

Charles Dickens : More a Compromiser than a Reformer

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Abstract. Dickens was the most successful and popular writer of his generation. The present paper will study a selection of his novels, as well as a range of his journalism and short fiction in its contemporary cultural, social and political contexts. Drawing on and extending older traditions, Dickens's writings played a central role in the development of the novel during the mid nineteenth century, often in controversial ways. His fiction actively intervened in a wide range of contemporary issues and debates between the 1830s and 1870. These include an investigation of modern urban society, particularly London; poverty, and state responses to it; the nature of capitalism and the relationship between social classes and between the underworld and the powerful. Dickens also explores the family as both a social unity and a shaper of the self; the nature and meaning of modern childhood and forms of femininity and masculinity; and the slippery relationship between the "normal" and the "abnormal". Dickens was familiar with many contemporary debates on the nature of the self, and his work explores a range of aspects of the nature of the conscious and unconscious mind: dreams, states of trance, double self and the working of memory, and these will be an important aspects of the module.

Keywords : Compromiser; reformer; contemporary culture; victorian modernity; double self.

Dickens was not only the first great urban novelist in England, but also one of the most important social compromisers who used fiction effectively to criticise economic, social, and moral abuses in the Victorian era. Dickens showed compassion and empathy towards the vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of English society, and contributed to several important social reforms. Dickens's deep social commitment and awareness of social ills are derived from his traumatic childhood experiences when his father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison under the Insolvent Debtors Act of 1813, and he at the age of twelve worked in a shoe-blacking factory. In his adult life Dickens developed a strong social conscience, an ability to empathise with the victims of social and economic injustices.

Dickens believed in the ethical and political potential of literature, and the novel in particular, and he treated his fiction as a springboard for debates about moral and social compromise. In his novels of social analysis Dickens became an outspoken critic of unjust economic and social conditions. His deeply-felt social commentaries helped raise the collective awareness of the reading public. Dickens contributed significantly to the emergence of public opinion which was gaining an increasing influence on the decisions of the authorities.

Dickens was a great moralist and a perceptive social compromiser. He was

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by no means completely under the influence of Carlyle, but he followed his teaching when he exposed the ills of Victorian society. Although his fiction was not politically subversive, he called to remedy acute social abuses. Dickens was not the first novelist to draw attention of the reading public to the deprivation of the lower classes in England, but he was much more successful than his predecessors in exposing the ills of the industrial society including class division, poverty, bad sanitation, privilege and meritocracy and the experience of the metropolis. In common with many nineteenth-century authors, Dickens used the novel as a repository of social conscience. Dickens succeeded in making Victorian public opinion more aware of the conditions of the poor. He depicted persuasively the disorder, squalor, blight, decay, and the human misery of a modern industrial city. Although Dickens's early works implied faith in the new commercial middle class as opposed to the old aristocracy, the writer saw the discrepancy between the ideas and practice of this new class and the principles of morality and ethic.

Dickens as a social compromiser exerted a profound influence on later novelists committed to social analysis. Some of his concerns with the Condition-of-England Question were further dealt with in the novels of Charles Kingsley, George Eliot, George Gissing, George Orwell, and recently in the postmodern novels of Martin Amis and Zadie Smith. He was undoubtedly a novelist who penetrated into the hearts of most of the people of his age. A writer capable of finding a place in the hearts of people is either a reformer who is familiar with the demanding issues of his age and the ways of tackling those issues, or a compromiser who knows how to deal with the society's individuals in equal terms. Dickens's fame as a reformer of his society has been discussed by a lot of his critics. However, his novels and letters as well as his own words point out that he tries to strengthen the dominant ideologies of his age and to be in the mainstream of the ruling middle class. The aim of the present study is to suggest that Dickens is better to be considered a compromiser - a subject in Althusserian view, who follows the demands of his society, one who has internalized the dominant ideologies of his age and tries to establish those ideas in his society - rather than a reformer. To come to such a view, an overall view of his novels in respect to the characters he creates, as well as his letters seem necessary. As such, he cannot be considered a reformer of his age.

In his survey of English fiction, W. J. Dawson writes that Charles Dickens is "the spokesman of the masses; he writes for them and lives by their praise; he is understood of the common people, and delights in kinship with them; he may thus claim to have been the creator of the democratic novel". Later critics like G. B. Shaw and Ernest A. Baker also find in Dickens a strong support of the working class and a vehement criticism of the governing classes. One must assume that these critics often base their judgements exclusively on the passages of explicit condemnation of the social order, for a close reading of the texts reveals contradictions in Dickens's social attitude. Dickens was familiar with the social problems and issues of his age because of his active participation in social activities and his involvement with different social

