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## Educational Establishments for Girls in Dickens' Novels

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### **Abstract:**

*Through this research work the condition of the education of girls during the nineteenth century England will be clear. It was during this time the education of girls was not given equal importance as that of boys. Needle work, stitching, embroidery and knowledge of all the household chores were considered to be the prime education of the girl child. Charles Dickens in his novels has shown the pathetic state of girl education during the Victorian age. It was not so because of the teachers alone but equally because of the parents wish.*

**Key Words : Education, unsatisfactory, knowledge, maid, living, embroidery, needle work**

In nineteenth century England children received education in various ways, but for the most part they were at the mercy of cruel, unscrupulous and shortsighted teachers. To make matters worse, ego-centred parents often viewed education as a mere means to an end, Education for its own sake was not viewed as being necessary, especially in the case of the girl child. The condition of girls' education, in particular, was far from satisfactory. Dickens was deeply concerned at the lack of interest in the education of girls. He said:

"How much may depend on the education of daughters and the conduct of mothers; how much of the brightest part of our old national character may be perpetuated by their wisdom or filtered away by their wisdom, or filtered away by their folly – how much of it may have been lost already, and how much more is in danger of vanishing every day are questions ..... well deserving a little serious consideration"<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Strong, a teacher in the novel David Copperfield had been to a university, but the other teachers described in the novels of Charles Dickens were mostly untrained. Several of them had come into the teaching profession through the time – honoured way. Few owners of private schools, the New Castle Commission reported, had received any training. Almost all of them had started schools either because they had failed in other pursuits; or because, they had been unexpectedly left in a state of destitution. This was a frequent complaint, particularly about female teachers. As Fraser said, the only qualification of many a governess was that she had twelve months' apprenticeship in an inferior boarding school, and her father had died a week ago.

In Dickens' novels many women, young or otherwise, turn to teaching when, for some reason or the other, their financial position becomes precarious. Depending on how he views these characters, their efforts are seen as either gallant or ludicrous.

Teaching or governing was, indeed, one of the few occupations open to a middle class girl or woman who needed to make a living. Mostly, the junior staff of a school comprised of those girls or women who had no apparent prospects, as they were illegitimate. Dickens presents such plight in his novel The Old Curiosity Shop where the downtrodden Miss Edwards is apprenticed at Miss Monflathers' establishment. "Being motherless and poor, she worked at the school for nothing : taught for nothing – teaching others what she learned, for nothing – and set down and rated as something immeasurably less than nothing, by all the dwellers in the house."<sup>2</sup>

The same expedient had of course occurred to Dickens' own mother, shortly before her husband was imprisoned for debt. Having decided that she 'must do something', she took a house in Gower Street, and displayed on the door a large brass plate – MRS. DICKENS' ESTABLISHMENT. Dickens recalled distributing many leaflets about the school – "but that nobody ever came to the school, nor anybody ever

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<sup>1</sup>. Charles Dickens : Sketches of Young Couples (Montana, U.S.A. Kessinger Publishing, 2004)

<sup>2</sup>. Charles Dickens : The Old Curiosity Shop (Boston, U.S., Chapman and Hall, 193, Piccadilly and Ticknor and Fields, 1858) Chapter XXXI P. 234.

proposed to come. Nor were the least preparations made to receive anybody". The family's situation remained the same and they got on very badly with the butcher and baker.

Almost exactly the same observations are recalled in David Copperfield about Mrs. Micawber's Boarding Establishment for Young Ladies, which attracts no visitors except creditors. Dickens, repeating himself over an incident which clearly had impressed itself on his memory, makes Mrs. Wilfer, in Our Mutual Friend, display the same LADIES SCHOOL doorplate, with the same lack of result.

The Old Curiosity Shop presents a tragic spectacle of the trials and tribulations of a little girl named Nell. It is a moving story of a parentless child, left alone to manage and initiate itself into the ways of the world with a premature sense of care and the responsibility of a grandfather. Nell is a fourteen-year old girl who should be studying but, instead, she is forced to bear the burden of providing and caring for her irresponsible grandfather. In Nell, Dickens presents a child suffering because of her guardian's squandering habits and 'psychotic irresponsibility.'<sup>3</sup> The novel abounds in memorable accounts of "age ironically protected by childhood"<sup>4</sup>. The figure of the starving destitute child-heroine hunted by some money hounds, comes as one of Dicken's most virulent attack on the society of the time, blinded by money. It lays bare an age, grown utterly insensitive to the hardships of little children.

