

*Investigating Charles Dickens's Vision towards the Victorian Society**Dr. Halima Benzoukh**Kasdi Merbah University, Ouargla (Algeria),**halimabenzoukh@gmail.com*

Abstract

The Victorian era witnessed the appearance of many great essayists and novelists who attempted to give the reader a clear picture of their industrial environment. Through many of their works, these writers revealed their commitment towards their social milieu during the nineteenth century. One of the outstanding figures of the period is Charles Dickens who was committed to his society's problems and living conditions. Through his novels, Dickens tries to give his readers an idea about the bitter reality the Victorians faced because of the Industrial Revolution. He is considered as the most exceptional social novelists in the British literature for his unique themes and subtle stylistic choices. In most of his literary works, Dickens tackles issues related to the Victorian family, education, working hands and government. An investigation of his vision towards his Victorian social setting seems worthy. Therefore, the present paper comes to shed light on Charles Dickens as a social critic and his commitment towards his society.

Key-Words: social novelist, Victorian society, Industrial Revolution, social commitment.

الملخص

شهد العصر الفيكتوري ظهور العديد من الكتاب والروائيين المتميزين الذين حاولوا إعطاء القارئ صورة واضحة عن بيئتهم الصناعية. من خلال العديد من أعمالهم، كشف هؤلاء الكتاب عن التزامهم تجاه أوساطهم الاجتماعية خلال القرن التاسع عشر. و من الشخصيات البارزة في تلك الفترة تشارلز ديكنز و الذي كان ملتزمًا بمشاكل مجتمعه وظروفهم المعيشية. من خلال رواياته ، يحاول ديكنز إعطاء قرائه فكرة عن الواقع المرير الذي واجهه الفيكتوريون بسبب الثورة الصناعية. يعتبر الروائي الاجتماعي ديكنز الأكثر تميزًا في الأدب البريطاني بسبب موضوعاته الفريدة وخياراته الأسلوبية الدقيقة. في معظم أعماله الأدبية ، يتناول ديكنز القضايا المتعلقة بالعائلة الفيكتورية والتعليم والأيدي العاملة والحكومة. و لهذا يبدو أن التحقيق في رؤيته تجاه محيطه الاجتماعي الفيكتوري يستحق الدراسة. و لذلك جاءت هذه الورقة لتسليط الضوء على تشارلز ديكنز كناقدا اجتماعي والتزامه تجاه مجتمعه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الروائي الاجتماعي، المجتمع الفيكتوري، الرواية الفيكتورية؛ الثورة الصناعية، الالتزام الاجتماعي.

1. Introduction

The Victorian period refers to the era of Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901). Victorians appear to be the British people contemporaries in different ways. They faced several difficulties which can be found in the British society even now. Victorian England is known of the great development of the Industrial Revolution. By 1850, England was the first industrial nation in the world: most of its people worked in industry. Although it might have been an era of achievement and progress,

the Victorian age was also a period of doubt and anxiety. During this era, members of humble origins moved to positions of wealth and government, and people of the working class were forced into the overcrowded cities where they worked in bad conditions for low wages. Life outside work was unpleasant with unhealthy housing. Parliament passed a series of Factory Acts to regulate the working conditions of children and women. There was also slow political reform .

During the same Victorian period, there were several social problems such as poverty and bad living conditions (Carter & McRae, 1996). In the meantime, the middle class became a rich and powerful force in the society (Pollard, 1993). This age was known for the entrance of machines into industry. Carlyle (1829) states the following:

“Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age.” (Carlyle, 1829, quoted in Klingopulos, 1996, p. 20)

This situation inspired several Victorian writers who attempted to depict a real picture of their society. Victorian writers, such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, attempted to fulfill their commitment through expressing “the spirit of the age with all the resources of imagination, feeling and thought” (Pollard, 1993, p.ix). They revealed their response to their society during the nineteenth century. Moreover, they tried to show their readers that there were several problems behind that beautiful scene of the Victorian society. These writers are regarded to be so important that they ought to be taken into account in any study of English literature. The novel became the fundamental form in the Victorian age, whereas poetry was the main literary form in the Romantic period .

.2The Victorian Novel

Victorian writers tried to fulfill their commitment turning their attention to the ‘condition-of-England question’ (Coote, 1993). They attempted to show the Victorian reader that there were many abuses behind that fascinating scene of their social environment. The Victorian period is an age of intense activity in literature, particularly by novelists and poets, essayists and philosophers.

