

The concept of child and education in Charles Dickens' works

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Abstract. This research work is intended to describe and analyze the concepts of child and education in the works of Charles Dickens. And also it is depicted how the Victorian society reflected upon the education of the folk, and the reasons impacting the literacy rates at that time.

Key words. Victorian period, education, child, literacy, factors, gender roles, child labor.

Introduction. Charles Dickens, a literary giant of the Victorian era, is renowned for his intricate narratives, vivid characters, and profound social commentary. Among the many themes that permeate his novels, the concept of childhood and education stands as a central and enduring motif. Dickens was not merely a storyteller; he was a passionate advocate for social reform, and his works serve as both a mirror reflecting the harsh realities of his time and a beacon illuminating the path toward a better society. In his novels, Dickens masterfully explores the multifaceted relationship between child and education, shedding light on the educational system's strengths and, more frequently, its glaring deficiencies during the 19th century.

The analysis of literature and theoretical basis. In the process of working and collective data the scientific books, publishes, biographical works, novels of Charles Dickens have been used. This research work is mainly based on the qualitative method, which explores, defines and compares the given concepts and the period.

The child concept in Dickensian works. In terms of child concept, many Victorian authors idealized childhood as a time of innocence and purity. Characters like Little Nell in Charles Dickens' "The Old Curiosity Shop" represent this idealized image of a virtuous child.

Charles Dickens, in particular, was known for his skill in creating such idealized child characters, including Little Nell, Tiny Tim, and Oliver Twist. These characters continue to be iconic representations of the Victorian idealization of childhood and its role in literature as a vehicle for moral and social commentary.

Dickens' novels frequently feature child characters who navigate the challenges of a rapidly changing society, and his depiction of these characters serves as a lens through which he critiques the social and moral issues of his time.

One of the central aspects of Dickens' portrayal of children is the idealization of innocence and virtue. Child characters, such as Oliver Twist and Little Nell, are often depicted as morally upright and untainted by the vices of the adult world. Their purity and goodness serve as a stark contrast to the moral decay and corruption surrounding them. The character of Oliver Twist epitomizes Dickens' portrayal of innocence. As an orphaned and impoverished child, Oliver's unwavering moral compass and innate goodness highlight the moral degradation of the society in which he lives. Little Nell in "The Old Curiosity Shop" embodies the idealized Victorian child. Her purity and selflessness are emphasized throughout the novel, making her a symbol of virtue in the face of adversity.

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While Dickens idealizes childhood innocence, he also explores the profound suffering and vulnerability experienced by child characters. Many of his young protagonists endure hardships that test their resilience and illuminate the harsh realities of Victorian society.

a. Pip in “Great Expectations”: Pip’s journey from childhood to adulthood is marked by suffering and self-discovery. His experiences as an orphan and his pursuit of social advancement reveal the psychological and emotional toll of societal expectations.

b. Little Dorrit: Amy Dorrit’s life in the Marshalsea debtor’s prison highlights the vulnerability of children in impoverished and marginalized communities. Her resilience in the face of adversity underscores the systemic injustices of the time.

Dickens’ portrayal of children also serves as a vehicle for social critique and a call for reform. Through the experiences of his child characters, Dickens highlights the pressing social issues of the Victorian era, including child labor, poverty, and inadequate education.

a. Jo in “Bleak House”: Jo, a homeless and illiterate child, symbolizes the plight of street children in Victorian London. Dickens’ depiction of Jo’s suffering and premature death serves as a poignant critique of the neglect and exploitation of impoverished children.

b. Educational Reform: Dickens’ novels often engage with debates about educational reform. Characters like Mr. Gradgrind in “Hard Times” personify the utilitarian approach to education, while Dickens advocates for a more holistic and humane system.

The concept of education in Ch Dickens’ works.

Every society witnessed the emergence of appropriate education within social issues. The condition of education during the Victorian era in England was marked by significant changes and challenges. The period, which roughly spans from the early 19th century to the early 20th century, witnessed both improvements in educational opportunities and persistent issues related to access, quality, and social inequality.

“However, if we take a view of the period as a whole, a rather different perspective emerges. In essence, literacy was merely one amongst a range of goods and services which parents might obtain on behalf of themselves or their family. It was a more or less desirable commodity which had to compete with many others for the available resources of time and money[2 : 67].”

The works of Charles Dickens can be studied from the different aspects. One of the significant themes often discussed is education. Education is a recurring theme in the works of Charles Dickens, and he often used his novels to comment on the state of education in Victorian England. Dickens’ portrayal of education in his works can be both critical and satirical, reflecting the complexities and flaws of the educational system of his time. Here are some ways in which education is depicted in Dickensian works:

Inequality in Educational Opportunities: Dickens frequently highlighted the vast disparities in access to education based on social class. Characters from impoverished backgrounds, such as Oliver Twist or David Copperfield, often struggle to access quality education, while those from more privileged backgrounds receive a better education.

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Child Labor and Lack of Formal Education: Dickens' novels often featured child characters who were forced into labor at a young age, depriving them of the opportunity for a formal education. Characters like Jo in "Bleak House" or the Cratchit children in "A Christmas Carol" exemplify this theme.