Here is the early stage of Dickens' concern for uncared for, neglected children, which occupies his main attention in his later novels. As Collins observes, "Little Nell and other rejected ones whom the world had too long forgotten and too often misused, had formed a bond between him and his public".<sup>5</sup> Like the other child characters of his previous novels, Little Nell is also a representative child of the age. But this time it is not a rejected and misused orphan boy of Dotheboys Hall but a girl, harassed and hunted by heartless people. The novel is the story of the struggle of a little girl for her very existence in heartless world.

Little Nell is a girl from the line of Dickens' child – heroines who are not little children but "little women".<sup>6</sup> She is the mistress of the house, ever busy performing the household duties of a grown – up woman. Her's is the world where children are burdened with all the worries and responsibilities "which checks their confidence and simplicity..... and demands that they share our sorrows before they are capable of entering into (our) enjoyments."<sup>7</sup>

Education of girls at this time was confined to a little proficiency in the three Rs. Those from the middle and upper classes of society learnt some foreign languages and also drawing, music and some geographical details but girls studying in schools maintained by charities were, infact, merely trained to be lady – like, meaning submissive and willing maid – servants for the rich, often the very people who maintained the charity schools.

Establishments for girls were too often places where girls acquired a smattering of everything and knowledge of nothing. The girls were taught to read, write and count, and this was considered sufficient knowledge for them. In Sketches by Boz, Dickens wondered whether the course female education had taken at the time, whether the pursuit of giddy frivolities and empty nothings, had tended to render women unfit for that quiet domestic life, in which it was believed, they shine far more beautifully, than in the most crowded assembly. It was a question often debated, at a time when, as one girl complained at the end of her highly expensive education, "Everything was taught to us in the inverse ratio to its true importance"<sup>8</sup>

In the novel 'The Old Curiosity Shop' Dickens describes two such girls' schools. Mrs. Wackle's School was called a Ladies Seminary but was, in reality, a very small day school for young ladies of 'proportionate dimensions'. The several duties of instruction in this establishment were thus discharged : "English grammar, composition, geography and the use of the dumb-bells, by Miss Melissa Wackles; writing, arithmetic, dancing, music and 'general fascination' by Miss Sophy Wackles; the art of needle – work, marking and samplery, by Miss Jane Wackles; corporal punishment, fasting and other tortures and terrors, by Mrs.

<sup>3</sup>. Monroe Engel : The Maturity of Dickens, (Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press, 1959) p 99

<sup>4</sup>. Martin Fido : Charles Dickens (London, Hamlyn Publication 1968), p 56

<sup>5</sup>. Philip Collins : Dickens and Education (London, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 9

<sup>6</sup>. G.K. Chesterton : Charles Dickens, (London, Penguin Publication, 1906) p.94

<sup>7</sup>. Charles Dickens : The Old Curiosity Shop, Ch. II, p. 41

<sup>8</sup>. Charles Dickens : Sketches by Boz', London Recreations P 94.

Wackles. Miss Melissa Wackles was the eldest daughter, Miss Sophy the next, and Miss Jane the youngest daughter. Miss Melissa might have seen five and thirty summers or thereabout and verged on the autumnal, Miss Sophy was a fresh, good humoured, buxom girl of twenty; and Miss Jane, numbered scarcely sixteen years. Mrs. Wackles was an excellent, but rather venomous old lady of three – score”.<sup>9</sup>

Mrs. Wackles's school is described to show the frivolous nature of such so – called private educational institutions, and to strike again at the abominable practice of abusing children by ‘corporal punishment, fasting, and other tortures and terrors’ by venomous old ladies.

Miss Monflathers's school was a boarding establishment for young ladies in which the dignity of their social position was duly impressed upon them; with the terrible danger of their yielding in any way to their natural impulses, all of which were assumed to be very wicked; with the sinfulness of sympathizing with or in any way recognising the lower classes; with the impropriety of knowing the fact that there was any wrong in the world to be righted or any suffering to be relieved; with the inestimable value of aristocratic birth; and with the most important truth that men are very dangerous animals, to be carefully shunned.

Little Nell was sent to the establishment of Miss Monflathers with recommendations of Mrs. Jarley's, being temporarily in the employ of that lady. Miss Monflathers's Boarding and Day Establishment was a large house, with a high wall, and a large garden gate with a large brass plate, and a small gateway through which Miss Monflather's parlour maid inspected all visitors before admitting them. Nobody in the shape of a man no, not even a milkman, was allowed, without special licence, to pass that gate. Even the taxgatherer, who was stout, and wore spectacles and a broadbrimmed hat, had the taxes handed through the gateway. More obdurate than a gate of adamant or brass, this gate of Miss Monflather's frowned on all mankind. The butcher also respected it as a ‘gate mystery’, and left off whistling when he rang the bell.