Whereas poetry was the main literary form in the Romantic period, the novel became the principal form in the Victorian age (Carter & McRae, 1996). The successful novels of Sir Walter Scott created a fashion for the series novels, published in monthly parts. Later on, these novels were published in volume form. They were usually historical like many of Scott. Then, Charles Dickens

(1812-1870) changed the theme of the novel, focussing on the social problems of that time through his different works (Klingopulos, 1996).

Dickens wrote various novels beginning with Sketches by Boz (1836) and ending with The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870). He is often regarded to be one of the greatest English novelists and one of those few authors whose works remain popular after their death. Most of Dickens's novels are full of characters, either fully developed or drawn briefly. Through his various novels, Dickens attempts to describe and attack different kinds of unpleasant people and places, bad schoolmasters and schools, dirty houses and even Parliament .

Dickens learned from and inspired his contemporaries, who continued to deal with social concerns. Through his Past and Present (1843) and The French Revolution (1837), Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) criticises mainly the Victorian economic tendency. He believed in the rule of the strong, but not in equality among men. Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1866) was one of the most important literary figures supported by Dickens. In her novels, Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1855), Gaskell tries to depict the reality of the Victorian times .

The three Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, were able to change the way the novel introduces the female character (Carter & McRae, 1996). They wrote about women and their struggles in the Victorian society. Charlotte's works include The Professor (1857), Villette (1853) and her finest novel, Jane Eyre (1847). Charlotte's sister, Emily, wrote one of the greatest English novels, Wuthering Heights (1847). The youngest sister, Anne Brontë, wrote The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848) with an unusual female character and involving complex relationships.

Another woman novelist is George Eliot who dealt with issues of women and of the whole society. She wrote Adam Bede (1859), The Mill on the Floss (1860), Middlemarch (1872) and other novels .

William Thackeray (1811-1863) and Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) are considered among the main outstanding literary figures of the Victorian period. Most of Thackeray's novels have historical themes. Trollope criticizes the Victorian society in many of his works, including Orley Farm (1862) and The Way We Live Now.(1875)

Furthermore, novels of sensation or detective stories became popular in the Victorian times (Carter & McRae, 1996). Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) often wrote in this genre; he published The

Woman in White in 1860. The most known detective novel is Sherlock Holmes (1887) by Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930); Holmes is the main character of a series of fictional stories.

Many social, religious and political issues became the dilemma of the time. In 1859, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published *The Origin of Species* which was the result of twenty years of enquiries among gardeners and farmers. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is considered to be one of the most important novelists who wrote about problems of the Victorians in the late nineteenth century. Through his different novels, including *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Hardy tackles the conflict between traditional values and modern ones. All these works deal with the successful community which denies the strangers. In Hardy's novels, nature has an important role; it is in itself a character (Thornley & Roberts, 1984) .

The Victorian novel became more successful than poetry in setting connections with some of the practical interests of the era (Klingopulos, 1996). With such Victorian novels, especially those written by Dickens, the language of literature was improved and explored in new ways. Dickens is "the most widely read author of great powers and permanent interest" (Churchill, 1996, p.117). He is said to be a man of some genius who contributes in enriching the scope of the novel during the nineteenth century.

.3 Dickens as a Committed Novelist

Charles Dickens is regarded as one of the most outstanding English novelists whose immense creative power made him the most popular author of his age. Born in an industrial society, Dickens was always aware of the social and economic abysses of that period. He wrote several novels, beginning with *Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) and ending with *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870); "his inventiveness is prodigious" (Hyland, 1981, p.49). Most of his novels were first serialised in monthly or weekly installments in different magazines; then they appeared in volume forms (Coote, 1993). His first *Pickwick Papers* had a great success. It came out in a serial form and gave the Victorian literature some of its most amusing and known characters. In this novel, Mr Pickwick is a Victorian man who meets and then employs the cheerful Sam Weller to keep him out of trouble caused by his own kindness, or to support him with wise words when the trouble could not be avoided .

Dickens also wrote historical novels, including *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). The former is often described as 'A Tale of the Riots of Eighty': it is based on the Gordon Riots of 1780 (Davis, 1999, p.15). Through this novel, the author maintains that "the social order

reflects the domestic world where the troubled relationships between fathers and sons produce violence and rebellion” (ibid.). The latter story is about the French Revolution and some events in London at that time. It is intended to show the inevitable results of oppression and carries an implicit warning against the danger of repeating the mistakes of the past .

