cruelty, but blockheaded ignorance, against which Dickens has to fight in the whole field of education.

Gentle ridicule sufficed to bring about his point in regard to the classical training at Doctor Blimber's genteel private school. Poor little Paul, at an age when modern children are learning their A B C's, was burdened with a curriculum that would stagger a college freshman. The pompous Doctor and the quaint little old-fashioned child provide an excellent contrast.

Mr. Creakle is less brutal, but he is cruel. He cannot

27

George Gissing, Charles Dickens, (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, Inc., 1945), p. 133.

28

Loc. Cit.

resist pinching fat boys, and most of his remarks find their physical emphasis on some unfortunate lad's anatomy.

Weakness and foibles of the aristocracy and the middle class society are constantly held up to ridicule by unfavorable contrast with the virtues of the poorer class. Hard Times not only condemns the Manchester School's philosophy, but signalizes another victory of goodness and simplicity over selfishness and cold-blooded practicality.

Although Dickens was a Christian, he had little respect for most of the religious sects of the day. The spirit of hypocrisy that pervaded them aroused his scorn and indignation. The picture of little Jo in all his misery seated on the doorstep of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts is a satire on their so called charity.

He admires the edifice and wonders what it's all about. He has no idea, poor wretch, of the spiritual destitution of a coral reef in the Pacific, or what it costs to look up the precious souls among the cocoa-nuts and bread-fruit.²⁹

Again, the poor starving creature is forced to listen

29

Charles Dickens, Bleak House (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1928), p. 205.

to the unctuous Mr. Chadband rave and rant on the unintelligible subject of Treweth. As he flees in desperation from the pious company, only the poor work-house slavey, Guster, offers him a share of her supper.

He had no use for organized charity and railed against the workhouses in Oliver Twist. In Bleak House, he assails the type of charity that looks abroad for its field of activity, while at home there is neglect and misery, unnoticed because it is so familiar.

No writer is more frequently charged with mawkishness and sentimentality than Dickens. His death-bed scenes of Little Nell, Poor Jo, and Paul Dombey, reduced even grown men to tears, and are, in truth, intended to make the reader weep as the writer himself wept while he wrote them. It is one of the chief indictments against his child characters that they are such pathetic creatures. Yet he found it frequently necessary to exaggerate the pathos to awaken the conscience of his generation to the plight of children who were mistreated, misunderstood and neglected.

He frequently achieves his purpose of creating pathos that is genuine when he makes the least effort to do so. The death of Mrs. Dombey with the little daughter clinging to her is such a scene. "Thus clinging fast to that slight spar within her arms, that mother drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls around all the world."³⁰

In Bleak House, there is another example in the story of the "Coavinses". The two babies are locked in the garret room, while little Charley works out by the day. Their interview with Mr. Jarnydyce is really pitiful. Joe Gargery is pathetic in his dignity and simplicity, and in his love for the ungrateful Pip who is ashamed of him. The scene in which Jenny Wren and her drunken, sottish father appear is truly touching.

He is really a muddling and swipecy old child standing shivering in the corner, whimpering, while she berates him.

"There!" said Miss Wren, covering her eyes with her hand. "I can't bear to look at you. Go upstairs and get me my bonnet and shawl. Make yourself useful in some way, bad boy, and let me have your room instead of your company, for one half-minute."

Obedying her, he shambled out, and Eugene Wrayburn saw the tears exude from between the little creature's fingers

30

Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son, (London: Walter J. Black, Inc.), pp. 14-15

as she kept her hand before her eyes. He was sorry, but his sympathy did not move his carelessness to do anything but feel sorry.³¹

Humor is perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of Dickens's work. Sometimes it is rollicking farce as in the incident of the waiter devouring poor David Copperfield's supper and giving all the guests the impression that the inoffensive young gentleman had a most prodigious appetite, or the scene in which Trabb's boy continually overtakes Pip attired in all his magnificence, in order to reel and stagger as at a first encounter, to the undisguised pleasure of the bystanders. Again it is bubbling good spirits that pervades the air as Kit Nubbles and his family party enjoy an evening at Astley's.

Or it is a gentle humor softening the sting of satire. When Sally Brass goes down to the dreary cellar kitchen to give her little slavey her victuals, she cut from the joint, "two square inches of cold mutton; and bade her victim never to say that she did not have meat in that house." The exaggeration provokes laughter, yet if he had shown the scene

³¹

Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, Vol. III, (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., n. d.), p. 443.

in all its stark reality, his readers would have turned away in disgust. After the laughter subsides, the thought recurs that what a shame it is that such conditions can and do exist and the reader thinks more sympathetically of poor little girls working under cruel or thoughtless masters.³²

When Mr. Fledgeby gets his just desserts in the nature of a severe caning from Mr. Lamble, one of his former victims, Jenny Wren comes upon the scene. Her charity prompts her to relieve his suffering with brown paper and vinegar plasters, but her sense of justice induces her to sprinkle the plasters generously with pepper.

His harsh humor shows human nature at worst as when Oliver runs after the coach, led by promise of a half-penny, only to be scoffed at when he falls back in weariness and pain.

But true humour always suggests a thought, always throws light on human nature. The humorist may not be fully conscious of his own meaning; he always indeed implies more than he can possibly have thought out; and therefore it is that we find the best humour inexhaustible, ever fresh when we return to it, even, as our knowledge of life increases, more suggestive of wisdom.³³

Dickens was a product of his environment and of his

32

George Gissing, op. cit., p. 201.

33

Ibid., p. 202.

age, although he managed to rise above them. He was not overcome by evil, but rather overcame evil by good as Saint Paul counsels. He understood people and he knew how to appeal to them. In common with the philanthropists, Lord Shaftsbury, Francis Place, Michael Sadler, and the humanitarian authors, Disraeli, Kingsley, Mrs. Gaskell, Harriet Martineau and Reads, he had a love for the poor and down-trodden; but in addition to this sympathy, there was a strong affinity for them, and understanding of them engendered by experiences.

His writing was the weapon that he wielded to combat the evils as he saw them and he fearlessly used all the devices his genius suggested; characterization, satire, pathos and humor. But his special appeal was to the sympathy of his readers for the pitiable condition of the underprivileged children of the poor who were the helpless victims of a social system that was as degrading as it was viciously unjust.

Now it will be necessary to study the children who play important roles in his books as well as those who have minor parts or are merely incidental characters. No matter how small their part, it will be noticed that he used them to call attention to some evil of the time, or to direct the attention of his readers to the consideration of children as individuals.

CHAPTER III

SPECIAL STUDY OF DICKENS'S CHILD CHARACTERS

Every child has an absolute, God given right not merely to the bare necessities of physical existence, to food, clothes and shelter, fresh air and sunlight--but to food for the emotions, the fancy, and the mind. He has a claim to affection, to understanding, to consideration, to companionship. These things along with the means of growing not only physically, but mentally and emotionally as well, Dickens maintained, are due him. He has a right to be himself and the right to be protected against all that threatens his being, against all that impairs by positive injury, by deprivation, terror, coldness, callousness, indifferness, systematic disparagement, and active hostility or against anything which curtails his self development and expansion of powers. For these fundamental rights Dickens fought against every type of foe, public and private, objective and subjective, whether acknowledged as such, or presenting themselves as public charity, parental right, prescriptive authority or pious duty.¹

He almost universally condemned organized charity, not only for the stigma attached to it, but also because of the

¹
T. A. Jackson, The Progress of a Radical, (New York: International Publishers, 1938), p. 76.

hypocrisy of the so-called benefactors. The New Poor Law had no more bitter enemy than he, and the workhouse system whether under the new or the old regime was an abomination. The relief of poverty is always a delicate question, and one that every race and age must face, for an omniscient Authority has assured us that the poor we have always with us. Doctor Arnold, writing five years after the passing of the New Poor Law, also deplored its results, as he felt the poor should be relieved rather than be driven to economy by terror.

Economy itself is a virtue which appears to me to imply an existing previous competence; it can surely have no place in the most extreme poverty; and for those who have a competence to require it of those who have not, seems to me to be something very like mockery.²

The first of the children that Dickens introduced to his readers for the purpose of awakening the public conscience to its duty in regard to neglected childhood was Oliver Twist. The child of the workhouse provided a most effective means of presenting Dickens' objective to the evils of the New Poor Law.

In Oliver Twist, Dickens presented actualities instead of statistics and revealed to the public what a work-

2

Humphrey House, The Dickens World, quoting from The Life of Arnold, (New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 93.

house looked like, felt like, tasted like, and smelled like.³ It was the primary purpose of his tale to show the little hero, jostled in the miserable crowd and yet preserved everywhere from the vice of its pollution by an exquisite delicacy of natural sentiment which clung to him.⁴ In his preface to a later edition, the author explained his second purpose. The book was a protest against the popular, picaresque novels that glorified crime and criminals.

It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really did exist; to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid misery of their lives, to show them as they really were, for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great black, ghostly gallows closing up their prospect, turn them where they might; it appeared to me that to do this would be to attempt a something which was needed, and which would be a service to society. And I did it as best I could.⁵

The story opens with the birth of the child in the workhouse, whither his unfortunate young mother had been taken when she was found in the streets.

Poor little Oliver from the moment he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed and fell into his place at once-- a parish child-- the orphan of a

3

Edmund Wilson, The Wound and the Bow, (Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1941), p. 26.

4

John Forster, Charles Dickens, Vol. I (London: Chapman and Hall, 193 Piccadilly, 1872), p. 136.

5

Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1946) Preface p. IX.

workhouse--the humble, half-starved drudge--to be cuffed and buffeted through the world--despised by all, and pitied by none.⁶

His first nine years were spent at a baby farm* in company with twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, under the care of an elderly female who made a little fortune even on the starvation rates allowed for their care. When she had managed to keep them alive on a minimum amount of food, in eight cases out of ten the child sickened and died from want and cold, fell into the fire from neglect, or was accidentally smothered. Some perverse infant on that rare occasion--wash day, usually managed to get scalded to death. Oliver managed to survive all these dangers and lived to celebrate his ninth birthday in the cellar for daring to suggest he was hungry.

On this auspicious day the pompous Beadle, Mr. Bumble, arrived to take Oliver back to the workhouse as nine years was considered a ripe old age for a youth to become self-supporting. There he presented the child to the board, eight or ten benevolent gentlemen, who proceeded to make Oliver feel very much at home by reminding him that he was

6

Ibid., p. 4.

*In a series of articles January 20, 1849, April 21, 1849 in "The Examiner" Dickens assailed the baby farm at Tooting during cholera epidemic, Cf. The Works of Charles Dickens, Miscellaneous Papers, Plays and Poems, Vol. I. (New York: Bigelow, Brown and Co., Inc. pp. 81 - 95.)

an orphan and that he was dependent on the parish. They extended to him the privilege of picking oakum--beginning the next morning at six o'clock.

These wise old members of the board decided to discourage applicants for relief, by associating it with the workhouse and gruel. After this system had been in force a few months, the paupers were suffering the tortures of slow starvation. The boys became so voracious and wild with hunger that lots were cast to decide who should approach the master and ask for more; it fell to Oliver. He, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity, had actually said;

"Please, sir, I want some more."

The master was a fat, healthy man, but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the same rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the corner. The assistants were paralyzed with fear.

"What!" said the master at length, in a faint voice.

"Please, sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."⁷

The horror with which this announcement was received by the board resulted in the culprit's instant confinement, and the publication of a notice that the parish would pay five pounds to anyone who would take Oliver off its hands. The gentleman in the white waist coat was confirmed in his opinion that Oliver would one day be hanged.

The incident was humorous; no one but Dickens could

7

Dickens, op. cit., p. 17.

have made such a pathetic scene a subject of such mirth, and yet, for all its exaggeration, there was truth in it—so much truth that people had to laugh very heartily indeed when they read it.

In spite of its zeal to be rid of such a desperado as Oliver, even the board was slightly reluctant to apprentice him to Mr. Gamfield, the chimney sweep, for it was a nasty occupation as Mr. Limbkins said; and another gentleman remarked that young boys had been smothered in chimneys.

"That's acause they damped the straw afore they lit it in the chimbley to make 'em come down again," said Gamfield: "that's all smoke and no blaze; veras smoke ain't o' no use at all in making a boy come down, for it only sends him to sleep, and that's wot he likes. Boys is very obstinit, and very lazy, gen'l'men, and there's nothink like a good hot blaze to make 'em come down with a run. It's humane too, gen'l'men, acause even if they've stuck in the chimbley, roasting their feet makes 'em struggle to hextricate theirselves!"⁸

Although Oliver did not hear this encouraging speech, he was terror-stricken when Mr. Bumble took him before the magistrate to sign the apprentice papers. The slight qualms of the board had been overcome by Mr. Gamfield's compromise for three-pound-ten instead of the original five pounds.

Dickens showed the attitude of the upper classes towards the sufferings of the poor by having the magistrate question the chimney sweep, to assure himself that the boy

8

Ibid., pp. 21-22.

would be well treated. The rich did not wish to believe that paupers had feelings or that their lot was a hard one. They would rather overlook such a possibility unless it confronted them as directly as did poor Oliver's horrified countenance. The poor lad's pleading for even death in preference to the indenture won not only his release but even a kind word from the magistrate.

Oliver was finally sent to assist the parochial undertaker. When he was informed of this arrangement and threatened with dire punishment if he got into more trouble, the young delinquent evinced so little emotion that the unnatural wretch was considered a hardened young rascal.

The simple fact was, that Oliver, instead of possessing too little feeling, possessed rather too much; and was in a fair way of being reduced, for life, to a state of brutal stupidity and sullenness by the ill-usage he had received.⁹

The Sowberry household welcomes the new drudge with thinly-veiled hostility as another mouth to feed.

I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the god had neglected. I wish he could have witnessed the horrible avidity with which Oliver tore the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine.¹⁰

⁹
Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁰
Ibid., p. 37

In another incident of the story, Dickens displayed in the person of Noah Claypole the harmful effects of charity schools with their stigmatizing benevolence and the conspicuous uniforms which drew down on the scholars not only the jibes of street lads, but also sticks and stones. Silently Noah endured the bullying until he saw the chance to wreak the vengeance of his own injustice on one weaker than himself. Oliver was the victim until Noah stepped too far. Oliver refused to endure an insult to his mother. For once Noah received his just deserts - a good thrashing. Just where Oliver acquired respect for his mother's name and memory is difficult to explain as the females whom he had thus far encountered were not likely to inspire love or reverence. As a result of the scuffle in which the whole Sowerberry family engaged, Oliver was beaten and locked up until the Beadle arrived to subdue him. The terrified child managed to escape and fled to London.

