

Ego-Centric Parents in The Novels of Dickens

Dr. Archana Gautam

Assistant Professor

Department of Humanities

Hindustan College of Science & Technology, Farah, Mathura

Uttar Pradesh

India

archana.aashi@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show EGO-CENTRIC PARENTS IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS. Many of Dickens' children suffer because of the failure of their parents to play their proper parental role. Dickens himself said his most painful memories of childhood were of his being abandoned by his own parents, and, later, of his mother's insistence on sending him to work even when the family was out of debt, and young Charles eager to resume his studies. It is no surprise, therefore, that several of the children in Dickens' novels suffer at the hands of their own callous and uncaring, and selfish and demanding parents. Dickens' mothers are often 'odd' and his father's 'bad'. It is indeed true that in Dickens' novels evil too often threatens to intrude the scenes of fellowship and warmth because of the parents themselves.

Keywords- Ego centricity, Negligence, Self centered, parental responsibility, selfishness

Introduction

It is a universally acknowledged fact that Dickens, in his novels, often regressed into childhood, seeking an ideal place of love, a place that offers warmth and security, and creates in the child a sense of belonging. This was so because Dickens himself, to the end, remained an intensely unhappy man: the frustrations and tragedies of his own life, specially his sensitive and precocious years as a child and the parental neglect and indifference he suffered not only dogged him at all times, but loomed large in his fiction, recurring as themes in it.

The list of children that have one or both parents alive and yet undergo terrifying experiences, and are ill treated, humiliated, exploited, even brutalized by the sharks of society they fall prey to, all because of lack of parental responsibility or parental neglect and apathy, is long.

Dombey and Son is Dickens' first great social novel to criticize the Industrial Revolution. Smollett and Fielding had dealt with London life but it was a different London from that of Charles Dickens. Dickens became the first novelist to write of the great industrial city of London, having had an experience of it in the Blacking Factory, being driven into it, early in life, by a greedy mother and an erring father.

The average Victorian was content to be a placid householder, the home and hearth anchoring him security. But the winds of change were affecting men from the upper middle class, so that they astonished the world with their energy, enterprise and self-reliance. At home, however, the old order prevailed, and they were still 'master' to wife, domestic staff, and even children, who were all to be seen, but not heard.

Dickens, specially his early childhood of want and parental neglect and the impact it had on Dickens' psyche and work. Dickens was exposed to the miseries of life at an impressionable age. He was sent to the Blacking Factory and exposed to prison life where his father was imprisoned because he could not pay his debts. This left a deep scar on his psyche.

Dickens' novels are mostly autobiographical. He writes from his experiences and observations. He arouses pity in us for the abandoned children who are deprived of the joys of childhood. He voices his resentment against these parents, guardians, and foster parents who ill treated and exploited children.

John Dickens was able to pay off his debts with the legacy he received following the death of a relative. He was freed from prison in 1824.

We now have before us a detailed picture of Dickens early life of want and parental neglect: that the most popular of all English novelists of literature of the Victorian era was born in a small, lower middle class family and that he was a victim of poverty and neglect in childhood. It is but natural that this must have left indelible marks on his psyche.

Dickens was a novelist with a purpose. He focused on the various evils of his time. He was well conversant with the sorrows and sufferings of the children of his age. Dickens has endeavored to awaken the conscience of an age which was insensitive to the ill treatment of children, often owing to the indifference or selfishness of their own parents, as does David.

David Copperfield's mother and stepfather could have shown him some consideration, but this was not possible because both suffered from inflated egos. His mother's attention was focused on Murdstone whom she feared to displease in any way. Murdstone who had taken control of her household viewed David as an impediment in his path. Thus David becomes a victim in the hands of his own egocentric parents; mother and stepfather. All the indignities of childhood are heaped on him because, as Mark Spilka says, the world belongs to harsh parental figures. The novel relates to the novelists' own childhood anguish. It is the expression of his attempt to ease the gnawing pain.

Through Mr. Dorrit and his family Dickens reflects the social and economic evils of Victorian Society. His purpose in this novel is also to show how children deprived of parental care due to their egoistic parents suffer captivity, dependence and servility. There is a powerful ambiguity in the novel of home and prison and Dickens points an accusing finger at society.

Dickens had great sympathy for such children because of his own experiences as a child. As a social reformer he draws the attention of the readers and the government towards these poor children. And these included children forced to live in prisons because their parents were imprisoned.

In other novels of Dickens, children suffer because their parents have no money or because they are parentless. In *Dombey and Son* Paul and Florence, in spite of having a father, do not enjoy a secure and happy childhood. Their relationship with Mr. Dombey is not what it should be. They pine for the love and care of their own father. The father, however, is so self centered, so egocentric, that he views everything, including his own children, as objects that can further his own interests. Mr. Dombey's pride is the main motive of the novel and thus, also, the mainspring of all its action. He is a dominating husband, father, master.