Oliver Twist (1837-38) depicts the miserable adventures of the poor boy, Oliver Twist who lives in a society full of hunger, stealing and crime. In this novel, Dickens imaginatively tackles his experiences as a child kidnapped from the respectable life. Another Dickens’s finest novel is A Christmas Carol, which is a story of a bad man who attempts to improve his behaviours after a ghost tells him the way of his death. In this novel, Dickens has an economic message: the condition of the poor is the responsibility of the rich.

The common theme of Dickens’s novels is the suffering of the Victorians, mainly of children. David Copperfield, the main character of his David Copperfield (1849-1850) is a Victorian boy seeking self-understanding. The author derives materials from his own life to write David’s fictional autobiography. David is able to reach his ambitions and dreams. Nicholas Nickleby (1838-1839) is the story of a boy who is left on the edge of adulthood fatherless and without any financial resource, and who has to fend for himself. This boy is employed in a school in Yorkshire, where the master, Squeers, treats some of his miserable pupils cruelly. Dickens’s first aim in the novel was to criticize Yorkshire schools. The novel’s characters are grounded in reality.

Hard Times (1854) is often regarded as a work of the Victorian times. Through this novel, Dickens attempts to show the abuses and inadequacies of the Victorian institutions. The novel is set in an industrial environment where Thomas Gradgrind’s children were born and brought up in accordance with hard facts, neglecting any kind of imagination. Philip, the main character of Dickens’s Great Expectations (1860-1861), has many hopes and dreams which cannot be reached. The novel is usually viewed as a picture of Philip’s society, in which Victorians try to cope with its cruelties.

Charles Dickens depicts the way the poor masses lived in the Victorian society. His later novels, including Our Mutual Friend (1864-1865), tackle the situation of London society. They are full of actual experiences of the world in which he lived to the point that they can be used as valuable documents for the understanding of the nineteenth century social history in Great Britain. Thus, it can be maintained that Dickens as a committed writer exposes a real scene of his Victorian society with all its abuses and failings.

.4Dickens's Prose Style

Dickens is often known for the continuous vitality of his prose style. Most of his novels are characterised by his gift of fascinating characterisation (Hyland, 1981). His minor characters are, in terms of action, distinguished by their individual speech patterns, idiosyncratic idioms which belong only to those characters and are never repeated (Grant, 1984). Dickens's extremely flexible style creates such discriminations and social observations. His characters take place in the world of the novel to which they belong through their language. They are remarkable individuals. Oliver Twist, Micawber, Uriah Heep, Tiny Tim, Squeers, Scrooge and dozens of other characters are part of the English folklore .

In writing, Dickens's powers are thought to be many. The author can make plots of complexity to ensure a sense of mystery and uncertainty in his novels (Hyland, 1981). This way helps him as a novelist whose writings are produced in serial form. He develops the technique of suspense to a fine art in his works (ibid.). His plots are deemed to be the product of his fertile imagination. His characters are vividly and cogently drawn and invite the readers warmly into the pages of his novels .

A further quality of Dickens's novels is his gift for humour (Carey, 1973). This feature is closely related to that of characterisation. His humour is of a more varied kind than would be done by characters' depiction alone. Many instances of his amusing comments, the comic scenes and the complete wit of the dialogue are all parts of the rich vein of humour that makes his novels distinguishable.

Dickens's novels are not only fun; they are full of satire (Grant, 1984). He is often considered as a satirist and a critic of the Victorian society. He shows all the inadequacies of the Victorian institutions. Dickens's satire strikes England and leaves its mark. He attacks schools, family, Parliament and the Church. It is said that his novels frequently reflect aspects of his own personal experience.

Idioms of the Victorian folk used by Dickens have a particular impact on the reader (Gillie, 1996). The use of such idiomatic expressions is considered as a way to introduce the Victorian culture and traditions to the reader. Therefore, Dickens's language is not only a communicative device, but it also bears a cultural heritage of his society. All his novels are the embodiment in words of a very special way of experiencing the world. The pervasive stylistic features of the writer, his recurrent words and images and his special tone are as personal to him as his face or his way of walking. His style is his own way of living in the world which is given a verbal form.

Dickens's novels, including *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*, represent important segments of the curve of his temporal development in his creative vision.

.5Conclusion

In a nutshell, in his writings Charles Dickens showed his commitment towards his Victorian society. The Industrial environment affected the social structure during the period, and thus the conflict between the different social classes increased. Therefore, Dickens attempted to depict the grim way of life behind the beautiful scene of the Victorian social setting. The present paper tried to examine Charles Dickens's outlook on the main social realities of the Victorian community.

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