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## Views of Dickens on Education during the Victorian Age

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### Abstract

*This essay focuses on the views of the great Victorian era novelist on the education system prevalent in that time. Charles Dickens was a great social reformer and his novels belong to the humanitarian movement of the Victorian age. He constituted himself as the champion of the weak, the outcast and the oppressed. In nearly all his works and speeches he set out to attack some specific abuse in the existing system of education. In nearly all his novels there is an attack on the corrupt and inefficient education system running in the schools of that time. Dickens' great interest in the prevalent system can be felt from the fact that he did not merrily refer to them in his novels or allude to them in his journals, letters and speeches. He gave a life like picture of what he had seen in his various novels, exposing the numerous ills and thereby drawing public attention to the very unsatisfactory, even unhappy and sadistic conditions in the temples of education. He was from the beginning till end a novelist with a purpose.*

**Key Words:** *Victorian Age, Novelist, Education, System, Condition.*

### Charles Dickens' Views on Education

As already discussed Dickens was a great social reformer and his novels belong to the humanitarian movement of the Victorian era. He was from first to last a novelist with a purpose. In nearly all his books he set out to attack some specific abuse in the existing system of things, and, throughout, he constituted himself as the champion of the weak, the outcast, and the oppressed. In nearly all the novels there is an attack on some corrupt and inefficient social system or the other : Boarding schools in Nicholas Nickleby, the court chancery in Bleak House, the new manufacturing system in Hard Times, the workhouse in Oliver Twist, the pettifogging lawyers in Great Expectations etc.

Evidence of Dickens' interest in the important subject of education appears in his fiction, journalism and public speeches. While he was sensitive to the various educational developments which occurred in his lifetime, he stopped short of offering practical solutions to problems, and his work reflects only a selected range of issues and problems. He was a strong believer in universal, non-sectarian education, though not necessarily under a state system. He never joined any of the reforming societies and seemed more comfortable dealing with particular cases and large principles, rather than legislation and administration. His general outlook on the subject is encapsulated in a speech he gave in Birmingham in 1844; he said, "If you would reward honesty, if you would give encouragement to good, if you would stimulate the idle, eradicate evil, or correct what is bad, education – is the one thing needful and the one effective end"<sup>1</sup>

Dickens' early years coincided with the state's growing sense of responsibility for the instructions of its citizens. Access to education varied tremendously, according to location, gender and class. Those who could pay for their schooling had access to several types of institutions – though quality was by no means guaranteed. Dickens' own experience is a case in sight. His education, which he acknowledged to have been "irregular"<sup>2</sup> (letter of July 1838) and relatively slight, began in Chatham, where he was a pupil at a dame school, a deficient private establishment with an unqualified woman at its head, similar to the one run by Mr. Wopsle's great aunt in Great Expectations. Then in 1821 he moved onto the Rev. William Giles's School, where his experiences were more positive. He parted with Giles in 1822, when the Dickens family shifted to London and in 1824, when they moved into the Marshalsea, Dickens went to reside with Mrs. Roylance, the

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<sup>1</sup>. Charles Dickens : Speech 63, (Edinburgh, June 25, 1841)

<sup>2</sup>. Letters of Charles Dickens, (July, 1835)

original of Mrs. Pipchin in Dombey and Son. His formal schooling resumed in 1825, when he was sent to Wellington House Classical and Commercial Academy, run by the sadistic William Jones, who was the original for Mr. Creakle, and whose school was the inspiration for Salem House in David Copperfield. Dickens' experience prompted two other recollections of Wellington House; in his essay Our School he noted that Jones (the Chief) had a penchant for ruling, ciphering books, and then smiting the palms of offenders with the same 'diabolical instrument'<sup>3</sup>. In a speech of 1857 he remarked that it was Jones' business 'to make as much out of us and put as little into us as possible'. There were, however, positive aspects to Dickens' time at the school; he spoke well of the English teacher, Mr. Taylor, who had features in common with Mr. Mell in David Copperfield and the Latin teacher, who "took great pains when he saw intelligence and a desire to learn"<sup>4</sup>. By the time Dickens left in 1827 he had won the Latin prize.

While Dickens, as the son of a clerk, acquired some formal education, provision for the poor was far less readily assured. Wider access was facilitated by the non-sectarian, British and Foreign School Society (founded in 1808), and the strongly religious National Society for promoting the Education of the poor in the principles of the Established Church (founded 1811); both used the large - scale monitorial system, and between them they administered over 18,000 schools by 1851. Dickens objected to the National Society's insistence on church intervention in education declaring that the "Catechism is wholly inapplicable to the state of ignorance that now prevails"<sup>5</sup> This comment is characteristic of a larger controversy : for much of the nineteenth century the issue of religious education proved to be the key obstacle in developing a pervasive national school system. Dickens developed this idea imaginatively in 'A December Vision', which contains a portrait of priests and teachers arguing over but never agreeing on what to teach"<sup>6</sup>

Dickens found an ally in his promotion of non-sectarian education and concern for the poor and deprived in James Kay – Shuttleworth (1804 – 77), a former assistant poor – law, commissioner, statistician and critic of the monitorial system, who in 1839 became the first secretary of the committee of the Privy Council on Education and laid the foundation for a national system of popular education. He opened the first teacher training college (in Battersea, 1840); reported on the training of pauper children (1841); instituted the pupil – teacher apprentice system to counter the shortage and poor quality of elementary teachers (1846) and developed an inspectorate for those schools which received government grants. Dickens made his acquaintance with Kay Shuttleworth in 1846 and found that they both shared an interest in Ragged Schools, those institutions which, as their name suggests, accepted the raggedest of children.

