Suffering and Personality Growth of Orphan Characters in Three Novels by Charles Dickens

By

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Supervisor: Prof. Nasser Athamneh

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English Literature

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research to my parents, my husband and my son Abed Al Kareem.
I am sincerely and heartily grateful to my advisor Professor Nasser Athamneh, for the support and guidance he gave me throughout my thesis writing. I am sure it would have not been possible without his help. Besides I would like to express my greatest gratitude to Dr. Susanne Ramadan and Dr. Sabah Shakoury for all the help they provided me with, and the advice and encouragement they gave me.
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Abstract


The purpose of this study is to investigate Charles Dickens’ representation of orphans characters who are underprivileged members of an industrial society. A closer examination of Dickens’ selected novels will provide a deeper understanding of his attitude towards the orphans. Dickens’ selected texts namely *Oliver Twist* (1839), *David Copperfield* (1850), and *Great Expectations* (1861), will be the point of focus. A connection is established between the suffering, the success in life, and the attainment of self-realization of the orphans in the previously mentioned novels. This study of Dickens’ presentation of the living condition of the orphans will further substantiate the assertion that Dickens was a social reformer and an author, who exposed the harsh reality of his society. Through his writing; he sought to bring awareness to the Victorian society. Charles Dickens’ childhood experience contributed to his sensitivity towards the oppression and neglect of orphans by family and other members of society.

Charles Dickens, who is one of the famous writers in the Victorian Era, was preoccupied with the orphan’s pessimistic view of the world, concerned with understanding how orphans manage to survive the pain and psychological damage inflicted by those who should care for them. In *Oliver Twist* (1839), *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), Dickens represents the world as a place where normal family relationships are abnormal or non-existent. He tries to give an example of
an individual’s struggle to remedy his homeless condition by searching for love, friendship, and security.

Dickens’ novels are works of social commentary. He was a tough critic of the poverty in the Victorian society.

The inscription on Charles Dickens’ tomb is good evidence that he was the writer of the poor: “He was a sympathizer to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England’s greatest writers is lost to the world” (Czarnik, “Living Conditions”).

Charles’s Dickens tries in his novels to build a hero that rises from a dark childhood and suffering life into a successful man, so he tries to idolize those orphans and to give a new concept of heroism for the children of the Victorian Era.

List of Abbreviations

OL .................................................................................................................. Oliver Twist
DC .................................................................................................................. David Copperfield
GE ............................................................................................................... Great Expectations
Introduction

The word orphan is understood by many to designate a parentless child, but when we search for other definitions, we discover that children were often considered “orphans” if they had one surviving parent, had been abandoned by their families, or were forced out into the world because of overcrowding at home (Cunningham 737). Orphans are among the most prominent figures in history and fiction, beginning in ancient times and continuing to the present day. History documents great numbers of orphans. In societies, where people married early and had many children and a high death rate was common among the adult population many children lost one of their parents or both before coming of age. Orphans suffered from a higher death rate than other children did. They often had to live outside of standard households, either because they were placed in a foster family or, as was more often the case, because they were placed as servants or apprentices at an earlier age than was common. Charitable societies first and by and by more institutions and organizations cooperated to improve these children’s living conditions and to make it easier for them to become integrated into society.

Charles Dickens’ work has often dealt with the formation of orphans’ personalities. Most of his works are explorations of the orphans’ conditions and situations; he tries to expose orphans’ problems that face them and hinder them from achieving success, unity of being and happiness. Dickens, by writing some novels about orphans, tries to make a connection between his protagonists’ suffering and their success, suggesting that suffering sometimes helps in establishing the autonomy of an orphan’s
personality. Dickens in his novels shows that the improvement of the orphans’ character appears after facing difficulties and realities, working hard and caring for others.

