

Children in the Victorian Era as Depicted in Dickens' Novels

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1. Theoretical Framework

The aim of this article is to analyse from a general perspective the depiction of children and their education in Dickens' novel *David Copperfield* in comparison with Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor.

1.1 Charles Dickens' Childhood

The Victorian novelist Charles Dickens was born in 1812 in the city of Portsmouth and died in 1870 in his house Gads Hills Place, Kent. His father John Dickens is a figure of great importance when studying Dickens' childhood and his depiction of children in his novels. John Dickens was a navy clerk and during his life "he steadily moved forward through the ranks of promotion -(however he was not good with money)-" (Ackroyd, 2004, p. 7).

One of Charles Dickens' biographers, Peter Ackroyd, provides an insight into the personality of John Dickens: "There is a sort of emptiness, an infantilism, a refusal to control himself" (Ackroyd, 2004, p. 9). This personality will lead the family towards disaster since John Dickens borrowed great amounts of money which he was unable to return.



Figure 1: Charles Dickens

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His inability to pay his debts had terrible consequences: John Dickens was arrested and Charles was forced to leave school and to work at a warehouse labelling pots at the age of 12.

1.2 A depiction of children in the Victorian Era through Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*.

Henry Mayhew (1812-87) was a journalist, novelist, dramatist and a social investigator. In his book *London Labour and the London Poor* Mayhew portrays the labour and the poor of London through descriptions and interviews.

The literary critics F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis point out the relation that exists between Dickens and Mayhew: "Dickens, in his constant patrolling of the streets of London - his "magic lantern" - for exercise and inspiration, [...] had plenty of opportunities of making his own observations, but Mayhew, being factual, escapes the possible charge of romanticizing or sentimentalizing his evidence" (Leavis & Leavis, 2008, p. 248). This statement shows the importance of Mayhew's work in relation to Dickens' work. Mayhew provides a journalistic and scientific account of the conditions in which the London poor and children lived during his lifetime. Therefore, by comparing Mayhew's depiction of children with Dickens' portrayal of infants it is possible to determine whether what Dickens' condemns is based on real evidence or not.

2. Victorian Children and Victorian Education

The Victorian Era was a historical time in which children often experienced violence from their families and from their teachers as Mayhew points out in the *Watercress Girl*. He also shows that some children did not see this as something inappropriate, the *Watercress girl* even says that her mother was good to her: "I always give mother my money, she's so very good to me. She don't often beat me; but, when she do, she don't play with me" (Mayhew, 2010, p. 49).

Dickens' intentions were to develop the social awareness concerning violence and children. He clearly shows his opinion on the matter in his novels.

In *David Copperfield*, violence occurs in the framework of education. When David is young and is sent to Salem House for the first time he and his classmates are beaten by Mr. Creakle with a cane.

"Mr Creakle came to where I sat, and told me that if I were famous for biting, he was famous for biting, too. He then showed me the cane, and asked me what I thought of that, for a tooth? Was it a sharp tooth, hey? Did it bite? At every question he gave me a fleshy cut with it that made me writhe; so I was very soon made free of Salem House (as Steerforth said), and very soon in tears also" (Dickens, 2004, p. 100).

The description given in *David Copperfield* shows the cruelty of Mr Creakle, who keeps on beating his pupils, and the hard conditions in which the students lived. Dickens describes David's school as "indifferently warmed", the morning school room as "a shivering-machine" and that there was a "dirty atmosphere of ink surrounding all" (Dickens, 2004, p. 117).



Figure 2: Photograph of a Victorian classroom.

In *David Copperfield* Dickens makes a direct and hard denunciation of the uselessness of the violent educational system. An adult David reflects upon the manner in which him and his classmates were taught:

"In a school carried on by sheer cruelty, whether it is presided over by a dunce or not, there is not likely to be much learnt. I believe our boys were, generally, as ignorant a set as any schoolboys in existence; they were too much troubled and knocked about to learn; they could no more do that to advantage, than any one can do anything to advantage in a life of constant misfortune, torment, and worry." (Dickens, 2004, p. 105).

Dickens' depiction of the school shows a terrible place where children lived in hard conditions and where they were constantly beaten. This causes great stress to the children and a horrible impact in their learning process. As Dickens comments, they are too worried about not getting beaten that they don't have enough energy to learn. By denouncing this Dickens is asking for a reform in the system, for a change in the learning process since he understands that education is the basis of a capable and critical adult. In *David Copperfield*, he shows that education is relevant when David goes back to school and he is able to become an integral man.

Charles Dickens could not attend Cambridge University and his dream of receiving proper education was shattered by the financial incompetence of his father (Tomalin, 2012, p. 25). This is reflected in his novels. *David Copperfield* is forced to work in hard conditions after the death of his mother. Unfortunately, orphanage was common at the time and its consequences were terrible.

Mayhew's portrayal of violence within the framework of education is very similar to Dickens' representation of education. In the story of *The Watercress Girl* the terrible consequences of violence in the school are shown:

"I used to go to school, too; but I wasn't there long. I've forgot all about it now, it's such a time ago; and mother took me away because the master whacked me, though the missus use'n't to never touch me. I didn't like him

at all. What do you think? He hit me three times, even so hard, across the face with his cane, and made me go dancing down stairs; and when mother saw the marks on my cheek, she went to blow him up, but she couldn't see him - he was afraid. That's why I left school" (Mayhew, 2010, p. 48).

The watercress girl was attending a school when she was five but had to leave it as a result of violence. This quotation shows how pointless was to hit children with a cane on the face and how defenceless they were. Her mother acknowledged the mistreatment and even though she tried to complain she was not able to speak with her daughter's teacher. This evidences that the Victorian society did not care for the safety and welfare of their children, even when a case of maltreatment was recognised by the mother and when she tried to protect her daughter the only solution found was to drop the school. The result of that is an eight year old watercress girl who worked at London's Farringdon Market and that, as Mayhew states, talked about "the bitter struggles of life, with the calm earnestness of one who had endured them all" (Mayhew, 2010, p. 47).

3. Conclusion

The work of Charles Dickens depicts the worst and best of the Victorian society; it is a complete account of the sufferings of children.

Both Mayhew and Dickens illustrate the hardness of the life of children; Mayhew does it from scientific perspective whereas Dickens does it from a novelistic perspective. The analysis carried out in this article shows that Dickens' work was indeed faithful to the reality of the Victorian Era. He was concerned about the conditions and the future of the poor and orphaned infants of his time.



Charles Dickens wanted to exhibit the bare suffering of children who had no chance of having a future in order to shock the Victorian society and to make these children visible to the upper classes. He made those children visible to every reader. Dickens wanted to develop the social awareness of the Victorian society and asked for reform and change for the children of the Victorian Era.

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