In 1843 Dickens began his frequent visits to these schools, and became one of their most prominent supporters, though he was also aware of their limitations, particularly the lack of qualified teaching staff. Ragged Schools found their way into his journalism and his fiction, where Charley Hexam in the novel Our Mutual Friend calls his first school, a ragged school, "temple of good intentions."<sup>7</sup> Dickens even wrote to Kay-Shuttleworth proposing that they establish a model ragged school : he enthusiastically declared "surely you and I could set one going"<sup>8</sup>.

While Kay-Shuttleworth's influence and expertise were recognised by both Dickens and Angela Burdett – Coutts (who enlisted the reformer's aid in developing the marks system for Urania Cottage), there were other issues on which he and Dickens diverged, particularly educational methods, school inspections and teachers' training.

Dickens' great interest in the prevalent educational systems can be gauged from the fact that he did not merely refer to them in his novels or allude to them in his journals, letters and speeches. He gave a lifelike picture of what he had seen in his various novels, exposing the numerous ills and thereby drawing public attention to the very unsatisfactory, even unhappy and sadistic conditions in many of these so called temples of education.

<sup>3</sup>. Charles Dickens : Speech 240, (London, May 11, 1864)

<sup>4</sup>. Charles Dickens : Household Words, (A weekly journal 11 October 1851)

<sup>5</sup>. Letters of Charles Dickens 16 September 1843.

<sup>6</sup>. Charles Dickens : Household Words, (A weekly journal 14 December 1850)

<sup>7</sup>. Charles Dickens : Our Mutual Friend Ch. 2.1.

<sup>8</sup>. Letters of Charles Dickens 28 March 1846.

One teaching strategy singled out by Dickens for criticism in his novel Hard Times was the object lesson, originally conceived by the swiss educationalist Johann Pestalozzi (1746–1827) as a method of instruction deriving from children's own experiences and suited to their particular stage of development, but distorted in its translation into English by Charles and Elizabeth Mayes, particularly through the latter's Lesson on Objects (1831). Form acquired ascendancy over subject matter, producing lessons whose vocabulary and content including latinate phrases and scientific jargon were not suited to children's experience. Kay Shuttleworth helped to popularize the object lesson by including it in the curriculum for his Battersea Teacher Training College, which then became the model for many others. Dickens' critique is embodied in the exchange between Gradgrind, Bitzer and Sissy Jupe over the proper definition of a horse. Bitzer, who has learned a definition and Granivorous, whereas Sissy, the horse – breaker's daughter, dubbed 'Girl number twenty', is reprimanded for possessing "no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals"<sup>9</sup> The object lesson is also recalled in Nicholas Nickleby, where Squeers describes a horse as "a quadruped and quadruped's Latin for beast, as everybody that's gone through the grammar knows"<sup>10</sup>.

The educational critique in Hard Times confirms Dickens' familiarity with pedagogical developments. He had read Kay-Shuttleworth's Public Education (1853), and lamented the "supernatural dreariness"<sup>11</sup> of its supporting tables and statistics, Dickens asked W.H. Wills to obtain for him a copy of the Education Committee's examination for teachers, for use in the opening chapters.

The novel's depiction of the government inspector, identified as the "thirdgentleman"<sup>12</sup> owes its inspiration to the art critic and designer Henry Cole (1808 – 82), one of the prime movers behind the Great Exhibition of 1851, who had recently been appointed Superintendent of the Department of Practical Art. Dickens reflected the recent introduction of elementary drawing into the curriculum, and satirized Coles's direction of industrial design for consumer goods, by having this 'professed pugilist' test the children's judgement about whether or not to 'paper a room with representations of horses'.<sup>13</sup> The decidedly negative response and the equation of taste with fact which Cole seems to have received with good humour, confirms Dicken's disapproval of such unimaginative exponents of rotational aesthetics.

The presentation of Mr. M. Choakumchild is further evidence of Dicken's interest in contemporary developments. The school master is the product of Kay Shuttleworth's pupil – teacher system, which apprenticed proficient boys and girls to school managers for five years, before allowing them to enter the training colleges for a maximum of three years and then to graduate as certified teachers; the scheme produced its first "Queen's Scholars" in 1853. While Dickens had argued against the employment of the "unqualified individuals"<sup>14</sup> as teachers he also deprecated what he considered "Kay Shuttleworthian nonsense"<sup>15</sup> (letter of 9 December 1856). Thus he presented M. Choakumchild as one of those who had "been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs. The list of subjects mastered, ranging from orthography, etymology, syntax and prosody to all the productions, manners and customs of all the countries" left little time to develop teaching skills. As Dickens noted, "If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more"<sup>16</sup>.