Satire of Educational Institutions: Dickens satirized various aspects of educational institutions, including schools, boarding houses, and workhouses. In "Nicholas Nickleby," he portrayed the hard conditions and abuse suffered by students at Dotheboys Hall, a fictional boarding school.

Corruption and Neglect: Dickens critiqued the corrupt practices and neglect within the educational system. For instance, characters like Mr. Squeers in "Nicholas Nickleby" and Mr. Creakle in "David Copperfield" are harsh and negligent educators who exploit their positions for personal gain. "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 school-masters, as a race, were the blockheads and impostors who might naturally be expected to spring from such a state of things, and to flourish in it; these Yorkshire schoolmasters were the lowest and most rotten round in the whole ladder[6: 33]".

Positive Role Models: Despite his criticism, Dickens also depicted positive role models in education. Characters like Mr. Gradgrind in "Hard Times" or Mr. Mell in "David Copperfield" represent educators who prioritize the well-being and moral development of their students.

Emphasis on Moral and Ethical Education: Dickens often emphasized the importance of moral and ethical education alongside academic learning. Characters like Mr. Brownlow in "Oliver Twist" or Mr. Jarndyce in "Bleak House" take on mentorship roles and guide young characters toward moral growth.

The Power of Self-Education: Dickens celebrated the idea of self-education and personal growth. Characters like Pip in "Great Expectations" and Esther Summerson in "Bleak House" engage in self-improvement and learning through their life experiences.

Redemption Through Education: In some of his works, Dickens portrayed characters who found redemption and a path to a better life through education. For example, David Copperfield's journey from a difficult childhood to becoming a successful writer reflects this theme.

Critique of Utilitarianism: In "Hard Times," Dickens critiqued the utilitarian approach to education, which focused solely on practical and measurable outcomes while neglecting the emotional and imaginative aspects of learning.

Overall, Dickens' depictions of education in his works are multifaceted and reflect his concern for the well-being of children, the impact of social class on educational opportunities, and the need for a balanced and morally grounded approach to education. His novels continue to be studied for their insights into the educational and social issues of the Victorian era.

The results. The output of the research is the findings related to the child characters in the works of Charles Dickens. Researching Charles Dickens' works with a focus on children can offer a unique and potentially novel perspective in several ways:

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Social Commentary on Child Labor: Dickens was a prominent social critic of his time, and many of his works, such as “Oliver Twist” and “David Copperfield” shed light on the harsh realities of child labor and exploitation in the 19th century. Researching how Dickens’ portrayal of child characters reflects the social issues of his era and how these themes resonate with contemporary issues can provide valuable insights.

Psychological Development of Child Characters: Dickens created memorable child characters with distinct personalities and backgrounds. Analyzing the psychological development of characters like Pip from “Great Expectations” or Little Nell from “The Old Curiosity Shop” can be a novel angle of research. Exploring how these characters evolve, cope with adversity, and interact with their surroundings can offer fresh perspectives on Dickens’ storytelling.

Educational Themes: Dickens was an advocate for education, and many of his works feature child characters striving for better opportunities through learning. Researching the depiction of education and its impact on children in Dickens’ novels can provide insights into his views on the role of education in social reform.

Narrative Techniques: Dickens was known for his innovative narrative techniques. Studying how he used child characters as narrators or focal points in his stories can be a novel aspect of research. Investigating the narrative voice, style, and symbolism related to child characters can reveal new dimensions of his storytelling.

Comparative Analysis: Comparing Dickens’ portrayal of children with that of other authors from the same period or different cultures can yield interesting findings. Examining how Dickens’ treatment of child characters differs or aligns with contemporaneous or later literary works can contribute to a broader understanding of Victorian literature and its impact.

Adaptations and Reception: Exploring how Dickens’ child characters have been adapted in various forms of media, such as film, theater, and television, and how their portrayals have evolved over time can provide a fresh perspective on cultural interpretations of his work.

Psychological and Societal Impact: Investigating how Dickens’ portrayal of children influenced societal perceptions and policies related to child welfare and labor laws in the 19th century can be a novel research avenue. Additionally, examining the enduring impact of his work on contemporary discourse

Discussions. Education in the Victorian period was a dynamic and transformative force, reflecting the changing needs and values of society. It played a pivotal role in addressing the challenges of industrialization, promoting social reform, and shaping the moral and intellectual development of individuals. The Victorian commitment to education laid the foundation for modern educational systems and continues to influence educational discourse today. This era serves as a testament to the enduring importance of education as a catalyst for social change and progress.

Conclusion. The Dickensian and Victorian perspectives, while distinct in their portrayal of the challenges and aspirations of children, converge on a common message: the profound significance of education in shaping the future of individuals and society. Both perspectives underscored the transformative potential of education, whether as a means of liberation from poverty and exploitation (as depicted by Dickens) or as a tool for personal and societal advancement (as advocated during the Victorian era).

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In conclusion, the Dickensian and Victorian perspectives on child and education concepts provide valuable insights into the evolving role of education in society. They remind us that education is not a static endeavor but a dynamic force that responds to the needs and values of its time. By studying these perspectives, we gain a deeper appreciation for the enduring importance of education in nurturing the minds and hearts of children, equipping them to navigate the challenges of their era and contribute to a better future.

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