Dickens presents Mr. Dombey as an egocentric father. Dombey is a rich merchant not satisfied with his considerable success, wants the business to grow and prosper further, for which

he needs a son. He gives more importance to material progress than to the relationship between father and child. In the end he has to suffer the ill effects of pride and haughtiness. *Dombey and Son*, thus, analyses the shortcomings of industrial England, and is Dickens' first great social novel.

Dickens in *Bleak House* presents a deep insight into not only the ills of the law courts in England but also throws light on the plight of countless illegitimate, abandoned Victorian children, and their neglect, abuse, or even exploitation by their selfish, self-centered parents.

Dickens is deeply affected by the social evils of his time. Especially, he reveals the sorrows and terrors of unwanted, illegitimate children. In *Bleak House* he is able to describe realistically the deep agony when Esther says in her misery, "I wish I was dead..... it would have been better and happier for many people, if indeed I had never breathed".

Pip is the hero of the novel *Great Expectations*. Pip's parents being dead he is brought up by his elder sister, Mrs. Joe Gargery, and her husband, Mr. Gargery, the blacksmith. When he is crying on his father's tomb he is threatened by a dangerous criminal and ordered to bring for him some food and a file. Thus his already burdened soul has even more to bear - the sense of evil and guilt.

Estella, a girl barely two or three years of age is deserted by her uncaring parents. Instead of being brought up by loving parents, she is handed over to a neurotic woman who turns her into a hardhearted young lady. This happens due to lack of parental love and proper guidance. Estella could have been a good natured and educated girl but is molded into a cold hearted and rude lady by the vicious Miss Havisham. She is treated as a mere tool under Miss Havisham under whose care she is placed by her parents.

Old Harmon, (in the novel *Our Mutual Friend*) the selfish and egocentric father of John Harmon had led a lonely life in his large house and is dead before the novel begins. He has a grip over the family even after his death, through his 'will' which makes him an important character, even in death.

Harmon's home could hardly be called a home. It was like a jail where the family members were like prisoners. Harmon turns his wife out of the house and the children are left

motherless and forced to live with their father who was no less than a tyrant. Harmon's son John leaves home, is presumed dead, and returns home in disguise like a living ghost.

Nicholas Nickleby is the central character of the novel Nicholas Nickleby. His father, the senior Nicholas Nickleby, is persuaded by his wife to indulge in speculation. Like his brother Ralph, who had become affluent through speculation, Nicholas adheres to his wife's advice but is not lucky enough.

Nicholas' father is so disappointed by this setback that he takes it to heart. The result is that he becomes bedridden and succumbs to his sickness. While alive, he asks his family to take help from his brother Ralph Nickleby who would surely help the widow and the children of his deceased brother.

In *Hard Times*, Gradgrind, the father of Louisa and Tom, is a former hardware dealer. He treats his own children as some kind of hardware too, not allowing them to show any personal initiative or curiosity or ask question at any time but to simply learn to be guided by 'facts' and nothing but hard facts.

Several important conclusions can be drawn from this study, **Ego-Centric Parents In Dickens' Novels**. A very significant point made by Dickens in the novels chosen for this study is that no matter how difficult parental responsibilities may be, irresponsibility's must be paid for. We can begin the world only when we have paid for our irresponsibility's.

Dickens shows how evil parents have great power to do evil to their children, and to make them suffer the consequences of their evil deeds. But Dickens talks, also, of the power of love, of the power of love to heal. Even Betsey Trotwood, in David's soothing company, is prompted to say, finally, "God forgive us all"!

Conclusion

It is necessary to mention, here, that the novels examined for the purpose of this study are not alone in depicting ego-centric parents and their irresponsible, often strange, and sometimes cruel treatment of their children. There are several such examples in the other works of Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* being the most outstanding. Barnaby is born the very day his father commits a murder, and in the eyes of his murderer father it is as if the baby son, Barnaby, sprung from his victim's blood. Rudge in disguise shadows his son as a ghost, blighting the son's life. Equally

www.ijellh.com

Volume IV
Issue VII
July 2016

IJELLH
International Journal of English
Language, Literature and Humanities

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
2321-7065

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

important is the fact that Dickens has also given us many pictures of happy homes where parent figures and their charges live together in complete trust, caring for and loving one another and exemplifying all that home and hearth stand for. In sharp contrast to the prison like homes and the 'bad' fathers and 'odd' mothers.

References

- G.K. Chesterton :The Victorian Age in Literature (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1966)
- Charles Beard, The Industrial Revolution(London : Allen & George Unwind, 1936)
- A.E. Dyson, (ed) : Dickens Modern Judgments (London : Macmillan, 1968)
- George Gissing, Charles Dickens A Critical Study (London : Blackie and Co., 1920)
- Humphrey House : Introduction to Oliver Twist (London : Oxford Univ. Press, 1959)
- A.E. Dyson: The Inimitable Dickens(London : 1970)
- George Gissing,: Charles Dickens A Critical Study (London : Blackie and Co., 1920)
- Philip Collins,: Dickens and Education (New York : Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1964)