In the novel Our Mutual Friend Bradley Headstone is a stipendiary teacher. He is well paid, and expected to train the pupil teachers placed under him. This arrangement, although a good initiative on the part of the government, often failed; either because the teacher was himself lacking in knowledge, or, because, although he was knowledgeable, his temperament, often unsympathetic, and sometimes even vicious, was an impediment in fostering mutual respect and understanding between the teacher and the pupil teacher, in this case Headstone and Hexam.

<sup>9</sup>. Charles Dickens : Hard Times Book, (Sheldon Publication, London) I Ch II.

<sup>10</sup>. Charles Dickens : Nicholas Nickleby, (Sheldon Publication, London) Ch VIII

<sup>11</sup>. Letters of 1 April 1853, 25 January 1854.

<sup>12</sup>. Charles Dickens : Hard Times Book I Ch II.

<sup>13</sup>. Ibid

<sup>14</sup>. Household word IV, 13 March 1852, Household world V, 11 September 1852.

<sup>15</sup>. Letters of December 1856.

<sup>16</sup>. Charles Dickens : Our Mutual Friends, (Macmillan Publication, Cambridge, 1962) Book-II Ch-I.

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Because the middle-class fee paying institutions of Dickens' day did not depend on either charitable subscriptions or state funding, there was greater variation in standards and conditions and thus more opportunity for imaginative expression. Many of the establishments for girls, about which Dickens knew relatively little, are presented comically, including Minerva House, in which the pupils "acquired a smattering of everything and a knowledge of nothing"<sup>17</sup>; Westgate House, to which Mr. Pickwick is lured by the threat of Jingle's elopement; Mrs. Wackles' Day School, where writing, arithmetic, dancing, music and general fascination are taught, Miss Monflather's Boarding and Day Establishment, into which "nothing in the shape of a man ..... no, not even a milkman was suffered, without special license, to pass," and the Lilliputian College in Tom Tiddler's Ground run by Miss Pupford, who gives a lecture on the mythology of the heathens, always carefully excluding cupid from recognition. The perspective adopted in these portraits is that of a casual adult observer, who visits an establishment generally kept by a mature, narrow-minded observer, usually a spinster. The humorous character of these vignettes is evidence of a typically patriarchal perspective Dickens shared with most men of the time; an ideal of femininity which emphasised the teaching of domestic crafts and responsibilities, rather than imaginative or intellectual pursuits.

When Dickens turns his attention to fee-paying establishments for boys, they are treated far more seriously and the perspective is generally that of the anguished pupil. Such is the character of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*, run by the sadistic Wackford Squeers. The novel served as a vehicle for exposing the dreadful conditions in the Yorkshire schools – those private venture boarding schools which catered for unwanted, often illegitimate – children, who were kept back in school throughout the year at cheap rates.

While Squeer's designs are undeniably malevolent, in *Dombey and Son* Dickens focuses on a well-intentioned school master whose shortcoming is a deficient methodology. Little Paul progresses from Mrs. Pipchin's, where the system was not to encourage a child's mind to develop and expand itself like a young flower, but to open it by force like an oyster, to Dr. Blimber's academy, where he is sent by a father impatient for his son's advancement. The pompous Blimber runs 'a great hothouse, in which there was a forcing apparatus incessantly at work, assisted by his daughter Cornelia, young but 'dry and sandy with working in the graves of deceased languages' and Mr. Feeder, BA, 'the human barrel organ'.

Dickens seized the opportunity to offer a critique on the premature acquisition of mathematical skill, but more importantly of classical languages, which were not only essential for university entrance, but were seen as valued culture tokens for increasing self-respect. The boy's plight is communicated through Mr. Feeder's method of instruction. The boys knew no rest from the pursuit of strong hearted verbs, savage noun substantives, inflexible syntactic passages, and ghosts of exercises that appeared to them in their dreams. They reach the conclusion that all the fancies of the poets and lessons of the sages were a mere 'collection of words and grammar and have no other meaning in the world'. It is interesting to note that although Paul Dombey's death is accelerated by the Blimber regime he and other pupils like Toots regard the school with affection.

### **Conclusion**

Thus we can conclude that Dickens believed in the extension of education on sound principles to all citizens. He exposed what he considered abuses and deficiencies and praised what he believed were positive developments. He was a pioneer in introducing the theme of education into prose fiction and proved, in his correspondence, journalism and speeches, that he had greater familiarity with the subject than most of his rivals. In the year of his death Parliament passed the Elementary Education Act, which further raised the standard of teacher training and effectively inaugurated compulsory schooling. If Dickens made any practical contribution to achieving this end, it was by reinforcing the public's sense of moral feeling and providing additional momentum for change.

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<sup>17</sup>. Charles Dickens : *Pickwick Papers* XVI.

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