Nothing is more evident of the general heartless attitude of the people at this time, against which some of Dickens's strongest thrusts are made, than the indifference and cruelty the lad encountered during his flight. Only a good-hearted turn-pike-man and a kind old lady showed him any pity until he met the Artful Dodger, a lad of about Oliver's age in years, but sadly advanced in the ways of evil. This world-wise young fellow led the innocent hero into the

infamous district of Saffron Hill, to the den of Fagin, where the lad was introduced to that pleasant old gentleman's mischievous pupils and initiated into a most amusing game. It can be seen that homeless boys like Oliver could be easily enticed to become professional pick-pockets. The element of danger, the love of mischief, and an easy way of earning a little money would appeal to youths to whom the opportunity of earning an honest living was barred. In his case, Oliver had no suspicion of the nature of Fagin's business until the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates attempted to rob Mr. Brownlow. That gentleman believed in Oliver's innocence though the evidence was against him, and took the boy to his own home for medical care and attention so sorely needed. Oliver's happiness was short-lived, for Nancy and Sikes, members of Fagin's gang, discovered his whereabouts and kidnapped him as he went on an errand for Mr. Brownlow. Fagin was not merely uttering idle threats when he told Oliver that he could very easily be the means of his falling into the hands of the law. It was Fagin's practice not only to train young thieves, but when it was convenient or expedient he betrayed them for the reward given for such thief-taking. Furthermore he regaled the boy with both humorous and exciting stories of his own adventures.

In short, the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils, Having prepared his mind, by solitude and gloom, to

prefer any society to the companionship of his own sad thoughts in such a dreary place, he was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue forever.¹¹

During the conversation between Fagin and Sikes as they planned the robbery of the Maylie home, Sikes expressed his need of a small boy and bewailed their scarcity.

... Lord!" said Mr. Sikes, reflectively, "if I'd only got that young boy of Ne'd, the chimbley-sweeps! He kept him small on purpose, and let him out by the job. But the father gets lagged; and then the Juvenile Delinquent Society comes, and takes the boy away from a trade where he was earning money, teaches him to read and write, and in time makes a 'prentice of him. And so they go on," said Mr. Sikes, his wrath rising with the recollection of his wrongs, "so they go on; and if they'd got money enough (which it's a Providence they haven't) we shouldn't have half-a-dozen boys left in the whole trade, in a year or two."¹²

It is doubtful if many readers felt that Sike's reproach applied to them, for they had done little to support the organization that frustrated the plans, and impaired the business of such law-breakers. If Oliver did not have friends interested in him, it is doubtful if the law or anyone else would have interfered in his behalf.

Although Fagin had little acquaintance with characters like Oliver, the old Jew had sufficient knowledge of human

11

Ibid., p. 178.

12

Ibid., p. 184.

nature to realize that while the boy had no desire to follow the life enjoyed by Jack Dawkens, Charley Bates and other adventurous spirits, his sensitive spirit would be crushed if they could once involve him in a crime.

Once let him feel that he is one of us; once fill his mind with the idea that he has been a thief; and he is ours! Ours for his life. Oho! It couldn't have come about better.¹³

In spite of all precautions the attempted burglary failed, and Oliver was abandoned by the housebreakers. As in his previous difficulty, Oliver received aid from the intended victims who believed in his innocence and listened to his story with sympathy.

It was a solemn thing, to hear, in the darkened room, the feeble voice of the sick child recounting a weary catalogue of evils and calamities which hard men had brought upon him. Oh! if when we oppress and grind our fellow creatures, we bestowed but one thought on the dark evidences of human error, which, like dense and heavy clouds, are rising slowly it is true, but not less surely, to Heaven, to pour their after-vengeance on our heads; if we heard but one instant, in imagination, the deep testimony of dead men's voices, which no power can stifle, and no pride shut out; where would be the injury and injustice, the suffering, misery, cruelty, and wrong, that each day's life brings with it.¹⁴

Dr. Losberne experiences difficulty in convincing everyone that Oliver was not the criminal they believed him to be, and the care he had to exercise lest he fall into the

13

Ibid., p. 186.

14

Ibid., p. 285.

hands of the law is a sad reflection on the spirit of social and civil justice that was then prevalent. Evidently a man was guilty until he was found innocent. In the light of circumstantial evidence Oliver certainly had an unfavorable reputation, for he had been a rebel, a dangerous assailant, a runaway, an inmate of a thief's den, and an ungrateful lad who had run away from his benefactor.

The innocence and simplicity of his character had made an impression not only on his new friends, but also on unfortunate Nancy. He had touched the only pure spark of womanliness left in the poor jaded creature who had been a victim of poverty and vice from her earliest years as she told Rose Maylie:

"Thank Heaven upon your knees, dear lady," cried the girl, "that you had friends to care for and keep you in your childhood, and that you were never in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and drunkenness, and--and--something worse than all--as I have been from my cradle. I may use the word, for the alley and the gutter were mine, as they will be my death-bed."¹⁵

How frequently Dickens mentions the unhappy childhood of some character who had grown to adulthood a menace or a burden to the very society which was so imbued with the laissez-faire policy that it permitted conditions to continue that were responsible for such ruin. In contrast to those who are bad through circumstances there will always be men like Monks,

15

Ibid., p. 395.

Oliver's half brother, who are innately bad, apparently. He deliberately planned the downfall of the boy, out of revenge in behalf of his mother and pure malicious hatred, as Nancy told Rose.

. . . Monks talking on about the boy, and getting very wild, said that though he had got the young devil's money safely now, he'd rather have had it the other way; the boast of the father's will, by driving him through every jail in town, and then hauling him up for some capital felony which Fagin could easily manage, after having made a good profit of him besides.¹⁶

Noah Claypole was another dyed-in-the-wool villain whose experience as a charity boy only intensified his meanness and cunning. After he ran away to London he found a profitable employment through Mr. Fagin in waylaying children and robbing them.

"The kinchins, my dear," said Fagin, "is the young children that's sent on errands by their mothers, with six-pences and shillings; and the lay is just to take their money away--they've always got it ready in their hands,--then knock 'em into the kennel, and walk off very slow, as if there was nothing else the matter but a child fallen down and hurt itself. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Ha! Ha!" roared Mr. Claypole, kicking up his legs in an ecstasy. "Lord, that's the very thing!"¹⁷

One of Fagin's young thieves, Charley Bates, had in his youth so imbibed the spirit of his master that he actually gloried in his calling. His professional pride

¹⁶
Ibid., p. 396.

¹⁷
Ibid., p. 424 - 425.

was sadly jolted when the Artful Dodger fell into the hands of the law.

"To think of Jack Dawkins, Dummy Jack, the Dodger, the Artful Dodger, going abroad for a common twopenny--halfpenny sneezebox! I'd never thought he'd done it under a gold watch chain, and seals, at the lowest. Oh, why didn't he rob some rich old gentleman of all his wotables, and go out as a gentleman, and not like a common prig, without no honour nor glory!"¹⁸

His mournful wail is amusing until one reflects that Fagin and his kind were more zealous in instilling into their pupils such demoralizing sentiments than many schoolmasters were in inspiring noble and lofty ideals in the young minds entrusted to them. Fagin had so impressed even innocent little Oliver that when Fagin was in the cell, condemned to die, Mr. Brownlow brought Oliver to see him. For, he explained to the jailer:

. . . as this child has seen him in the full career of his success and villany, I think it as well--even at the cost of some pain and fear--that he should see him now.¹⁹

With the death of Fagin, and the denouement of his half-brother's plot to disgrace him, Oliver was freed from the evils that surrounded him. Secure in the care of Mr. Brownlow who adopted him, he enjoyed the happiness that Dickens so firmly believed to be the prerogative of every child.

¹⁸
Ibid., p. 430.

¹⁹
Ibid., p. 532.

The next novel to be considered is that of "The Old Curiosity Shop", whose heroine was inspired by Mary Hogarth, Dickens' seventeen year old sister-in-law. When Mary died suddenly, he was grief stricken and for some time he was unable to pursue his literary activities. She seemed to be symbolical of the content and peace that forever eluded him, no matter how famous, successful, and happy he may have appeared. His daughter, Mamie, writes of this girl:

She was of a most charming and lovable disposition as well as being personally very beautiful. Soon after my parents married, Aunt Mary was constantly with them. As her nature developed she became my father's ideal of what a young girl should be.²⁰

After her death Dickens was inspired to write this story as he wrote to his friend Forster: "I resolved to try and do something which might be read by people whom death had been, with a softened feeling, and with consolation,".²¹ At a dinner in Edinburgh he explained why he kept to his intention that little Nell should die.

It was done that he might substitute a garland of fresh flowers for the sculptured horrors that usually disgrace a tomb. He had wanted to fill young minds with better thoughts of death, to soften the grief in older hearts, to console old and young in time of trial. Therefore

20

Mamie Dickens, My Father as I knew Him (New York E. P. Dutton and Co., 1897), p. 21.

21

Forster, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 186

in spite of all the letters requesting Nell's reprieves, he had kept to his purpose and Little Nell had died.²²

Little Nelly Trent is a little girl forced to accept the responsibilities of a person beyond her years. As Master Humphry who introduced the story commented when he saw her caring for her grandfather in the musty old shop:

It always grieves me to contemplate the initiation of children into the ways of life, when they are scarcely more than infants. It checks their confidence and simplicity--two of the best qualities that Heaven gives them, and demands that they share our sorrows before they are capable of entering into our enjoyments,²³

Master Humphry could not forget the child when he left that night, and the thought that her grandfather went out each night, at midnight, on a mysterious errand leaving her alone, greatly worried him. It would be a curious speculation, he felt, to imagine her in her future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of wild grotesque companions; the only pure, fresh, youthful object in the throng.

Ever before him were the dark murky old rooms--the quaint suits of mail with their silent air--the faces all awry, grinning from wood and stone--the dust, and rust, and worm that lives in wood--and alone in the midst of all this

22

Una Pope Hennessy, Charles Dickens (New York: Howell, Soskin, Publishers, Inc. 1946), p. 128.

23

Charles Dickens, The Old Curiosity Shop (Philadelphia: Macrae, Smith, Company, n. d.), p. 7.

lumber and decay and ugly age, the beautiful child in her gentle slumber, smiling through her light and sunny dreams.²⁴

Such is the main idea of the Old Curiosity Shop and throughout the story the child is the victim of selfish, unscrupulous people. Her grandfather and her profligate brother instead of protecting her, selfishly used her for their own ends. The latter believed his grandfather to be very wealthy, and he, wished to marry her to his friend, Dick Swiveller. The former gambled away the little money he had, and that which he borrowed from Quilp, the horrid dwarf, under the delusion that he would win a fortune and make her a lady.

The little girl's heart was heavy with fear and loneliness, for no longer did she and her grandfather spend quiet happy hours reading together, speaking of her mother, or walking in the fields. Now he came in long after midnight, weary, pale, his eyes bloodshot, and lay groaning on the bed.

To insure the pathos, Dickens had the child pour out her woes to "pretty Mrs. Quilp, obedient, timid, loving Mrs. Quilp" while the fiendish dwarf eavesdropped outside the door, and by deduction learned the grandfather's secret. The only

24

Dickens - op. cit., p. 15.

relief afforded her was the presence of Kit, big, kind-hearted overgrown Kit. Even the consolation of his friendship was denied her, for Quilp allowed the old grandfather to believe that Kit had betrayed the secret that he was a gambler.

The child's terror increased after Quilp took possession of the property, and her grandfather became ill from the shock. Only a secret visit from the simple, kindly Kit whose good mother offered to share their home with them gave her any comfort.

Surrounded by unfeeling creditors, and mercenary attendants upon the sick, and meeting in the height of her anxiety and sorrow with little regard or sympathy even from the women about her, it is not surprising that the affectionate heart of the child should have been touched to the quick by one kind and generous spirit, however uncouth the temple in which it dwelt.²⁵

The grandfather recovered but was "the listless, passionless creature, that suffering of mind and body had left him."²⁶ From henceforth Nell was his guide and leader, and the two homeless "children" secretly left the city lest a fate worse than death should part them. The exhausted pair were ever driven onward by the old man's fear of pursuit.

He became as merry as a child when they came upon

25

Ibid., p. 99-100.

26

Ibid., p. 103.

Codlin and Short, itinerant showmen, who were mending their stage arrangements for the Punch and Judy show. Later while he gleefully enjoyed the show, his little grand-daughter slept the sleep of exhaustion on his shoulder--her fears and worries for the moment forgotten. Dickens constantly reminds us that the gentle little girl, who so sorely needed attention and affection, was thrust into the role of protector and guardian.

Another personification of selfishness had already cast a shadow on the child's path. Codlin, the misanthrope, was surly and cautious when his partner, Short, invited the old man and the child to accompany them to the races. When Short revealed that he was sure they were running away from friends, Codlin became very ingratiating for he foresaw an easy way to make some money. "Codlin's the friend, not Short," he continually assured the mystified Nell.

Everything at the race-course frightened and repelled Nell, and in all the crowd only one lady took pity on her and bought her flowers. Codlin and Short kept a vigilant eye on the pair, and they, frightened that their secret had been discovered, made their escape while their "friends" were busily engaged in a performance.

Meanwhile Quilp, for revengeful notions of his own, convinced young Trent that the grandfather was really rich, and connived with him to marry Nell to Dick Swiveller. "In the hatching of their scheme, neither Trent nor Quilp had

one thought about the happiness or misery of poor innocent Nell."²⁷

One of Dickens' few kind schoolmasters appears in this story, yet he is a sad figure. For his favorite scholar was very ill and the old grandmother blamed the schoolmaster. "If he hadn't been poring over his books out of fear of you, he would be well and merry now, I know he would."²⁸ His unhappiness when the lad died saddened the little girl as well; so little happiness fell her way.

Mrs. Jarley, owner of Jarley's Waxworks, proved a kind and considerate mistress when she engaged Nell to assist her in the show, and for the first time in many a day the girl was happy. Only the memory of Quip's visit to the city, presumably in a fruitless search of herself and her grandfather, caused her any uneasiness; then the knowledge that the old man was such a poor, thoughtless, vacant creature grieved her. The grandfather fell in with some scoundrels who encouraged him in his passion for gambling, and revived his dream of winning a fortune for Nell.

Exulting in some brief triumph; or cast down by a defeat, there he sat so wild and restless, so feverishly

27

Ibid., p. 199

28

Ibid., p. 213.

and intensely anxious, so terribly eager, so ravenous for the paltry stake that she could have almost better borne to see him dead.²⁹

Saddest of all, Nell was the innocent cause of all this, and his insatiable thirst for gain was prompted by the most unselfish thoughts. That night, he robbed her of the little sum she had hidden--and in the midst of her grief she knew that if they were overtaken he surely would be separated from her. His thirst for gold was consuming now--more, more, he must get more; and none of her pleadings could divert him from his plan of some day winning the fortune.

A further humiliation awaited her at the hands of Miss Monflathers who conducted a select Boarding and Day Establishment. She had gone there to invite the students to a special showing of Mrs. Jarley's Wax Works.

"Don't you feel how naughty it is of you," resumed Miss Monflathers; "to be a waxwork child, when you might have the proud consciousness of assisting, to the extent of your infant powers, the manufactures of your country; of improving your mind by the constant contemplation of the steam-engine; and of earning a comfortable and independent subsistence of from two and ninepence to the three shillings per week. Don't you know that the harder you are at work, the happier you are?"³⁰

Thus through this snobbish schoolteacher, Dickens voiced the

29

Ibid., p. 249.

30

Ibid., p. 263.

opinion of the upper-middle class and reflected their superior attitude toward those whom they considered inferior. Miss Edwards, a poor girl, who showed Nell an act of kindness, was severely chided for her "attachment to the lower classes."