Orphans’ characters are formed by their surroundings. Nevertheless, orphans are considered to be different from the rest of the society. Melanie A. Kimball describes the characters of orphans and their roles in fiction and explains this fact:

Orphan characters in literature symbolize our isolation from one another and from society. They do not belong to even the most basic of groups, the family unit, and in some cultures this is enough to cut them off from society at large. In other cultures, orphans are regarded as a special people who must be protected and cared for all costs. In either case, orphans are clearly marked as being different from the rest of society. They are the eternal Others. (10)

I will begin with Wordsworth who is important in the respect of his influence on Dickens. Robert Langbaum argues that Wordsworth asserted a new romantic self that drew significance from an “organic connection … with nature” (7). In other words, the Wordsworthian self, Langbaum argues, gain value through its connection with the “the external world through sensation” (45) and through its relationship with “the archetypal phases of identity“ (46). Therefore, the problem of identity in Wordsworthian terms, Langbaum argues, is presented as the problem of “self-consciousness” leading to the “loss of feeling“ (53).
Wordsworth’s poetry portrays a vision of human life in which man stands in isolation. Davies and Beatty argue that Wordsworth presents man in an incoherent civilization that deprives him of his identity, stability and balanced relations with his environment and mankind (53). The feeling of lack of identity and stability is clear in Wordsworth’s "The Ruined Cottage":

These lines juxtapose man and nature. Nature is described as “still” and a source of “repose and peace.” These traits give a sense of steadiness and tranquility, whereas the old man is portrayed as tearful, a portrayal which conveys the feeling of sorrow an instability. The state of sorrow and instability that the old man experiences highlights his inability to adapt to the conditions of life and shows the imbalance of his personality. However, at the end of “The Ruined Cottage.” The Pedlar who suffers from sorrow which is a sign of the lack of stability in his personality undergoes intrinsic change:

Be wise and cheerful, and no longer read
The forms of things with an unworthy eye
That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shews of being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream that could not live.

(Davies and Beatty 39)

This condition of instability and suffering give him better understanding of life and make him conscious of nature’s total pattern beauty and permanence. Through this feeling the Pedlar regains equanimity: his identity is restored. The senses and the heart play a major role in deciding the stability of the Pedlar’s personality. The turning of his sense to receive the beauty of nature arouses happiness in his heart, a feeling that activates his consciousness and entices him to interact with and respect his surroundings.

Some other writers deal with individuals’ inability to attain romantic personality through which they can be self–dependent and free like nature. Those writers portray the individual under the restriction of society in an attempt to give a redefinition of human personality. For example Langbaum shows that Dostoevsky’s antihero in Notes from underground develops a pathological identity as a way of protecting himself: he exhibits a continual “perversity” against his own interests “as a way of asserting his freedom,” an act through which he turns upon himself the hatred he cannot “vent openly in action.” (15-16). Also, Dostoevsky emphasizes the role of suffering as “the only cause of consciousness.”(qtd in Langbaum, 16).

The dominant influence of the outer world upon the individual’s personality is clear in Notes from Underground. The antihero’s heightened consciousness emphasizes his excessive submission to the outer world: he is excessively conscious in order to keep his interest and desires in line with the rules of the outer world. Here, we are before an
individual who sees his freedom through passive submission to the outer world and who negates his self in order keep in line with the laws of society.

Freud in “Neurosis and Psychosis” points out that the human psyche is divided into three entities, the “ego, superego, and id” (188). Freud argues that the id is made up of “powerful instinctual impulses”; the superego represents the “real environment” and “the outer world”, and the ego mediates between “the outer world and the id” (185-7).

Furthermore, in “Formulation Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning,” Freud believes that human psyche is dominated by two principles. The pleasure principles, Freud argues, governs the processes that “strive towards gaining pleasure” while the reality principle has to form “a conception of real circumstances in the outer world” and to “decide whether a particular idea…was in agreement with reality or not.” (22-23) However, the reality principle, Freud points out, aims at “no dethronement of pleasure-principle, but only a safeguarding of it.” (26)

In *Existential Psychoanalysis*, Jean-Paul Sartre gives another contribution to the understanding of the self. He defines human personality as a blend of negative and positive experiences (153). According to Sartre, a human being may have bad or good faith, bad faith, Sartre argues, is associated with “falsehood,” and the one who practice bad faith hides “a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth.” (157) on the other hand, Sartre points out that “I am in good faith, at least to the extent that I am conscious of my bad faith. But then this whole psychic system is annihilated.” (159).

In other words, human personality has two conflicting modes. The individual who has a bad faith tries to achieve happiness by pursuing false and deceptive aims. Bad