Miss Monflathers also points to the acquirement of useless feminine 'accomplishments', and adds another note characteristic of the private schoolmistress, a snobbish gentility. She puts on trial little Nell for being 'a wax-work child'<sup>10</sup> in Mrs. Jarley's employ. Instead of improving her mind by the constant contemplation of the steam-engine and earning a comfortable and independent subsistence from two-and-nine pence to three shillings per week she asks the child :

"Don't you know that the harder you are at work, the happier you are?"

“How doth the little-” murmured one of the teachers.

“The little busy bee”, says Miss Monflathers, drawing herself up, “is applicable only to genteel children.”

"In books, or work, or heartfelt play," it is quite right as far as these genteel children are concerned, and the ‘work’ meant painting on velvet, fancy needlework, or, embroidery. In such cases as the children at her establishment, she says, pointing to Nell, with her parasol, and in the case of all poor people's children it should, she says, be read thus:

"In work, work, work. In work alway

Let my first year be past,

That I may give for every day

Some good account at last"<sup>11</sup>

These and other such passages in the novels relate to the feminine ideal which Dickens always states or implies: an ideal which however insipid and incomplete it appears to later generations, he shared with most men of his time.

Kingsley's view, "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever," is notoriously famous. Even Tennyson expresses this ideal against the feminist voices in The Princess : -

“Not learned, save in gracious household ways,

<sup>9</sup>. Charles Dickens : The Old Curiosity Shop, p. 149

<sup>10</sup>. Charles Dickens : The Old Curiosity Shop, Ch. XXXII.

<sup>11</sup>. Charles Dickens : The Old Curiosity shop Ch – XXXI p 234 – 6.

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Not perfect, nay, but full of tender wants,  
No, Angel, but a dearer being, all dipt  
In Angel instincts, breathing paradise,  
Interpreter between the Gods and men ....."<sup>12</sup>

Dickens exposed the cruelty of Miss Monflathers, as a type of Christian rectitude towards Nell, whom she assumed to be very wicked, and the tendency of society to treat teachers with contempt, because they were not rich. "The tone of Miss Monflather's lofty criticism in language and thought, quite incomprehensible to the person admonished, is very true to life in cases of conventional people, who take no pains to understand child nature or human nature in any phase, except its depravity".<sup>13</sup> And this was specially true in the case of the girl child's education.

The heartlessness of the distinction between the 'genteel' children and poor children is clearly pointed out. There could scarcely be a more unchristlike treatment of the poor from like thought than the one that would prohibit the children the enjoyment of their natural tendency to play. No civilization in which either by deliberate purpose or by criminal negligence the children of the poorest are left without the privilege and the means for full, free play should dare to call itself Christian. Yet Miss Monflathers' parody aptly represented the practical outworking of civilization at the time of Dickens, and long since too, with regard to poor children. Miss Monflathers told Miss Edwards majestically that she "must not take the air today",<sup>14</sup> and contemptuously ordered her to remain in her room all day.

This was done by the writer to condemn the common practice of keeping children in at recess or confining them indoors as a form of punishment. Dickens always thought it a crime against childhood to punish a child by robbing it of any of its natural rights to food, or fresh air, or free exercise. The ecstasy of passion reached by Miss Monflathers because Miss Edwards passed her without saluting her showed Dickens' attitude toward those who insisted and still insist on obeisance from those they are pleased to regard as inferiors. Public school education was often criticised because, it did not train poor children to courtesy to their superiors. Any system deserves the support of all right - thinking people if it trains the children of the poorest to hold their heads up respectfully, and look the world squarely in the face without a debasing consciousness of inferiority.

## Conclusion

Thus we can conclude that it was through his works Dickens depicted a very clear picture of the Victorian society where the role of women was not of much importance. Not much importance was given to the female folks in politics, external affairs, property or education. The education of the girl child was in a very gloomy and pathetic state be it rich or poor. Girls were considered to be the care takers or the home makers. They were educated in the field of embroidery, cooking and all the house hold affairs. It was through his novels that people got the message that it was a matter of social concern that education of girls should also be taken care of.

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<sup>12</sup>. Lord Alfred Tennyson : **Princess** (Dover Street, Edward Maxon and Co., 1866), p.72

<sup>13</sup>. Philip Collins : **Dickens and Education**, (New York, London, Macmillan and Co., Ltd. 1963), p.125

<sup>14</sup>. Charles Dickens : **The Old Curiosity Shop** Ch. XXXI.