In the meantime, the evil companions had goaded poor old grandfather into promising to rob Mrs. Jarley so that he might avenge his honor and win. Nell overheard the plans and that night forced him to flee with her, to evade the crime and disgrace that were threatening them. The relief she experienced in saving him, suppressed her regret at her apparent ingratitude and treachery to her friend. The wanderings of Nell and her grandfather in hope of evading pursuers led them among strange and unfamiliar scenes in northern England.

Dickens had little understanding of, or sympathy for the manufacturing cities of this region. His conservative attitude toward the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution did not favor the busy marts nor the huge ugly factories and blast furnaces that marred the beauty of the countryside.

This inferno through which their paths lay, was like some nightmare to the child and old man. In this scene Dickens vented his hatred and fear of mob-violence.

. . . When bands of unemployed labourers paraded the roads, or clustered by torch-light around their leaders

who told them, in stern language, of their wrongs, and urged them on to frightful cries and threats; when maddened men, armed with sword and firebrand, spurning the tears and prayers of women who would restrain them, rushed forth on errand of terror and destruction to work no ruin half so surely as their own. . . .³¹

This is Dickens' conception of the Chartist movement; and he made the description more effective by showing its effects on the sick, terrified little girl whose aching lumbs, and bruised feet could scarcely drag her through the poverty-stricken, dreadful spot. She was so ill that she no longer felt the desire for food, but the old man complained bitterly of hunger. As she begged at one hovel--a gaunt faced man pointed to a bundle on the ground.

That's a dead child. I and five hundred other men were thrown out of work, three months ago. That is my third dead child, and last. Do you think I have charity to bestow, or a morsel of bread to spare?³²

In another hut, a couple of families shared parts of the room. Two women surrounded by children faced a magistrate who held a deaf and dumb boy by the arm. The boy had been brought before him that morning charged with theft, but because of his infirmity, he had been given another chance. The other mother pleaded for her boy who had been transported for a similar offence.

"Peace, women," said the gentleman, "your boy was in

³¹
Ibid., p. 376.

³²
Ibid., p. 378.

possession of all his senses."

"He was." cried the mother; "and he was the more easy to be led astray because he had them. If you save this boy because he may not know right from wrong, why did you not save mine who was never taught the difference. You gentlemen have as good a right to punish her boy, that God has kept in ignorance of sound and speech, as you have to punish mine, that you kept in ignorance yourselves. How many of the girls and boys, ah, men and women, too, that are brought before you and you don't pity, are deaf and dumb in their minds, and go wrong in that state, and are punished in that state, body and soul, while you gentlemen are quarrelling among yourselves whether they ought to learn this or that? Be a just man, Sir, and give me back my son."

"You are desperate," said the gentleman, taking out his snuff-box, "and I am sorry for you."³³

This tragic scene is another in which Dickens denounced the political and social conditions of his times, and showed how the young people were the chief victims. Exposing his little heroine to such experiences aroused sympathy more easily than any other means he might have used.

The child's wanderings were drawing to a close. Exhausted, she fell prostrate at the feet of a gentleman who turned out to be the old schoolmaster, on his way to a new post in a distant village. He took her to an inn and when she had revived, she told him her story; how she fled with the old man, first to save him from the mad house, and now to save him from himself.

"This child!"--he thought--"has this child heroically

persevered under all doubts and dangers, struggled with poverty and suffering, upheld and sustained by strong affection and the consciousness of rectitude alone! And yet the world is full of such heroism. Have I yet to learn that the hardest and best-borne trials are those which are never chronicled in any earthly record, and are suffered every day! And should I be surprised to hear the story of this child."³⁴

After her recovery they accompanied their friend to the scene of his new labors. In a moldering old building once part of a monastery or convent, Nell and her grandfather settled down. She was able to earn a little money for their support by guiding visitors through the old ruins. Peace came to her at last, and when the little girl sat within the quiet old church and gazed on the relics of antiquity that surrounded her, all the associations among which her early days had been spent seemed to cluster around her to be present at the closing scene of her life.

But stripped of their strangeness; deepened into solemn shapes by the suffering she has undergone, gently fusing every feeling of a life past into hopeful and familiar anticipation of a life to come, and already imperceptibly lifting her, without grief or pain, from the earth she loves, yet whose grosser paths her light steps only touched to show the track through them to Heaven.³⁵

Their friends, who were more numerous than the child realized, had never abandoned hope of finding the wanderers,

³⁴
Ibid., p. 386.

³⁵
Forster, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 190-191.

but alas they arrived too late, for little Nell lay quietly sleeping and the childish old man gently mourned that she did not arise and join her little friends.

Nell's death bed scene affected Dickens so much that he could scarcely bring himself to describe it. In a letter to Forster, Dickens pictured his reaction to the close of the story.

Nobody will miss her like I shall. It is such a very painful thing to me, that I really cannot express my sorrow. Old wounds bleed afresh when I only think of the way of doing it; what the actual doing will be, God knows. I can't preach to myself the school-master's consolation, though I try. Mary died yesterday, when I think of this sad story.³⁶

It cost him a good deal of emotional strain and a whole night of anguish to write the description of the child's death bed scene. Every detail was of the utmost importance to him.

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death.

Her couch was dressed with here and there some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour. "When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always." Those were her words.

She was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell was dead. Her little bird--a poor slight thing the pressure of a finger would have crushed-- was stirring

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Forster, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 186.

nimbly in its cage; and the strong heart of its child-mistress was mute and motionless for ever.³⁷

Dickens' labor of love had now drawn to a close and nothing remained but to show the grief of the old man when he finally realized that she was resting forever in the old church. The grandfather was found lying dead upon the stone, and they laid him by the side of her whom he had loved so well, but so unwisely.

The next novel in which Dickens treated child characters was Dombey and Son. Florence and Paul Dombey, children of a wealthy city merchant, lacked none of the necessities and luxuries that money can buy, yet they were deprived of a loving father's care and affection. Mr. Dombey saw in the boy only the heir who would make Dombey and Son a reality, but the girl he saw not at all.

Dickens averred his purpose in writing the story when he said he intended to show Mr. Dombey with that one idea of the Son taking firmer and firmer possession of him, and swelling and bloating his pride to a prodigious extent. He intended to show him impatient for the boy's getting on, and urging his masters to set him to great tasks. But the natural affection would turn toward the despised sister; and he purposed to show her learning all sorts of things,

37

Dickens, op. cit., pp. 599-600.

of her own application and determination, to assist him in his lessons and helping him always.³⁸

Dombey and Son. "These three words conveyed the one idea of Mr. Dombey's life. The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light."³⁹ It was unfortunate that Mrs. Dombey was unable to make the effort to live, for that the life and progress on which he built such hopes, should be endangered in the outset by so mean a want; that Dombey and Son should be tottering for a nurse was a sore humiliation.⁴⁰

No one thought of six year old Florence or consoled her for the loss of her mother. Her father seemed unaware of her existence, and her aunt showered all her attention on Paul, as her nurse Polly noted.

The child, in her grief and neglect, was so gentle, so quiet, and uncomplaining; was possessed of so much affection that no one seemed to care to have, and so much sorrowful intelligence that no one seemed to mind or think about the wounding of: that Polly's heart was sore when she was left alone again.⁴¹

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Forster, Vol. II, op. cit., pp. 310-311.

³⁹

Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son (New York: Walter J. Black, Inc. n. d.), p. 2.

⁴⁰

Ibid., p. 21.

⁴¹

Ibid., p. 37.

Fortunately Polly was able to win Mr. Dombey's consent that Florence might be with her little brother frequently because it would be good for him to have a child about. Polly was motherly and understanding; Susan Nipper was quick and impatient, given to thumping and pushing her young charge but she really loved her loyally. Children were frequently left in the care of servants to be spoiled, or bullied, or neglected. Many parents were as negligent as Mr. Dombey in selecting the nurses of their unwanted children, though he very judiciously chose a nurse for Paul.

Polly unwisely allowed herself to be persuaded by Susan to visit her own family in Stagg's Gardens. When Polly attempted to rescue her son, who attended the Charitable Grinders school, from a hooting mob, Florence became lost in the turmoil. It mattered little to Mr. Dombey that his little girl had been exposed to danger, robbed of her clothes by a terrible woman, and badly frightened. The incident was significant only because it revealed the fact that his son had been taken "into haunts and into society which are not to be thought of without a shudder."⁴²

Polly was, of course, dismissed and from that time on little Paul began to fail. Perhaps it was due to the loss of his nurse, or perhaps he caught cold on his christening day, but he grew to be a frail pretty little fellow,

⁴²

Ibid., p. 111.

with a wan wistful look on his small face, and a strange, old fashioned, thoughtful manner.

. . . he looked (and talked) like one of those terrible little beings in the fairy tales, who at a hundred and fifty, or two hundred years of age, fantastically represent the children for whom they have been substituted.⁴³

At night, he, and stiff, solumn Mr. Dombey would sit side by side gazing into the fire. Sometimes he confronted his parent with disconcerting questions such as "I mean, what's money, after all?" "What can it do?" "It can't make me strong and quite well, either papa; can it?"⁴⁴

Mr. Dombey thus learned what he did not want to know that his son and heir lacked the robest health requisite to insure his growth to manhood. Arrangements were made for Paul to go to Brighton for the sea air. Florence, who was the most important person in the child's life, accompanied him and Mrs. Wickam, the new nurse, to Mrs. Pipchin's infantine boarding house.

She (Mrs. Pipchin) was generally spoken of as "a great manager" of children; and the secret of her management was to give them everything that they didn't like, and nothing that they did--which was found to sweeten their dispositions very much.⁴⁵

43

Ibid., p. 123.

44

Ibid., p. 126.

45

Ibid., p. 134.

When Paul fell into one of his old, old moods, he would sit staring at her, and his amazing questions and answers subdued even that hardy old lady.

After a year, when Paul was six, his father decided that since he looked better he should remain in Brighton and attend Dr. Blimber's Academy. Dickens had achieved nothing more effective in his attack on education than his satire on this somber genteel institution.

The Doctor only undertook the charge of ten young gentlemen, but he had, always ready, a supply of learning for a hundred, on the lowest estimate; and it was at once the business and delight of his life to gorge the unhappy ten with it.

In fact Doctor Blimber's establishment was a great hothouse, in which there was a forcing apparatus incessantly at work. All the boys blew before their time. Mental green peas were produced at Christmas and intellectual asparagus all the year round.⁴⁶

Mr. Dombey, Florence, and Mrs. Pipchin accompanied Paul to school, and left a very disconsolate little boy sitting on the table, listening to the clock in the hall gravely inquire, "How, is, my, lit-tle, friend? How, is, my, lit-tle friend?" He might have answered "weary, weary! very lonely, very sad!"⁴⁷

Life was very formal at Doctor Blimber's. When a young gentleman was denied the privilege of dining with his

46

Ibid., p. 189.

47

Ibid., p. 201.

school fellows, he was sent "a round of bread, genteely, served on a plate and napkin, and with a silver fork lying crosswise on the lap of it."⁴⁸ The table arrangements were stately and handsome and quite in keeping was the elegant butler "who gave quite a winey flavor to the beer; he poured it so superbly."⁴⁹ Conversation was reserved to the Blimbers who seldom broke the grave silence except to make some classical reference or impart some edifying information from some Latin author. After dinner the young gentlemen loitered up and down in a plot of ground, but no one indulged in anything as vulgar as play.

Tea was served with no less style than dinner, after which the young gentlemen resumed their studies until prayer time at eight in the dining room. Afterwards the butler presided over a side table on which bread, cheese and beer were prepared for those who desired refreshments. Doctor Blimber's -- "Gentlemen, we will resume our studies at seven tomorrow" terminated the day.

Is it any wonder that under the forcing system, a young gentleman usually took leave of his spirits in three weeks. He had all the cares of the world on his head in three months. He conceived bitter sentiments against his parents or guardians in four; he was an old misanthrope, in five; envied Quintus Curtius that blessed refuge in the earth, in six; and at the end of the first twelvemonth had arrived at the conclusion,

48

Ibid., p. 208.

49

Ibid., p. 209.

from which he never afterwards departed, that all the fancies of the poets, and lessons of the sages, were a mere collection of words and grammar, and had no other meaning in the world.⁵⁰

Paul's education was entrusted to Miss Blimber who piled him up with books and sent him to study.

They comprised a little English, and a deal of Latin--names of things, declensions of articles and substantives, exercises thereon, and preliminary rules--a trifle of orthography, a glance at ancient history, a wink or two at modern ditto, a few tables, two or three weights and measures, and a little general information.⁵¹

He did very poorly in his recitation, but he felt that if he could talk to old Glubb, the fisherman, he would do much better. The poor child worried about his lessons until Florence persuaded Susan Nipper to buy her a set of books like Paul's which she studied in order to help him. Mr. Dombey had never thought of having Florence educated until she asked him, as Susan said, . . . "when he couldn't well refuse; but given consent when asked, and offering when unasked, Miss, is quite two things."⁵²

Paul existed only for the week-ends which he spent with his beloved Florence. At school he grew more thoughtful and reserved every day, and when he was unoccupied with his books he preferred to be alone. The thought of

50
Ibid., p. 192.

51
Ibid., p. 216.

52
Ibid., p. 220.

death was frequently with him.

Mr. Dombey seldom joined his children on Saturday now. "He could not bear it. He would rather come unrecognized, and look up at the window where his son was qualifying for a man; and wait, and watch, and plan, and hope."⁵³

When the midsummer vacation approached Doctor Blimber's pupils oozed away to their homes. Unhappy as most of the youths were, they would have preferred remaining at school rather than go home, for their families prepared such numerous and severe mental trials for the young gentlemen that the cramming process continued, with merely a variation in scenery.

Paul was grieved that Miss Blimber's analysis of his character revealed that he was singular in his character and social conduct, and unlike other gentlemen of his age and position, and that because of this they could not like him as well as they might wish. Paul was especially anxious that everyone should like him, and endeavored to propitiate even the fierce old dog Diogenes, that he too might miss him when he had gone.

But over and above the getting through his tasks, he had long had another purpose always present to him, and to which he still held fast. It was, to be a gentle useful, quiet little fellow, always striving to secure the love and attachment of the rest; and though he was

53

Ibid., p. 226.

yet often to be seen at his old post on the stairs, or watching the waves and clouds from his solitary window, he was oftener found, too, among the other boys, modestly rendering them some little voluntary service."⁵⁴

Just before the vacation each young scholar received a very formal invitation to an early party on Wednesday evening the seventeenth instant; all the arrangements were conducted on principles of classicality and high breeding, and on no condition was any reference to be made to this affair until the event became a reality. Paul's joy was unbounded when he learned that Florence was invited.

That very night Paul suddenly became quite ill, and the apothecary suggested that his books be put away as vacation time was so near. From that time on everyone was especially considerate of him, and he overheard so many different people say that he was such an old-fashioned child. The phrase rather puzzled him.

And now it was that Paul began to think it must surely be old-fashioned, to be very thin, and light, and easily tired, and soon disposed to lie down anywhere and rest; for he couldn't help feeling that these were more and more his habits every day.⁵⁵

At the wonderful party, Dickens introduced the Skettles. Sir Barnet Skettles was in the House of Commons

⁵⁴
Ibid., p. 250.

⁵⁵
Ibid., p. 262.

and it was expected that when he did, in three or four years time, catch the Speaker's eye he would rather touch up the Radicals. Master Skettles, who was to be a new boy after the vacation was graciously given permission by his mother to know Paul, as his father was, "city--very rich--most respectable."⁵⁶

Never had there been such a party at Mr. Blimber's and never had any boy been given such a farewell as Paul. He could not understand why everyone was so especially attentive and kind to him, although he knew that it was only natural that they should be charmed with his dear Florence.

One cannot help but marvel at the consideration of the Blimbers, and the fact stands out that they were really humane, kindly people after all. Convention and custom demanded that they cram and cram, because parents like Mr. Dombey believed that such training was essential for the proper preparations of their sons and heirs.

Susan Nipper took no such charitable view of the subject however. She expressed her opinion to Walter Gay and he assisted her in her attempts to find Polly, Paul's old nurse.

56

Ibid., p. 267.

"I couldn't forgive myself at such a time as this, Mr. Walter", said Susan, "and when there's so much serious distress to think about, if I rested hard on any one, especially on them that little darling Paul speaks well of, but I may wish that the family was set to work in a stony soil to make new roads, and that Miss Blimber went in front and had the pickaxe."⁵⁷

Paul had never risen from his bed after his arrival at home. He lay there, day after day, content to have Florence beside him. The thought of the rushing river that had so frequently been in his mind in the few years past, seemed to be with him always. "Why will it never stop, Floy?" he would sometimes ask her. "It is bearing me away, I think!"⁵⁸

Mr. Dombey sat motionless for hours at a time at the foot of Paul's bed. All the dreams, and hopes, and plans of a lifetime were drifting away with the feeble life of the little creature on the bed.

The golden ripple on the wall came back again, and nothing else stirred in the room. The old, old fashion! The fashion that came in with our first garments, and will last unchanged until our race has run its course, and the wide firmament is rolled up like a scroll. The old, old fashion--Death!⁵⁹

As Miss Tox said, to think that Dombey and Son should be

57
Ibid., p. 295.

58
Ibid., p. 298.

59
Ibid., p. 304.

a daughter after all.⁶⁰

Dickens was so carried away by the pathos of this story that little can be added to interpret it. The little child was sacrificed to his father's indomitable pride, but his death only made the cold man still colder and more reserved.

Florence was as unimportant as before. The fact that she received all the love of little Paul may have accounted for it, though Mr. Dombey continued to act as if unaware of her existence. The statuary had to call Mr. Dombey's attention to an error in the inscription for Paul's stone-- "beloved, and only child" should be "son."⁶¹ Florence had always dearly loved her father in spite of his coldness and indifference, and Dickens showed the girl growing into young womanhood longing and yearning for a return of affection.

His marriage to a haughty, imperious beauty brought the girl some happiness. For strangely enough, cold Edith Dombey dearly loved her little step-daughter but had only scorn for the man whom her mother forced her to marry. This attachment served only to widen the breach between father and daughter. It was only after long years of waiting and suffering that Mr, Dombey, broken at last,

60

Ibid., p. 544.

61

Ibid., p. 323.

accepted the affection, and reciprocated the devotion that Florence had longed to pour out on him.

The fourth child hero that Dickens made famous was David Copperfield for whom he confessed his preference in the preface of the book.

Of all my books, I like this the best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favorite child. And his name is David Copperfield.⁶²

It is not strange that Dickens should have this preference since the story of David Copperfield embodies much that is autobiographical while a great deal of that which is fictional serves to illustrate the moral purpose which so often motivated his writing.

Very frequently his female characters are weak, rather foolish women. This may be attributed to the fact that young girls were not provided with an education that would develop their minds and enable them to cultivate interests that would have a broadening influence of their lives. Their outlook was narrow at best and frequently they did not have even the management of a house to engage them, as efficient housekeepers settled such domestic problems.

62

Charles Dickens, David Copperfield (New York Grosset and Dunlap, n. d.), Preface.

David Copperfield's mother was a sweet, gentle, rather ineffectual creature. She was easily won by the suave Mr. Murdstone, even though faithful Peggotty and little David instinctively felt a dislike for the man. A few gracious compliments, an assurance of protection and guidance, and an interest in her handsome little son completely overcame any misgivings the poor creature might have had.

David's new step-father, was in many respects an embodiment of all the evils consequent upon the Industrial Revolution; a polished gentleman, cruel and treacherous. The mental cruelty that he wreaked on his pretty, simple little wife was none the less cruel than the combination of physical and mental torture that he inflicted on his step-son. He seemed intent on bringing out all the worst in David's character and of stifling all his good qualities. Children who suffered for any length of time under such brutes would scarcely develop into normal persons.

David had little opportunity to play with children for the gloomy theology of the Murdstones made all children to be a swarm of little vipers, . . . and held that they contaminated one another.

His happiest experiences in this regard were the memorable days he had spent at the seashore with Little Em'ly in the company of his old nurse. The picture of life at the Peggotty household is another of Dickens' excellent des-

criptions of family life among the lower middle class. Yet even into this wholesome atmosphere the influence of the world was slowly sleeping under an insidious guise. Little Em'ly longed to be a lady, because then they would be gentlefolks together, Em'ly, uncle, Ham, and Mrs. Gummidge, and never more would they fear the sea. This apparently innocent desire for gentility later led to the most unhappy consequence for the whole family.

After his return home the boy became sullen, dull and dogged under inhuman treatment. His only recompense was the collection of books that opened another world to him. Dickens frequently mentions the books of his childhood and there are numerous references in his works to them. The development of the mind and the imagination provided an outlet for the emotions that might otherwise become stultified or perverted. As David said, "They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time."⁶³

Mr. Murdstone was diabolically clever in his plan to get rid of David. He and his sister made a farce of the boy's education at home. The denouement came when, with exquisite cruelty, he sat tapping a lithe and limber cane while the wretched boy and his terrified mother attempted to struggle

63

Ibid., p. 56.

through the lessons. The lad was blamed for the mother's nervous condition and taken upstairs to be punished. Goaded beyond reason, David bit the brute's hand and thus given the provocation needed, his stepfather beat him unmercifully-- of course, in self defense. It was only reasonable that after such a display of violence the boy should be sent away to school, as no mother, however loving, could condone such an exhibition of vicious conduct from a son.

He was sent to the new school, Salem House, during holiday time as a punishment for his misdoing. Awaiting him was a pasteboard placard warning, announcing "Take care of him. He Bites." This was fastened to his back. The anguish that the boy suffered from this humiliation, should alone have recompensed his step-father. The cruel care-taker with the wooden leg would frequently roar out, "Hallo, you sir! You Copperfield! Show that badge conspicuous, or I'll report you!"⁶⁴ David visualized the reaction of every boy when they spied the sign; every inanimate object seemed to jeer at him; his dreams were haunted by fantastic incidents in which the sign played a conspicuous role.

The reopening of school was almost a relief, as the reality could be no worse than the anticipation. Mr. Creakle

⁶⁴
Ibid., p. 78.

was disappointed to find that there was nothing to be reported to David's discredit. He was a cruel man who had no voice but spoke in a whisper, the exertion of which, or the consciousness of speaking in that feeble way, made his angry face much more angry. Traddles, the first boy to return, saved David much embarrassment by pointing out the placard in a joking manner. The boys were so low spirited at their return to the dismal place that they did very little teasing.

The arrival of J. Steerforth, the most prominent boy in the school, marked the beginning of better days for David, for the older lad took him under his patronage and pronounced his punishment a "jolly shame." Such was the fascination that this handsome, unscrupulous youth exercised over David that years afterwards when he was proven guilty of the most heinous offences, David could not but love and forgive him.

The contempt that Dickens had for all inefficient, cruel school-masters may be summed up in David's remark about Mr. Creakle's school:

In a school carried on by sheer cruelty, whether it is presided over by a dunce or not, there is not likely to be much learnt. I believe our boys, were generally as ignorant a set as any schoolboys in existence; they were too much troubled and knocked about to learn; they could no more do that to advantage, than any one can do anything to advantage in a life of constant misfortune, torment, and worry.⁶⁵

65

Ibid., p. 95.

There is excellent contrast in the character studies of Traddles and Steerforth. The former was the most unfortunate, but the most kindhearted and honorable boy in school. Steerforth was superior only in his social standing, yet when he was most a cad, he was a hero in the eyes of the school. When he betrayed David's confidence by insulting poor Mr. Mell and revealed the fact that the teacher's mother lived on charity in an almshouse, the man lost his position. Traddles protested at the injustice, but Steerforth loftily announced that Mr. Mell's feelings didn't matter and that he would write home for money to recompense the fellow.

We were all extremely glad to see Traddles put down, and exalted Steerforth to the skies; especially when he told us, as he condescended to do, that what he had done had been done expressly for us, and for our cause and that he had conferred a great boon upon us by unselfishly doing it.⁶⁶

When David went home for the holidays he found a new baby brother whom he dearly loved for his mother's sake, but the Murdstones resented even this affection.

In short, I was not a favorite there with anybody, not even with myself; for those who did like me could not show it, and those who did not showed it so plainly that I had a sensitive consciousness of always appearing constrained, boorish, and dull.⁶⁷

⁶⁶
Ibid., p. 101.

⁶⁷
Ibid., p. 118.

Yet, if the boy kept to his room or sat in the new kitchen with Peggotty he was sent for. "I was still held to be necessary to my poor mother's training, and, as one of her trials could not be suffered to absent myself."⁶⁸

It was a relief to leave the uncomfortable atmosphere and return even to such a desolate place as Salem House. Scarcely two months afterwards, on David's birthday in fact, Mrs. Creakle, a quiet, brow-beaten little woman broke the news to him of his mother's death. She kept him all day and let him cry and sleep in an attempt to comfort him.

He stood on a chair when he was left alone and looked in the glass to see how red his eyes were and how sorrowful his face. In all his grief he was conscious of a certain dignity attached to him, due to the fact that he was going home for a funeral, and he was aware that he was important in his grief.

If ever a child were stricken with sincere grief, I was. But I remember that this importance was a kind of satisfaction to me, when I walked in the playground that afternoon while the boys were in school..When I saw them glancing at me out of the windows, as they went up to their classes, I felt distinguished, and looked more melancholy, and walked slower. When school was over, and they came out and spoke to me. I felt it rather good in myself not to be proud to any of them, and to

68

Ibid., p. 119.

take exactly the same notice of them all, as before.⁶⁹

Death always had a peculiar fascination for Dickens and his deathbed scenes are usually tender and pathetic. He left strict orders that his own last rites were to be simple and private, for as has been mentioned, he had a horror of the grim and dismal ceremonies that usually accompanied death. The description of David's mother's death are tender, and the funeral ceremony had none of the gloomy farce that usually prevailed.

For a time after the funeral David was allowed to visit the Peggotty family with his old nurse. Little Em'ly was growing up and seemed more capricious than before. She, poor child, had too much love and affection, and too little guidance from her uncle and cousin who were devoted slaves.

David fell into a state of neglect after his return home. He was ignored, kept apart from the society of boys of his own age, denied any companionship.

I was not actively ill-used. I was not beaten, or starved; but the wrong that was done to me had no interval of relenting, and was done in a systematic, passionless manner. Day after day, week after week, month after month, I was coldly neglected.⁷⁰

69

Ibid., pp. 124-125.

70

Ibid., pp. 150-151.

He could lounge about the neighborhood with the one restriction that he was to make no friends. Again it was his books that came to his assistance and comforted many a lonely hour.

Finally an arrangement was made whereby David would go to work for the firm of Murdstone and Grinby, wine merchants in the city. The ensuing scenes are those that actually occurred in Dickens' own life, with the impecunious Mr. Micawber and his family substituted for his own. After Mr. Micawber's release from the Marshalsea, David decided to run away from the unbearable task at the bottling factory. A dishonest young man robbed him of his box of clothing and a half-guinea so that he was forced to wander like a beggar to his great Aunt's, Miss Betsey Trotwood, home.

One of the most unfortunate incidents of that tedious wearying journey was his experience with a drunken madman pawnbroker. The man would not give more than eighteen pence for the boy's jacket, and at that, insisted that he take something rather than money in exchange. The poor child sat outside the shop all day waiting for his money. The neighborhood boys came to torment the old man, and incidentally David, whom they somehow connected with the establishment. The bargain was eventually closed when the half-crazed creature grudgingly paid him a halfpenny at a time. The

The exquisite suffering that a sensitive child undergoes was sympathetically treated by Dickens.

Another unhappy meeting was with a ferocious tinker and his poor wife. The former demanded the price of a pint of beer, but the woman's lips formed the word "No". Then the ruffian seized the boy's silk handkerchief which the woman tossed back to him, saying "Go". The brute then snatched the handkerchief and knocked the woman down. Such incidents of ill-used wives are not uncommon in Dickens' novels. The husbands of the very poor class seemed to vent all their rage and disappointment with life on their women.

After many futile inquiries, David at last arrived at his aunt's gate, and stood there sadly aware of his unkempt appearance.

My shoes were by this time in a woeful condition. The soles had shed themselves bit by bit, and the upper leathers had broken and burst until the very shape and form of shoes had departed from them. My hat (which had served me for a night-cap too,) was so crushed and bent that no old battered handleless saucepan on a dung-hill need have been ashamed to vie with it. My shirt and trousers, stained with heat, dew, grass, and the Kentish soil on which I had slept and torn besides, might have frightened the birds from my aunt's garden, as I stood at the gate. My hair had known no comb or brush since I left London. My face, neck and hands, from unaccustomed exposure to the air and sun, were burnt to a berry-brown. From head to foot I was powdered almost as white with chalk and dust, as if I had come out of a lime-kiln. In this plight, and with a strong consciousness of it, I waited to introduce myself to, and make my first impression on, my formidable aunt.⁷¹

71

Ibid., pp. 191-192.

In spite of his unprepossessing appearance, and his aunt's sharp tongue, Miss Betsey was kind to David, and accepted mad Mr. Dick's very sensible advice to bathe him, feed him, and put him to bed. Dickens again emphasizes the fact that a loving heart can accomplish wonders.

After I had said my prayers and the candle had burnt out, I remember how I still sat looking at the moonlight on the water, as if I could hope to read my fortune in it, as in a bright book; or to see my mother with her child, coming from Heaven, along that shining path, to look upon me as she had looked when I last saw her sweet face.⁷²

In response to a letter sent by Miss Betsey, Mr. and Miss Murdstone appeared at the cottage. Not discouraged by their numerous complaints against David's character and conduct, Miss Betsey settled the discussion of the boy's future by taking Mr. Dick's suggestion to have him measured for a new suit directly. She managed to give her guests the benefit of her sharp tongue before they left. It must have afforded the boy some consolation to see the brother and sister meet their match, and depart without winning that argument.

At last someone took an interest in the neglected lad. Arrangements were made with Mr. Wickfield that he should attend school in town and board at his home. In farewell his aunt gave him some excellent advice. "Never,"

72

Ibid., pp. 200-210.

said my aunt, "be mean in anything; never be false; never be cruel. Avoid these three vices, Trot, and I can always be hopeful of you."⁷³

Doctor Strong's school was a new experience for David. It is one of the few good schools that Dickens describes and shows what an influence for good such an institution can be when properly conducted.

It was very gravely and decorously ordered, and on a sound system; with an appeal, in everything, to the honor and good faith of the boys, and an avowed intention to rely on their possession of those qualities unless they proved themselves unworthy of it, which worked wonders. We all felt that we had a part in the management of the place, and in sustaining its character and dignity. Hence we soon became warmly attached to it--I am sure I did for one, and I never knew, in all my time, of any other boy being otherwise--and learnt with a good will, desiring to do it credit. We had noble games out of hours, and plenty of liberty; but even then, as I remember, we were well spoken of in the town, and rarely did any disgrace, by our appearance of manner, to the reputation of Doctor Strong and Doctor Strong's boys.⁷⁴

The boy had been estranged from companions of his own age for such a long time that he felt strange in their company:

I was so conscious of having passed through scenes of which they could have no knowledge, and of having acquired experience foreign to my age, appearance and condition as one of them, that I half believed it was an imposture to come there as an ordinary little school-boy. I had become, in the Murdstone and Grinby time, however short or long it may have been, so unused to the sports and games of boys, that I knew I was awkward and

73

Ibid., p. 225.

74

Ibid., pp. 238-239.

and inexperienced in the commonest things belonging to them.. Whatever I had learnt, had so slipped away from me in the sordid cares of my life from day to night, that now, when I was put into the lowest form of the school. But, troubles as I was, by my want of boyish skill, and of book-learning too, I was made infinitely more uncomfortable by the consideration that, in what I did know, I was much farther removed from my companions than in what I did not. My mind ran upon they would think, if they knew of my familiar acquaintance with the King's Bench Prison? Was there anything about me which would reveal my proceedings in connection with the Micawber family--all those pawnings, and sellings, and suppers--in spite of myself?⁷⁵

The uneasiness and distrust that David's experience had bred in him, gradually disappeared in the hospitable influence of Mr. Wickfield's old house where he boarded. The calm, bright-faced little Agnes tried to fill a woman's place in the home. David felt that there was goodness, peace and truth wherever Agnes was.

The 'umble Uriah Heep was the only disturbing element in the place--save perhaps the fact that Mr. Wickfield drank too much wine might be considered another. And somehow there was an indefinable relation between the two.

David was so happy in Dr. Strong's establishment and was doing so well in his studies that he offered to teach Uriah Heep some Latin in order that he might more easily read the law books which engrossed his attention. Uriah's reply was characteristic.

75

Ibid., pp. 229-230.

"Oh, indeed you must excuse me, Master Copperfield! I am greatly obliged, and I should like it of all things, I assure you; but I am far too umble. There are people enough to tread upon me in my lowly state, without my doing outrage to their feelings by possessing learning. Learning ain't for me. A person like myself had better not aspire. If he is to get on in life, he must get on umbly, Master Copperfield!"⁷⁶

In such happy environment David's childhood slipped by, and the first sign of his adolescence was his violent attachment for Miss Shepherd, a little girl with a round face and curly flaxen hair, a student of Miss Nettingall's establishment. In the Cathedral it was her voice he heard in the choristers' chant, in the services her name was inserted among the Royal Family. At dancing school they became acquainted and a mutual tenderness grew up. Secretly he bestowed on her, twelve Brazil nuts, soft suddy discuits, and innumerable oranges. What agony he suffered when he learned she had been punished for turning in her toes. Then somehow--almost imperceptibly a coldness sprang up between them. One day he met the young ladies out walking--and all the rumors of her unfaithfulness were verified,--she made a face at him, and laughed with her companions. Then ended the devotion of a lifetime.

School became more interesting now. Yound ladies and dancing school became very boring. He neglected the

76

Ibid., p. 256.

laces of his boots, but became proficient in Latin verses. His commendation by Dr. Strong as a rising scholar was a joy to Mr. Dick and his aunt.

A young butcherboy was the terror of the youth of Canterbury. David felt that his honor demanded the thrashing of this bully, and the appointment was made. Ignominiously he was assisted home after a bloody bout, and during his three or four days confinement Agnes ministered to his needs, and like a gentle sister listened to his tale of wrongs and agreed that he had pursued the only honorable course, though she trembled at the thought of the fight.

The head boy who had aroused such admiration in David's breast when he first went to Dr. Strong's became an advocate, but somehow much of the glamour that surrounded him in those earlier years had faded. David was head boy now, and the little lad who had been himself seemed far away.

At this stage in his growth, David wore a gold watch and chain, a ring on his little finger, and a long-tailed coat and used a great deal of bear grease. Again he fell in love; this time it was the eldest Miss Larkin--a young woman of at least thirty who lived in the neighborhood. It was agony to her young admirer to see her familiar with officers. As evidence of his passion, he lost his appetite, and wore his newest silk handkerchief continually.

His age--seventeen--was a constant source of worry. Long hours he spent walking around the house, "wishing that a fire would burst out; that the assembled crowd would stand appalled; that I, dashing through them with a ladder, might rear it against her window, save her in my arms, return for something she had forgotten, and perish in the flames."⁷⁷

When he prepared to attend the great ball given at Larkins, he pictured the touching moment had come to make his declaration; and the felicitations of the fond parents and his aunt fell on his enraptured ear. It was his first grown up party and he was a little uncomfortable as no one paid attention to him. . . . "except Mr. Larkin, who asks me how my schoolfellows are, which he needn't do, as I have not come there to be insulted."⁷⁸

He waltzed with the eldest Miss Larkin and exchanged flowers with her. He was much gratified when she presented to him a plain elderly gentleman, evidently an old family friend. Again he waltzed with her, and for days after lived in a happy dream with the faded flower that consoled him for the lack of her physical presence.

One day Agnes told him of the approaching marriage

77

Ibid., p. 271.

78

Ibid., p. 272.

of someone he admired. Yes, it was the eldest Miss Larkin-- and her bridegroom was not the dashing Captain Bailey whom he had suspected as a rival, but that elderly gentleman, the old family friend.

For two weeks he was completely dejected. He took off his ring, wore his worst clothes, wore no bear grease, and mourned over the faded flower. At last he wearied of this, and urged on by some new provocation from the butcher, he discarded the flower, went forth to meet this old adversary and gloriously defeated him.

This event, with the resumption of his ring, and bear grease in moderation, ushered him into young manhood with childhood left far behind.

The description of David's growth from boyhood to young manhood served a far more important purpose than merely to amuse Dickens' readers. It was a subtle plea for understanding and sympathy during that difficult phase of life. It is a time when the young fellow feels himself to be a creature of contradictions; proud of his growth, yet conscious of his size and aware of his awkwardness; the land of childhood is closed to him, yet he is unwelcome in an adult world. His eager fancy is fickle, and he is troubled by his inconstancy. How well Dickens understood and how aware he was that most people did not understand. Adolescent psychology was a subject as yet unknown; and

unsuspected perhaps, but how great a need there was for it, but few people realized until pioneers like Dickens brought the problem to the public attention. David's adventures did not end at this point but his childhood did, and with it his special significance in regard to the problem of this study.

Strictly speaking Little Dorrit is not a child character as she is a young woman of twenty-two when the story opens, and but one chapter of the book that bears her name is devoted to her early years. Nevertheless because of that one chapter, and because in spite of her years and motherly ways, she is such a tiny creature, the child of the Marshalsea may be considered in this study.

As one may have occasion to remember, the Marshalsea played an important part in Dickens' life, and it is interesting to see in this novel, the effects of a prolonged incarceration in such a place both on the father of the family, and on the children who are tainted by the atmosphere.

Twenty some years before the story opens, a very amiable and very helpless middle aged gentleman arrived at the Marshalsea for the usual brief sojourn. He was a shy retiring man, well-looking, though a bit effeminate with a mild voice, curling hair and irresolute hands-- which nervously wandered to his trembling lips a hundred

times during his first half hour in the place.⁷⁹ His financial affairs were in a hopeless muddle and he was so irresolute and irresponsible in business matters that a solution seemed hopeless. His family joined him--his delicate, inexperienced little wife and two children, a boy of three and a girl of two. A few months after their arrival, a little girl was born to them in the prison. The event, the first of its kind there, caused quite a stir in the place. As the years passed a feeling of peace gradually descended upon the man, and he became quite proud of his reputation as the oldest inhabitant, and of his title, "Father of the Marshalsea."

The little child who was born in the prison became a tradition there. The turnkey became her godfather and between the two as she grew older there grew a strong and understanding friendship. When she was old enough to walk and talk he bought her a little arm-chair and placed it near the high fender of the lodge fire-place. He bought little cheap toys to entice her to talk to him. When she fell asleep in the little arm-chair, he covered her with his pocket handkerchief. While she sat dressing and undressing a doll--who soon lost all likeness to dolls in the outside world and resembled an ugly old female on the

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Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit (New York: A. L. Burt Co., n. d.), p. 59.

premises, he would watch her fondly.

Evidently her mother was a gentle aimless creature who did little to satisfy the child's need of love and affection and very early in her life the little girl began to regard her father with a pitiful and plaintive look. Somehow she learned that all the world did not live in narrow yards surrounded by high spiked walls, and that while she was free to go beyond them, her father must remain behind. There was a pitiful plaintive look for her wayward brother and sister, and all the sordid surroundings and the companions old and young of the only home she knew.

When she became old enough she and the turnkey on alternate Sundays would spend the day in the green fields. As she picked wild flowers the old man smoked his pipe and watched her in quiet contentment. She must have been like a quiet little shadow carrying with her an air of gentle sadness even into the sunlit meadows.

Shortly after her eighth birthday, her mother went to visit an old nurse in the country and there took sick and died. From then on the little girl became the mother of the strange household.

From that time the protection that her wondering eyes had expressed toward him, became embodied in action and the child of the Marshalsea took upon herself a new relation toward the Father.⁸⁰

Here again Dickens has a little girl, meant to be loved and cared for, growing up before her time, wearied with cares and responsibilities. He who should have been her guardian and protector was not only a burden but a constant source of worry.

Her first sacrifice in his behalf was to leave the pleasant company of Bob and quietly sit beside him because he depended on her presence. "Through this little gate, she passed out of childhood into the care-laden world."⁸¹

At best it would have been a very abnormal childhood, but even the recreation enjoyed by the other children was denied her. Somehow, . . . "she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious for the sake of the rest."⁸² Although the youngest member of the family, she found herself in the role of eldest in all things but precedence; "she was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames."⁸³ She managed to attend in a desultory fashion an evening school outside and obtained the means that her brother and sister would

81
Loc. cit.

82
Loc. cit.

83
Ibid., p. 74.

have the opportunity to attend day schools. There was no home training in any sense, for she knew well, "that a man so broken as to be the Father of the Marshalsea, could be no father to his own children."⁸⁴

Somehow she found courage to ask a dancing master who was an inmate for a while to teach her sister to dance. This venture was so successful that later the girl procured a job dancing in a theater. At another time she approached a milliner who agreed to teach her the art of needlework whereby she might earn a little to support the family.

Mr. Dorrit in his shabby genteel fashion was cut from the same pattern as the selfish Mr. Turveydrop, the Model of Deportment. Little Dorrit was forced for the sake of his feelings to conceal the fact that they worked, and preserved the fiction that they were idle beggars.

The deteriorating result of false pride in gentility is personified in Mr. Dorrit. His gentle refined insistence on pecuniary testimonials from all visitors was a constant source of humiliation to poor Amy, for her shame of him struggled bitterly with her devoted love.

Her brother was an idle useless fellow; a typical product of his environment. With the aid of the old turn-key she obtained numerous positions for him, but he wearied

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Loc. cit.

of them all and soon returned to the prison after each attempt.

Wherever he went, this foredoomed Tip appeared to take the prison walls with him, and to set them up in such trade or calling; and to prowl about within their narrow limits in the old slip-shod, purposeless, down-at-heel way; until the real immovable Marshalsea walls asserted their fascination over him, and brought him back.⁸⁵

Her great sorrow came when he returned, after a fairly long absence, as an insolvent debtor. It became her care then to keep the knowledge from her father. "There was no want of precedent for his return; it was accounted for in the usual way; and the collegians, with a better comprehension of the pious fraud than Tip, supported it loyally."⁸⁶

No one knew better than Dickens just what degrading influence the Marshalsea could exert on those confined to its walls. Surely no more unreasonable means of punishing a debtor could be devised, even with the aid of a "Circumlocution Office." After the first shame passed, the inmates frequently regarded it as a refuge, as it was, from hounding creditors and responsibilities to the outside world. Dickens' own brothers and sisters were certainly no better for being exposed to its noxious atmosphere, and perhaps Dickens felt

85

Ibid., p. 78.

86

Ibid., p. 80.

that its influence in some subtle way affected even his own children for he once told Wilkie Collins that he believed he had reared the largest family with the smallest capacity to do anything for themselves.

The story of Pip differs from those of Dickens' other novels in that it is a study of character as it develops through the influence of circumstances and surroundings. Pip is not a heroic figure; in fact most of his actions are meant to show that he is not.⁸⁷ He shows how circumstances can corrupt men yet,

That a deal of spoiling, nevertheless, a nature that is really good at the bottom of it will stand without permanent damage, is nicely shown in Pip; and the way he reconciles his determination to act very shabbily to his early friends, with a conceited notion that he is setting them a moral example, is part of the shading of a character drawn with extraordinary skill.⁸⁸

Apparently all alone in the churchyard on a dreary evening, Pip feeling sorry for himself, wailed loudly until his cries were checked by a ferocious figure, "a fearful man, all in coarse gray, with a great iron on his leg. A

87

G. K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens (London: J. M. Dent and Son, Ltd. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1911), p. 199.

88

Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, Vol. III (London: Chapman and Hall, 193 Piccadilly, 1874), p. 330.

man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied around his head."⁸⁹

That night Pip's conscience reproached him; the knowledge that he was going to rob Mrs. Joe of victuals and Joe of a file for the escaped convict; and the vow of secrecy he had made to the wretched man haunted him.

This was his first knowledge of convicts and prisonships so he attempted to increase his store.

. . . "People are put in the hulks because they murder, and because they rob, and forge, and do all sorts of bad; and they begin by asking questions, " his sister tartly accused him, rapping his head with her thimble."⁹⁰

As Pip went up to bed he felt fearfully sensible of the great convenience that the hulks were handy for him. He was clearly on his way there. He had begun by asking questions, and he was going to rob Mrs. Joe. Perhaps much of Pip's future trouble lay in the literal interpretation of the expression, "brought up by hand." He, and even Joe, man that he was, lived in such fear and terror of Mrs. Joe's sharp tongue and ready hand that it was inevitable that fear should motivate much of the boy's course of action.

He was forced to explain his absence the next morning by saying he had been to hear the carols although in reality

89

Charles Dickens, Great Expectations (New York: Walter J. Black, n. d.), p. 2.

90

Ibid., pp. 15-16.

he had delivered the food and file to the convict. At the Christmas dinner that day he was most uncomfortable.

Not because I was squeezed in at an acute angle of the tablecloth, with the table in my chest, and the Pumblechookian's elbow in my eye, nor because I was not allowed to speak (I didn't want to speak) nor because I was regaled with the scalt tips of the drum-sticks of the fowl, and with those obscure corners of pork of which the pig when living had the least reason to be vain.⁹¹

But because during the meal most of the conversation was pointed at him with the purpose of his reformation in mind. One of the guests, Mrs. Hubble, mournfully surveyed him and asked "Why is it that the young are never grateful?" and Mr. Hubble solved the moral riddle with the explanation, "Naturally vicious."⁹²

Dickens knew that this type of mental cruelty was all too common, and he realized that the very virtues that they intended to instill in the young hearts were stifled. Were it not for kindhearted people like Joe who expressed his compassion by generously filling Pip's plate with gravy, Kindness might have vanished completely under the assaults of "justice". For the edification of the guests Mrs. Joe listed the trouble Pip had been.

91
Ibid., p. 29.

92
Loc. cit.

"Trouble?" echoed my sister, "Trouble?" And then entered on a fearful catalogue of all the illnesses I had been guilty of, and all the acts of sleeplessness I had committed, and all the high places I had tumbled from, and all the low places I had tumbled into, and all the injuries I had done myself, and all the times she had wished me in my grave, and I had contumaciously refused to go there.⁹³

When the convicts were recaptured and the convict, to save Pip, confessed that he had stolen the food from the blacksmith, the lad still felt guilty. The fear that Joe would think him worse than he was, and the dread of losing the only love he knew, kept him silent about the incident. "In a word, I was too cowardly to do what I knew to be right, as I had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong."⁹⁴

Again Dickens in this story assails the inadequate provision made for the education of the young. Pip's education was provided at an evening school kept by Mr. Wopsle's great aunt. She was a ridiculous old woman who slept away the school hours, and were it not for Biddy, her granddaughter, the boy would never have struggled through the alphabet. Fortunately at home, Joe whose scholastic skill consisted in the ability to recognize a few irrelevant letters of the alphabet, was instructing him in reverence for women.

93

Ibid., p. 32.

94

Ibid., p. 49.

I see so much in my poor mother, of a woman drudging and slaving and breaking her honest hart and never getting no peace in her mortal days, that I'm dead afeerd of going wrong in the way of not doing what's right by a woman, and I'd fur rather of the two go wrong the t'other way, and be a little ill-conwenienced myself.⁹⁵

Pip's great expectations really began when he was hired to amuse Miss Havisham, a wealthy recluse. There was always the possibility that this eccentric creature might take a fancy to him and make his fortune. After meeting the haughty girl Estella who called him a common laboring boy, and who disdained his coarse hands and thick boots, Pip began to feel dissatisfied with his lot.

In Miss Havisham, Dickens has presented a frustrated woman who reared a little girl to be proud and cruel and heartless in the unwholesome atmosphere of her ghastly house in order that her own desertion at the altar rail might be avenged. Estella had no true conception of the worthwhile things of life; she was not to be a woman but an instrument of revenge.

The dread of not being understood kept Pip from telling the truth about Miss Havisham's fantastic establishment, and because Uncle Pumblechook and Mrs. Joe were so rude to him Pip invented a marvellous description. He was

honest enough this time to confess his guilt to Joe and admit that he felt miserable because beautiful Estella called him "common". Joe warned him against lying, . . . If you can't get to be uncommon through going straight, you'll never get to it through going crooked. So don't tell no more on 'em, Pip, and live well, and die happy.⁹⁶

Pip continued his visits to Miss Havisham's and on one occasion was provoked to a fight by an unknown boy. Even though he won, and on his way out, Estella permitted him to kiss her cheek, a dreadful foreboding filled him that he would be punished for the assault, invited though it was. Fear in one form or other seemed constantly to lurk about him.

The time had come that Miss Havisham decided was opportune for Pip to be apprenticed to Joe. When this message was delivered to Joe instead of herself, Mrs. Joe went on a rampage, exhausted a torrent of abusive inquiries, threw a candlestick at Joe, and cleaned the house with such fury that the two culprits, guilty of what, they weren't quite sure, stood shivering in the back yard until ten at night.

At the interview between Miss Havisham and Joe, the embarrassed fellow continually answered all the lady's questions as if he and Pip were carrying on the conversation. This was to the humiliation of Pip, and the amusement of

the haughty Estella. The little celebration at the Blue Boar, the party consisting of the same group that had made Pip so miserable at the Christmas party, only confirmed Pip's conviction that he didn't like his new trade. The thought of Estella haunted Pip. He was ashamed of himself, his home, his work, of dear, honest Joe.

One night Pip came home from a visit with Miss Havisham to find his sister unconscious on the floor felled by a powerful blow from an unknown assailant, presumably a convict, for another had escaped that day. Beside her lay the leg-iron that Pip's convict had undoubtedly cast off some time ago. Pip could not tell Joe of that incident because it seemed so fabulous that he probably would not believe it.

Mrs. Joe was now a helpless, speechless invalid, but her temper improved and she was patient. She appeared most anxious to be friendly with burly ill-natured Orlick, Joe's helper, with whom she had violently quarrelled on the day of her accident. Biddy came to live with them and care for the sick woman. Pip confided in her all his dissatisfaction and longing; and his desire to be a gentleman, whether to please Estella or spite her, he knew not.

In the fourth year of his apprenticeship, Pip was informed of an unknown benefactor who wished him to be educated and trained as a gentleman. It was Joe who came off

with honors at the interview with Miss Havisham, for when he was offered money to recompense him for the loss of Pip's service he said:

Pip is that hearty welcome to go free with his services, to honor and fortun' as no words can tell him. But if you think as money can make compensation to me for the loss of the little child--what come to the forge--and ever the best of friends.⁹⁷

Pip's childhood was fast drawing to a close with the days that intervened before his departure to the city. His joy at the prospect dawning before him, was somewhat marred by his dissatisfaction with himself. Whenever he caught Joe or Biddy covertly looking at him he felt offended, as if they were expressing mistrust of him. As he took a farewell trip through the neighborhood, he promised himself that he would do something for the townspeople one of these days, and "formed a plan in outline for bestowing a dinner of roast-beef and plum-pudding, a pint of ale, and a gallon of condescension upon everybody in the village."⁹⁸

Of all Dickens' child characters, Pip is the most unusual. His struggle is with himself and the little narrow world that surrounds him. Through all his fortunes and misfortunes it is crude, simple, Joe Gargary, symbolizing

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Ibid., p. 136.

⁹⁸

Ibid., p. 141.

the quiet, humble, happy aspects of a simple life who is contrasted with that of capricious Estella who stands for the world of "fine gentlemen." Joe seemed to bring out all that was best in Pip, Estella drew only his weaknesses. Thus Dickens seems to be showing what a powerful influence good or evil characters can be, and emphasizing the responsibility of individuals in a society for the common welfare. Pip makes a pathetic figure, though a foolish one, and Dickens presents him with skill and dexterity.

For a time good fortune turned the head of Joe's little friend, but in the end when Pip was faced with a difficult situation his better nature asserted itself and he was generously able to give the happiness that he deserved to the convict who had risked all to make Pip a gentleman. Pip realized at last the dignity of labor, and the beauty of a staunch and noble character.

Dickens' minor child characters reveal his moral purpose as clearly as do those who have major roles in his stories. Suffering childhood in every guise won his sympathy and he was eager to spread his gospel of humanitarianism in their behalf. His most effective attacks on political, economic, and social evils of his day were presented with children as the victims. Educators of note agree that Dickens' was an influence for good in the field of education. The chief work of Dickens was to lay bare

the injustice, the meanness, and the blighting coercion practiced on helpless children. His was a noble work and it was well done.

The pictures he gave of the pupils in various schools impressed his readers more strongly than tirades of orators, or argumentative treatises would have done. In the preface to Nicholas Nickleby he tells us that his knowledge of the Yorkshire schools was picked up when he was a young child. A young lad had come with a suppurated abcess in consequence of his "Yorkshire guide, philosopher and friend, having ripped it open with an inky pen-knife."⁹⁹ The case made such an impression on Dickens that when he had gained some reputation as a writer he decided to write about the existing conditions in the Yorkshire schools.

With this intent in mind he went down to Yorkshire and lest the schoolmasters should be shy of receiving a visit from the author of Pickwick Papers he concerted a pious fraud. He posed as a gentleman anxious to place a little boy in one of the Yorkshire schools at the request of his widowed mother; and received a letter of introduction to a gentleman who would suggest a suitable school. When he finally met the gentleman, the latter was most evasive

on the subject of schools; finally he confessed in confidence that while he did not like to speak ill of anyone he would beg the widow not to send her boy to one of the schoolmasters as long as there was a house in London to live in, or a gutter to sleep in.

After the publication of Nicholas Nickleby several schoolmasters contemplated court action against the author as they recognized themselves in the infamous Mr. Squeers.

Of the monstrous neglect of education in England, and the disregard of it by the state as a means of forming good or bad citizens, and miserable or happy men, private schools long afforded a notable example. Although any man who had proved his unfitness for any other occupation in life, was free, without examination or qualification to open a school anywhere; . . . and although schoolmasters, as a race, were the blockheads and imposters who might naturally be expected to spring from such a state of things, and flourish in it; these Yorkshire schoolmasters were the lowest and most rotten round in the whole ladder.¹⁰⁰

The pupils sent to such schools were usually children who for one reason or another were not wanted at home. The guardians who entrusted the children to men like Mr. Squeers were as cruel and unscrupulous as he, or guileless, or desperate enough to resort to any measures with no questions asked such as unmarried mothers, step-fathers, unfeeling guardians or distraught relatives.

When Nicholas Nickleby saw the young gentlemen of

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Ibid., Preface, p.v.

Dotheboy's Hall for the first time he was shocked at their appearance.

Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring, or of young lives which, from the earliest dawn of infancy had been one horrible endurance of cruelty and neglect. There were little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with the scowl of sullen, dogged suffering; there was childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone, and its helplessness alone remaining; there were vicious-faced boys, brooding, with leaden eyes, like malefactors in a jail; and there were young creatures on whom the sins of their frail parents had descended, weeping for the mercenary nurses they had known, and lonesome even in their loneliness. With every kindly sympathy and affection blasted in its birth, with every revengeful passion that can fester in swollen hearts eating its evil way to their core in silence, what an incipient Hell was breeding here!¹⁰¹

These poor creatures were lined up, and dosed with a long wooden spoon full of brimstone and treacle, as this mixture was found to be not only beneficial to their health, but also impaired their appetites which was an advantage to the Squeers.

The system of education was very practical as Mr. Squeers assured his new assistant. The first boy in the philosophy class was cleaning the back parlour window when class was called.

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Ibid., pp. 75-76.

C-l-e-a-n-, clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n-, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement. When a boy knows this out of a book, he goes and does it. It's just the same principle as the use of the globes.¹⁰²

The second boy was weeding the garden on the same idea. The third boy, having defined a horse as a beast, was sent to care for Mr. Squeer's horse, and the rest of the school was dismissed to draw water for the next day's washing.

With little or no provocation the boys were cruelly flogged, their letters from home were publicly read and interpreted to the schoolmaster's satisfaction, and all gifts of money or clothing were confiscated. By a strange coincidence all clothing of whatever size happened to fit young Master Squeer's obliging figure. They were starved and misused with no hope of pity or release.

Is it a wonder that when the news of Mr. Squeers downfall in London reached Dotheboy's Hall, the young gentlemen staged a rebellion? It was probably for the satisfaction of his readers who had suffered with the boys through their hardships that Dickens permitted the wretches to revenge themselves on Mrs. Squeers and her two obnoxious offsprings, by dosing them with brimstone and treacle, and then wildly dispersing.

In Hard Times, Dickens presents a model school in

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Ibid., p. 78

Coketown. The scholars were denied every sort of food, for their affections or their imaginations, and the results of an education that taught nothing but facts were shown in Tom Gradgrind who was a sneak and a thief, Louisa Gradgrind who was an unfaithful wife, and the star pupil of the establishment who grew up to be a cruel, selfish misanthrope. Only Sissy Jupe, who remained unimpressed by statistics and who was a complete failure in the eyes of the teacher, Mr. M'Choakumchild, was the one in the end who consoled Mr. Gradgrind. She proved Dickens' theory that a kind and loving heart compensates for the lack of qualities and possessions esteemed by the world.

Dickens' distaste for the Charity Schools has been mentioned in regard to Noah Claypole. Another charity boy is Rob Toodles, familiarly known as "the Biler". This black sheep of a respectable family began his infamous career as a protege of Mr. Dombey who expressed himself as being unfriendly to, what is called by persons of levelling sentiments, general education. "But it is necessary that the inferior classes should continue to be taught to know their positions and to conduct themselves properly. So far I approve of schools."¹⁰³

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Dickens, Dombey and Son, p. 80.

With this intention in mind, the benevolent gentleman nominated Mrs. Toodles' eldest son to an existing vacancy in the ancient establishment of the Charitable Grinders. The results, however, were far from satisfactory, as even the boy confessed to Mr. Carker when he was in trouble. "I was chivied through the streets, Sir, when I went there, and pounded when I got there. So I wagged, and hid myself, and that began it."¹⁰⁴

He spent his time in bad company, bird-catching, and walking-matching. The family was so miserable when the snivelling fellow put in an appearance that he seldom went home. He had a great fund of self-pity, and even at the end of the story when he entered the service of Miss Tox he bewailed himself as an unfortunate "cove" and a victim of circumstances. There is no denying that the Biler was weak but the school took no responsibility in regard to character training.

Nothing delighted Dickens more than to present the pictures of the poor but happy homes of the middle class society. The Kenwigs family in Nicholas Nickleby are a gentle satire on the social pretensions of the class they represent. They enjoyed prestige not only on their own account but through their Uncle Lillyvick, who collected

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Ibid., p. 408.

a water-rate, and who was, by virtue of that employment, a gentleman of wealth and distinction.

When Mrs. Kenwigs secured a French teacher for her daughters she hoped that they would not become proud, but that they would bless their good fortune which had born them superior to common people's children.

"And when you go out in the streets, or elsewhere, I desire that you don't boast of it to the other children," said Mrs. Kenwigs; "and that if you must say anything about it, you don't say no more than 'We've got a private master comes to teach us at home, but we ain't proud, because ma says it's sinful.' Do you hear, Morleena?"¹⁰⁵

Morleena and her little sister were well versed in feminine wiles, and whenever Uncle Lillyvick's tender feelings were offended they threw themselves upon him in protestations of devotions. These unfortunate and unsuspecting children were defrauded of their inheritance when Uncle Lillyvick treacherously married. Only Dickens could picture the scene that ensued when Nicholas Nickleby broke the news. Morleena fell rigidly into a chair in a fainting fit as she had seen her mother do, but when no one noticed her she revived and prepared the bedroom for her father who was quite overcome.

Only Dickens could describe the happy reunion, when the Uncle, deserted by his new wife, returned to the bosom

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Ibid., p. 173

of the family. Mr. Kenwigs viewed with satisfaction, Morleena seated on her uncle's knee.

. . . When I see that man mingling, once again, in the spear which he adorns, and see his affections deweloping themselves in legitimate situations, I feel that his nature is as elevated and expanded, as his standing afore society as a public character is unimpeached, and the voices of my infant children purvided for in life, seem to whisper to me softly, "This is an ewent at which Evins itself looks down!"¹⁰⁶

The Bagnet family is another of Dickens' happy creations. Quebec, Malta and Woolwich, the children with the geographical names, are the offspring of an ex-artillery man and his military-minded wife, "the old girl". The description of the "old girl's" birthday celebration is an excellent picture of family life. Mrs. Bagnet was forced to sit in state while her husband and the children took over the household cares for the day.

The great delight and energy with which the two young ladies apply themselves to these duties, turning up their skirts in imitation of their mother, and skating in and out on little scaffolds of patterns, inspire the highest hopes for the future, but some anxiety for the present. The same causes lead to a confusion of tongues, a clattering of crockery, a rattling of tin mugs, a whisking of brooms, and an expenditure of water, all in excess; while the saturation of the young ladies themselves is almost too moving a spectacle for Mrs. Bagnet to look upon, with the calmness proper to her position. At last the various cleansing processes are triumphantly completed; Quebec and Malta appear in fresh attire, smiling and dry; pipes, tobacco; and the old girl enjoys the

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Ibid., p. 591.

first peace of mind she ever knows on the day of this delightful entertainment.¹⁰⁷

It is very noticeable that in the scenes of home life, the whole family share the joys and sorrows that befall the individual members. The unity of feeling and affection knit them together in misfortune as well as festivity.

Kit Nubbles in The Old Curiosity Shop was the innocent cause of grief and consternation to all when Nelly Trent told him that he was the cause of her grandfather's misery. His mother, who was so proud of her faithful boy, was heart broken.

She rocked herself upon a chair, wringing her hands and weeping bitterly, but Kit made no attempt to comfort her and remained quite bewildered. The baby in the cradle woke up and cried; the boy in the clothes-basket fell over on his back with the basket upon him, and was seen no more; the mother wept louder yet and rocked faster; but Kit, insensible to all the din and tumult, remained in a state of utter stupefaction.¹⁰⁸

On the other hand, when the family celebrated at Astley's, an air of happy excitement prevailed the atmosphere that was shared even by the little ones.

But the greatest miracle of the night was little Jacob, who ate oysters as if he had been born and bred to the business--sprinkled the pepper and the vinegar with a discretion beyond his years--and afterwards built a grotto on the table with the shells. There was the baby too, who had never closed an eye all night, but had sat as good as gold, trying to force a large orange into his

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Dickens, Bleak House (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1928), pp. 620-621.

108

Dickens, The Old Curiosity Shop, p. 91.

mouth, and gazing intently at the lights in the chandelier--there he was, sitting up in his mother's lap, staring at the gas without winking, and making indentations in his soft visage with an oyster-shell, to that degree that a heart of iron must have loved him.¹⁰⁹

Mrs. Jellby was so engrossed in her project to settle from a hundred and fifty to two hundred families cultivating coffee and educating the natives of Borrioboola Gha, on the left bank of the Niger, that her own family was neglected. Her days were spent writing letters in behalf of the scheme. Her fine eyes never saw anything nearer than Africa.

Poor Peepy who had fallen down stairs presented himself with a "plaster" on his forehead, to exhibit his wounded knee to his mother and her guests. He was serenely told, "Go along, you naughty Peepy!"¹¹⁰ The visitors knew not which to pity more, the bruises or the dirt. The children sat up until Mrs. Jellby, in the midst of an interesting discussion on the Brotherhood of Humanity, accidentally remembered them. They were overturned into cribs by a slatternly maid.

Caddy Jellby poured out her grief to Esther Summerson:

"It's disgraceful," she said. "You know it is. The whole house is disgraceful. The children are disgraceful. I'm disgraceful. Pa's miserable, and no wonder! Priscilla (the maid) drinks--she's always drinking. It's

109

Ibid., pp. 329-330.

110

Dickens, Bleak House p. 35.

a great shame and a great story, of you, if you say you didn't smell her to-day. It was as bad as a public-house, waiting at dinner; you know it was!¹¹¹

The neglected children were eager for love and affection and avidly listened to the stories Esther Summerson told them. Poor Peepy had never received such care as she bestowed on him, and even permitted her to wash him.

To this he submitted with the best grace possible; staring at me during the whole operation, as if he never had been, and never could again be, so astonished in his life--looking very miserable also, certainly, but making no complaint and going snugly to sleep as soon as it was over.¹¹²

Another philanthropist, Mrs. Pardiggle did not approve of Mrs. Jellby's treatment of her young family; she took her five boys everywhere with her. They attended Matins with her at six o'clock every morning, and accompanied her during the revolving duties of the day. She introduced them to Miss Summerson and Ada.

"Egbert, my eldest (twelve), is the boy who sent out his pocket-money, to the amount of five-and-threepence, to the Tockahoopo Indiana. Oswald, my second (ten-and-a-half), is the child who contributed two-and-ninepence to the Great National Smithers Testimonial. Francis my third (nine), one-and-sixpence-halfpenny; Felix, my fourth, (seven) eightpence to the Superannuated Widows; Alfred, my youngest (five), has voluntarily enrolled himself in the Infant Bonds of Joy, and is pledged never, through life, to use tobacco in any form."

111

Ibid., p. 42.

112

Ibid., pp. 43-44.

We had never seen such dissatisfied children. It was not merely that they were weazened and shrivelled--though they were certainly that too--but they looked absolutely ferocious with discontent.¹¹³

It can be readily seen that the lot of these poor children was far from happy, and that any real desire to perform acts of charity would be stifled. The ungracious reception that their mother received as she forced on the poor her unwelcome attentions, which consisted mainly of advice, would not be conducive to the cultivation and the appreciation of the virtue of charity.

Dickens delighted to describe children who knew no home life, or whose existence was a reproach to those who enjoyed domestic blessings, but who spared no thought for those less fortunate. It was no uncommon condition for little orphan girls as young as eleven to be household drudges. Two little creatures immortalized by Dickens are Salle Brass' little slavey, whom Dick Swiveller dubbed the "Marchioness", and Charley "Coavinses" who worked for Judy Smallweed.

"This Marchioness," said Mr. Swiveller, folding his arms, "is a very extraordinary person--surrounded by mysteries, ignorant of the taste of beer, unacquainted with her own name (which is less remarkable), and taking a limited view of society through the keyholes of doors --can these things be her destiny, or has some unknown person started an opposition to the decrees of fate? It is most inscrutable and unmitigated staggerer!"¹¹⁴

113

Ibid., p. 94.

114

Dickens, The Old Curiosity Shop, p. 481.

She was a tiny undersized creature who lived a mole-like existence in the cellar until Dick Swiveller initiated her into the delights of purl and cribbage. She proved herself to be a little woman in spite of her tender years, by posing as Dick's sister and nursing him back to health when he became ill with the fever.

Her benefactions did not end there for through information, gleaned as she listened at the keyhole in the Brass home, she was able to secure Kit Nubbles' exoneration. She presented a ludicrous but pathetic figure as she rushed down the street after Mr. Abel with her big cap flying, and her too-large slippers flopping off. She personifies the idea that people who often have the least consideration shown to them, are most considerate of others.

Mr. George met Charley at the Smallwood's. Her little orphan brother and sister awaited her return in a garret room while she worked out by the day.

"You Charley, where are you?" Timidly obedient to the summons, a little girl in a rough apron and a large bonnet, with her hands covered with soap and water, and a scrubbing brush in one of them, appears, and curtseys.¹¹⁵

She seemed out of place in the dingy atmosphere of the Smallweed establishment. George took her bonnet off and patted her head. "You give the house almost a wholesome look.

It wants a bit of youth as much as it wants fresh air."¹¹⁶

He was far more right in his casual observation than he realized for there never were any children in that house. Judy Smallweed had been young but she had never been a child.

Judy never owned a doll, never heard of Cinderella, never played at any game. She once or twice fell into Children's company when she was about ten years old, but the children couldn't get on with Judy, and Judy couldn't get on with them. She seemed like an animal of another species, and there was instinctive repugnance on both sides.¹¹⁷

. . . And her twin brother couldn't wind up a top for his life. He knows no more of Jack the Giant Killer, or of Sinbad the Sailor, than he knows of the people in the stars.¹¹⁸

It is not surprising that Judy would be a most unpleasant creature with no sympathy or understanding, and entirely unaware of the charm of gracious living.

After the meal was over, Judy. . . begins to collect in a basin various tributary streams of tea, from the bottoms of cups and saucers and from the bottom of the teapot, for the little charwoman's evening meal. In like manner she gets together, in the iron bread-basket as many outside fragments and worn-down heels of loaves as the rigid economy of the house has left in existence.¹¹⁹

116
Ibid., p. 278.

117
Ibid., p. 270.

118
Loc. cit.

119
Ibid., p. 272

The child was not even permitted to enjoy this unappetizing repast for Judy sent her to answer the door and meanwhile disposed of the food to terminate her meal. Fortunately Charley was rescued from this situation by Mr. Jarndyce who provided for the three children, and secured Charley's services for Esther Summerson.

"And, O, miss," says Charley, clapping her hands, with the tears starting down her dimpled cheeks, "Tom's at school, if you please, and learning so good! And little Emma, she's with Mrs. Blinder, miss, a being took such care of! And Tom, he would have been at school--and Emma, she would have been left with Mrs. Blinder--and me, I should have been here--all a deal sooner, miss; only Mr. Jarndyce thought that Tom and Emma and me had better get a little used to parting first, we was so small. Don't cry, if you please, miss!"¹²⁰

Dickens' reform purpose in his child characters seems evident in view of the fact that Charley loses much of her charm for the reader once she is happily settles in her new home. Once his unfortunate children are leading normal happy lives, he apparently loses interest in them.

The introduction of Johnny, Sloppy and the two Minders, Toodles and Poodles in Our Mutual Friend provides an opportunity for Dickens to aver his moral principles. and attack social evils. Old Betty Higden cared for her grand-daughter's little boy, Johnny, and kept a Minding School. Her great repugnance for the Poor-House re-echoes Dickens' sentiments in regard to it.

"Dislike the mention of it?" answered the old woman. "Kill me sooner than take me there. Throw this pretty child under cart-horses' feet and a loaded wagon, sooner than take him there. Come to us and find us all a-dying and set a light to us all where we lie, and let us all blaze away with the house into a heap of cinders, sooner than move a corpse of us there!"¹²¹

Little Johnny was offered a home by the Boffins who wished to adopt him, but before he could be taken there he became seriously ill. Betty suspected that they wished to take him to the Poor-House for medical care, and became desperate in her fear and anger until they reassured her.

One of the few charitable institutions that met with Dickens' approval was the Children's Hospital. Johnny's removal there gave Dickens an occasion to show suffering surrounded by loving care and affection.

. . . they were all carried up into a fresh airy room, and there Johnny came to himself, out of a sleep or a swoon or whatever it was, to find himself lying in a little quiet bed, with a little platform over his breast, on which were already arranged, to give him heart and urge him to cheer up, the Noah's ark, the noble steed and the yellow bird, with the officer in the Guards doing duty over the whole, quite as much to the satisfaction of his country as if he had been upon Parade. And at the bed's head was a coloured picture beautiful to see, representing as it were another Johnny seated on the knee of some angel surely who loved little children. And, marvellous fact, to lie and stare at; Johnny had become one of a little family, all in little quiet beds (except two playing dominoes in the little arm-chairs at a little table on the hearth): and on all the little beds were little platforms whereon were to be seen dolls' houses, wooly dogs with mechanical

barks in them not very dissimilar from the artificial voice pervading the bowels of the yellow bird, tin armies, Moorish tumblers, wooden tea-things, and the riches of the earth.¹²²

After Johnny's death, Sloppy, an unfortunate love-child, was selected by the Boffins to rear as their own but his love and loyalty would not permit him to leave Betty, who had rescued him from the parish work house. She, however, would not stand in his way so she ran away with her burial money sewed in her clothes for she was always haunted by the fear of the work house. Sloppy's role in the story seems to be principally to afford Dickens an opportunity to reiterate his sentiments regarding that institution, the fear of which always haunted the poor woman. Yet he also illustrates Dickens' theory of a noble and manly heart often found in an awkward and ungainly body.

A considerable capital of knee and elbow and wrist and ankle, had Sloppy, and he didn't know how to dispose of it to the best advantage, but was always investing it in wrong securities, and so getting himself into embarrasses circumstances. Full-Private Number One in the Awkward Squad of the rank and file of life, was Sloppy, and yet had his glimmering notions of standing true to the Colours.¹²³

If Our Mutual Friend had noother merit than that it introduced Jenny Wren, the doll's dressmaker, it would be

122

Ibid., pp. 272-273.

123

Ibid., p. 165.

well worth reading. None of Dickens' pitiful children deserve more sympathy than she, yet she is such a cheerful, sharp-tongued, courageous little creature that pity would be wasted on her. Jenny is a lesson on the value of a cultivated spirit of self-reliance, humor, and a good imagination. She has a philosophy that sustains her in the hum-drum of daily life as well as in the face of the grim realities of death. Her crooked back and queer legs estranged her from the friendship of other children. Necessity forced her to earn a living for herself and her shiftless, drunken father whom she called "her bad child", so her days were spent in dressing dolls for more fortunate little girls. It is characteristic of her that she would be satisfied with only the best models, and in spite of her infirmity she was frequently seen in the crowd that surrounded the fashionable hotels and theaters. Her sharp little eyes took in every detail of mi-lady's gowns and wraps, and mentally she was cutting and measuring her latest patterns. It was usually necessary for her to return to the scene as the elite were departing in order that she might have a final "fitting". Necessity compelled her presence, not curiosity.

The gentle old Jew, Riah, who befriended her and her friend Lizzie Hexom, brought her playful qualities. She called him her fairy godmother and herself Cinderella. When he took her to the roof of his shops she told Fledgby,

the villain, that it was so wonderful that you feel you were dead.

"How do you feel when you are dead?" asked Fledgeby, much perplexed.

"Oh, so tranquil!" cried the little creature, smiling "Oh, so peaceful and so thankful! And you hear the people who are alive, crying and working, and calling to one another down in the close dark streets, and you seem to pity them so. And such a chain has fallen from you, and such a strange, good sorrowful happiness comes upon you!"¹²⁴

Her melodious voice follows him as he leaves,

"Come up and be dead! Come up and be dead!"¹²⁵

She was always speaking of "him", the man who would some day come to court her, and she meant to lead him quite a merry chase. All men are compared favorably or otherwise with this paragon of virtue. Sadly enough her knowledge of the faults of masculine nature was beyond her years.

One night as she was out on business she met a group of men carrying the remains of her father who had at last succumbed. Grief is an expensive luxury for the poor, so after a longer cry than might be expected for her "bad child," Jenny resumed her duties. Even during the funeral services her active little mind and eyes were storing away impressions, with the result that she cut out a clergyman pattern, not for

124

Ibid., pp. 232-233.

125

Ibid., p. 231.

a funeral, but 'a doll clergyman my dear, glossy black curls and whiskers, uniting two of my young friends in matrimony!"¹²⁵ she explained to Riah.

A final glimpse of Miss Wren showed her busily at work, and making the acquaintance of Sloppy, the orphan boy who had been adopted by the kind-hearted Boffins. Forster says of her:

Jenny Wren, whose keep little quaint weird ways, and precocious wit sharpened by trouble, are fitted into a character as original and delightfully conceived as it is vividly carried through to the last. A dull coarse web her small life seems made of; but even from its task-work, which is undertaken for childhood itself, there are glittering threads cast across its woof and warp of care. The unconscious philosophy of her tricks and manners has in it more of the subtler than even the voices of society which the tale begins and ends with.¹²⁶

The gloom of Chancery which pervaded the whole atmosphere of Bleak House was felt nowhere more strongly than in miserable London slum region called Tom-Alones. The property was tied up in litigations and suits in which no one took any interest; crime, filth, poverty, and wretchedness bred and flourished there. One of the social outcasts who lurks about that district was a young crossing sweeper whose sad history can be summed up in the title "Poor Jo". Perhaps the first kindness ever shown him was from a down-and-out law writer, who gave him a coin for food and lodging when he had it, and

125

Ibid., p. 609

126

Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, Vol. III
p. 344.

at least a kind greeting when fortune found him as poor as Jo.

Dickens made the most of the inquest scene in which Jo was called as a witness when his friend who "was very good to him" was found dead in bed.

Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heard of such a thing. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name. Thinks it long enough for him. He don't find no fault with it. Spell it? No. He can't spell it. No father, no mother; no friends. Never been to school. What's home? Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom, or about the lie, but knows both. Can't exactly say whar'll be done to him arter he's dead if he tells a lie to the gentlemen her, but believes it'll be something wery bad to punish him, and serve him right-- and so he'll tell the truth.¹²⁷

Such a witness could not be accepted, so Jo mournfully shuffled off. Poor Mr. Snagsby, a hen-picked law stationer, pressed a half-crown in his hand in silent sympathy. It was very unfortunate for Jo that he knew anything about the victim because from then on his pitiful existence became a torturing experience. Innocently he found himself involved with Lady Dedlock, the Snagsbys, and Inspector Bucket.

Through all the bewildering experiences that befell him, he was constantly forced to move on: Dickens again carried his point. It was the poor who were kindest to him:

127

Dickens, Bleak House, p. 137.

Mr. Snagsby whose only means of comfort was to press a half-crown into his hand unbeknownst to the 'little woman', the poor brickmaker's ill-used wife; Guster, the work house wretch, whose chief accomplishment was the ability to fall into one fit after another.

It was unfortunate for him that the dead man was the former lover of Lady Dedlock, and that Tulkinhorn, a prudent but unscrupulous lawyer was at great pains to establish that fact and discredit her. Mr. Snagsby always found himself as complicated and bewildered as Jo. It was in his home that Jo received his first instruction in religion in the form of a sermon delivered at him by the oily Rev. Mr. Chadband. The most intelligible portion of the discourse runs,

"I hear a voice," says Chadband; "is it a still small voice, my friends? I fear not, though I fain would hope so--"

(Ah--h!" from Mrs. Snagsby.)

"Which says, I don't know. Then I will tell you why. I say this brother, present here among us, is devoid of parents, devoid of relations, devoid of flocks and herds, devoid of gold, of silver, and of precious stones, because he is devoid of the light that shines in upon some of us. What is that light? What is it? I ask you what is that light?"

. . . "It is", says Chadband, "The ray of rays, the sun of suns, the moon of moons, the star of stars. It is the light of Terewth."¹²⁸

Jo found no peace even in sickness. When he was be-

128

Ibid., p. 334.

friended and brought to the home of Mr. Jarndyce, he was secretly whisked away in the night to a hospital by the ubiquitous Inspector Bucket. He was finally found and befriended by a young doctor and his friend who cared for him until death finally released him.

Dickens made this another of his famous deathbed scenes but it was Jo's life, not his death, that was sad. Saddest of all is the knowledge that he was but one of the countless unfortunates like him. It was in their behalf that Dickens pleaded for a revision of the laws of England, and a simplification of legal procedure.

Another similar character is Deputy in The Mystery of Edwin Drood. This hideous small boy, "a man-servant at Travellers lodgings" had no object in life, but to throw stones. "Not a person, not a piece of property, not a window, not a horse, nor a dog, nor a cat, nor a bird, nor a fowl, nor a pig, but what he stoned for want of an enlightened object."¹²⁹ Durdles, the stone mason, hired him to throw stones at him when drink made his homeward journey a difficult task. He felt that it was a noble project. "I don't know what you may precisely call it. It ain't a

129

Charles Dickens, The Mystery of Edwin Drood
 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd. New York: E. P. Dutton
 and Co. 1916), p. 45.

sort--of--a--scheme of a--National Education?"¹³⁰ Whatever it may have been, Deputy took his job seriously. A piercing whistle warned the stone mason, and then wierdly dancing, the hideous boy yelped,

"Widdy widdy wen!
I--ket--ches--I'm--out--ar--ter--ten,
Widdy Widdy Wy!
Then--E--Don't--go--thn--I shy--
Widdy Widdy Wake-cock warning!"¹³¹

It would have been interesting to see how this boy turned out, but Dickens did not live to finish this novel.

An incidental character who affords much amusement in Great Expectation is Trabb's boy who was the most audacious boy in all the countryside. When Pip entered the tailor shop to order his new clothes, as befit a young man recently come into property, Trabb's boy swept all the dirt over Pip, and knocked the broom against all obstacles to express equality with any blacksmith, (meaning Pip) alive or dead.¹³² This young scoundrel had to be warned by his master against any more tricks. He collapsed as Mr. Trabb royally conducted Pip out of the establishment, impressing Pip with the fact that he was too overcome by the news of

130
Loc. cit.

131
Ibid., p. 43.

132
Dickens, Great Expectation, p. 185.

of the newly acquired fortune.

Trabb's boy might well be Dickens himself; taunting, ridiculing in mock seriousness the complacent snobbish middle class society of his day. His attacks on the dignified visitor on the occasion of Pip's return to his native town were as sudden and unexpected, as mirth-provoking and malicious, as disturbing and effective, as were Dickens' assaults on the social evils of his time. The reader instinctively feels in sympathy with the impudent fellow as he staggered and reeled astounded by Pip's magnificence, and he laughs as heartily at Dickens who showed the foibles of the bourgeoisie.

One after another the child characters in Dickens' novels play their part in depicting the author's sentiments in regard to the political, social, and economic evils of the time as they appeared to him. Beneath the humor and drama of his stories runs an undercurrent of moral rejuvenation that cannot fail to impress the thoughtful reader, and which answered a great need of the Victorian Era.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

DICKENS USED HIS CHILD CHARACTERS FOR REFORM PURPOSES RATHER THAN AS ARTISTIC OR PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESENTATIONS.

The accumulated abuses of the eighteenth century prepared the way for the great reforms of the nineteenth. People were vaguely conscious that conditions were unsatisfactory, but Dickens was aware that the desire for reform must come from the people themselves.

. . . and until the people can be got up from the lethargy, which is an awful symptom of the advanced stage of the disease. I know of nothing that can be done beyond keeping their wrongs continually before them.¹

Even when he had become famous and successful, the sordid memories of his boyhood would not let him forget that he had been of the people who worked in darkness.

. . . and it was this fact that he was one of them which made him so great a power. He never tried to push himself out of the Middle Class to which he belonged from first to last.²

¹ Charles Dickens, The Letters of Charles Dickens, Vol. I, ed. His Sister-in-Law and His Eldest Daughter. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880), p. 393.

² Belle Moses, Charles Dickens and His Girl Heroines. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1941), p. 107.

his chief vehicle of expression was the new form of literature - the novel. Within a comparatively short time it became a popular and powerful influence among the people. Some critics viewed this with mingled contempt and alarm.

The novelist has taken rank as a recognized public instructor. Important questions of social policy, law reform, the latest invention, the most recent heresy, are formally discussed in his pages, in the most attractive manner, too, with a maximum of argument and a minimum of facts. This change is in a great measure owing to Mr. Dickens himself.³

Another innovation for which Dickens is responsible is the introduction of children into literature. "Strange as it seems, till the sun of his genius rose, childhood found practically no expression in English literature."⁴ It was he who first treated them as individuals, and used them as leading characters in his novels. His reverent treatment of them did much to undermine the current theory of child depravity. To him . . . "Childhood was an essentially pathetic and tragic experience."⁵

It is to be noted that Dickens was most sympathetic toward suffering childhood. He loved his own large family

3

"Modern Novelists: Charles Dickens", Westminster Review, Col. XXVI, Oct. 1864, p. 429.

4

Walter Crotch, Charles Dickens, Social Reformer "London, Chapman and Hall, Ltd. 1913), p. 319.

5

Stefan Zweig, "Charles Dickens," The Dial, Vol. LXXIV, Jan. 1923, p. 8.

as his daughter Mamie testifies. "I can remember with us his own children, how kind, considerate, and patient he always was."⁶ Yet his favorite son, Sir Henry Fielding Dickens remarks that "there was still a kind of reserve on his part which seemed occasionally to come between us and which I never quite understood."⁷ This perhaps may be explained by the fact that they- the children of a famous and well-to-do father had never experienced the hardships that he had endured and could not forget. There is little doubt that the children of his flesh and this may account for Katie's-later Mrs. Perugini- far reaching comment that - "The only fault I found with my father was that he had too many children."⁸ Be that as it may, his readers loved his little heroes and heroines, and laughed and cried at their experiences.

"Abuses must be wiped out"- Dickens said this none the less fiercely and effectively because he laughed hilariously the while. "This is his almost unique distinction in

⁶ Mamie Dickens, My Father as I Recall Him. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1897), p. 14.

⁷ Sir Henry Fielding Dickens, Memories of My Father, (London, Victor Gollancz, Ltd. 1925), p. 19.

⁸ Gladys Storey- Dickens and Daughter, (London: Frederick Muller, Ltd. 1939, p. 93.

reformatory literature that he was in equal parts humanist and humorist."⁹ The novel Hard Times is almost an exception to this and because of the lack of "Dickension spirit", it did not have popular appeal. Even here his sincerity, however, cannot be doubted.

He must have felt that he was in some degree warring against the demonstrated laws of the production and distribution of wealth; yet he also felt that he was putting into prominence some laws of the human heart which he supposed political economists had studiously overlooked or ignored.¹⁰

Even the controversy regarding the realism of his child characters merely proves that readers have always considered them of primary importance in the moral issue. Dickens himself was not concerned with them as artistic or psychological presentations. To him they were very real people who were suffering as he had suffered. Because he associated himself with each of them, their griefs and troubles may assume undue importance. Dickens exaggerated - it was natural for him to do so - but merely to produce a more telling effect. He desired that others who had never undergone such experiences might identify themselves with

⁹ Stockton Axson, "Approaches and Reactions in Six Nineteenth Century Fictionists." The Rice Institute Pamphlet, Vol. III, Jan. 1916, p. 13.

¹⁰ Edwin P. Whipple, "Dickens' Hard Times", The Atlantic Monthly, Vol. XXXIX, March, 1877, p. 353.

his characters and suffer vicariously, and that those who had, would be stirred to protest. His pathetic child characters lack the naturalness that he would achieve only when he was not striving for pathos, because he always "had to make a character humorous before he could make it human."¹¹ Contemporary critics were more discerning than the majority of his public to whom the children were very real.

"When he - (Jo in Bleak House) is "moved on" for the last time, we too are moved. Yet we know all the time that poor Jo is an unreal phantom, a mere shadowy outline, raised by a few strokes of a steel pen; yet we weep over him and give him sympathies which we withhold from the real Joes we encounter in our daily walks."¹²

The novelist realized only too well that this was the popular attitude, and he cared little for ridicule if he could but achieve results.

In the early part of the narrative (Oliver Twist) we were disposed to admire a little at the philosophical temper and precocious spirit of the boy of ten years old, but we remember the saying (we believe of Charles Lamb) that the off-spring of the poor are never children, and we reconcile ourselves to Oliver's extraordinary wisdom by the unquestionable correctness of that acute remark.¹³

He never fully understood how the problem of charity is com-

¹¹

G. K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, (New York: Dodd Mead & Company, 1935), p. 192.

¹²

C. F. Riggs, "Characters in Bleak House," Putnam's Monthly, Vol. II, Nov. 1853, p. 558.

¹³

"Oliver Twist," Dublin University Magazine, Vol. XII, Dec. 1838, p. 708.

plicated by modern social conditions, but "he did understand a pinched face-the index to a pinched stomach."¹⁴

His admirers gradually came to understand too, and they not only praised and applauded his efforts, but they also acted to eliminate the evils he so vividly portrayed. Dombey and Son had exposed among other evils, the practice of child stealing. In the story, Mr. Dombey was indifferent to poor Florence's unfortunate experience, but the public made much of the incident, and East End theaters presented sketches entitled "Mrs. Brown, the Child-Stealer."¹⁵

Mr. Lang, a cruel Hatton Garden magistrate, had been in the public disfavor for some time but no effective efforts were made to remove him from office. Dickens gave the necessary impetus by having Oliver Twist suffer injustice at the hands of Mr. Fang.

When in 1839 a petition was presented by the Guardians of the Dudley Union to the House of Lords, protesting that the diet prescribed for the paupers was insufficient, England was already laughing at Oliver who had "asked for more."¹⁶

14

Stockton Axson, op. cit. p. 16.

15

Percy Fitzgerald, The Life of Charles Dickens, Vol. II, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1905), p. 220.

16

Humphrey House, The Dickens World, (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 94.

The Yorkshire schools received their death blow in Nicholas Nickleby as Dickens had intended. History has verified the fact that his contemporaries foresaw in 1855.

. . . a strange and most miserable picture is that of Do-the-boys-Hall.

How has it fared with the Yorkshire Schools since the era of Nicholas Nickleby? . . . We cannot tell; but we think few fathers or mothers could summon sufficient fortitude to intrust their boys knowingly to any representative of redoubtable Squeers.¹⁷

Although Dickens may not be formally classed as an educator, leaders in that field recognize his contribution as invaluable. The schoolboys of his novels furnish excellent pictures of the effects of good and bad schools.

All his child characters were created to make humanity aware of the gross wrongs inflicted on defenseless childhood or of the possibility of guiding the race by wise reverent, loving training of children.¹⁸

His greatest contributions through his child characters, in the various fields of reform are aptly summed up by Cazamian.

Above all he has stimulated the national sensibility which was slowly wasting away in the dry atmosphere of a utilitarian age; he has re-established balance and a more wholesome order in the proportionate values of the motives of life.¹⁹

17

"Charles Dickens," Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine, Vol. LXXVII, p. 451.

18

James L. Hughes, "What Charles Dickens Did for Childhood: His Work in Education," The Century Magazine, Vol. LVII, Feb. 1899, p. 495.

19

Legouis and Cazamian, History of English Literature, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 1166.

Dickens has been dead for nearly eighty years, and most of the evils he deplored have passed away. A new age has brought new problems in regard to children but the modern world is at least aware of the importance of its youth and recognizes them as the hope of the world. It would be unwise to speculate just how much of this improvement is due to the writings of Charles Dickens, but grateful tribute is due the man who consciously endeavored to make the world a happier and better place through the presentations of his child characters.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Sister Marie Agnes McCall, O.P. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

May 20, 1948
Date

James J. Young
Signature of Adviser