institutions. It is his familiarity with social issues that lead many critics to consider him a reformer. According to Cunningham, "both in his lifetime and afterwards, Dickens had a reputation as a reformer. Many have credited him with creating the climate of opinion that facilitated the reforms in education, public health, and criminal law that helped to make Britain a safer and less strife-ridden society".(158) These kinds of reforms, attributed to him can be considered the new ideas and ideologies that the society seeks to replace the previous ones as the age is in transition. Every era of transformation brings forward new questions with itself. Therefore, what Dickens does is what the transitory society and the ruling class demands. Literature, especially novel, is a means in the hands of the society. It is actually one of its apparatus, according to Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus", which establishes the dominant ideologies. Dickens is exactly in accordance with the dominant ideologies of his age, and his novels try to establish and strengthen them. According to Althusser, novel has the quality of attracting all the subjects of a society. Through its appealing quality the members of the societies become subjects, even good ones i.e. they become the persons "who submit to a higher authority, and are therefore stripped off all" initiatives, one who is docile and obedient. (Althusser, 701) In its traditional sense, a reformer is a hindrance in the way of the governing class. However, what Dickens achieves in his novels is what the dominant class demands of its society to observe. Because of the transitory nature of the period, social, moral, cultural, religious, educational, and economic changes seem necessary. The important point is that, in those aspects that Dickens seems to be a reformer, he only highlights these necessities. Even if he seems to appear as a reformer in some cases, on the whole he leads the circumstances in the direction of the dominant class observations and the public good.

Besides, his observation of dominant ideologies leads Dickens to treat equally most of the individuals of his society. Paroissien believes, "corresponding with people from every quarter of society on equal terms represents one of the defining features of Dickens's correspondence". (39) Actually, he deals in equal terms with everybody in order to penetrate into their hearts. His familiarity with their demands assists him to correspond with them all and to make real subjects out of them. To do this, he shows a kind of empathy with everybody in an optimistic way. If anything happens to people whom he is acquainted with, he feels his own responsibility both to show his concern as well as his advice. There are a lot of such cases in his letters; to give an example, it is worth mentioning that on 3rd November, 1858 a mill owner was bankrupt; he wrote a letter to him, saying that "pray do not let it cast you down too much. What has happened to you, has happened to many thousands of good and honourable men, and will happen again in like manner, to the end of all things". (Paroissien 40) Levine claims, "Dickens was the great mythmaker of the new urban middle class, finding in the minutiae of the lives of the shabby genteel, the civil servants, the 'ignobly decent', ..., great comic patterns of love and community". (160) Dickens never forgets his desire of moralizing. Not only in his letters, but also in his novels, he reveals himself as a moralist, and a moralist can be viewed as a real subject - an authority who leads the

individuals to their subjective roles - and not a reformer. It is his moralizing quality that makes him deal with culture, especially popular culture, in order to be taken seriously. Dickens's view of novel as a genre which represents culture is discussed by John. According to her, "Dickens insists that novels, and the popular entertainments they foreground, be taken seriously". (142) To Dickens, popular culture, the kind of dramatic novels he writes for the people who work in factories and industry, provides these people with an imaginary world which leads them back to humanity, as they are mostly dealing with non-human tools and machines. Actually, novels work with moral, educational, as well as entertaining functions.

These notions mentioned by Dickens himself and brought forward by John clarify the role of a real subject who tries to internalize the dominant ideologies among all the individuals of a society by interpellation, in Althusserian sense; that is by addressing the individuals of the society in a special way, and installing in them a specific kind of identity as the members of the society. Through these notions it becomes obvious that Dickens is leading the people to their social functions and obligations. It is the society and its demands that are of significance to him, while humanity has its own value in the sense that becomes a means in his hand. His concern over violence is very important. Since violence should be removed from the society, and since the society demands obedient and docile subjects, Dickens tries to describe the circumstances of violence as disgusting ones; it is in these circumstances that he intrudes and talks with his readers. In these long descriptions, he depicts the whole universe in a hellish situation and fire, smoke, ashes, and flame cover the whole surrounding. Of course, these sceneries seem redundant to the plots of the novels, but they are there to reveal the author's thoughts. He associates such violent and hellish situation with bad subjects. In fact, the savages and the cynics are associated with the destroyers of violence and gentility; they are associated with violence; these savages and cynics are either punished or converted to good subjects in his novels. The point is that he is aware of the inherent potentiality of culture, whether high or low. Therefore, he utilizes both in his novels. Dickens tries to convey to the reader that these cultural modes work in the direction of health creation, not in the direction of corruption. As John believes, Dickens can be considered a novelist whose base of novel is a melodrama, one which is "an intensely emotional genre in which a passion felt is a passion expressed" (147), and in which the good ends happily and the bad unhappily. This use of melodrama has also its own social function. Dickens employs it to strengthen the pillars of his society. It has its own emotional, moral, and populist tendencies, and hence, is useful for Dickens's purpose.

Accordingly, what Dickens portrays and propagandises is creating earnest young gentlemen such as Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewit, David Copperfield, Tom Sawyer, Oliver Twist and Pip, and angelic young women such as Kate Nickleby, Rose Maylie, Ruth Pinch, Florence Dombey, Agnes Wickfield, Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit. He observes the Victorian culture in respect to family, according to

which, "men belonged to the world of work, women to the domestic world, and home was to be a haven for men from the heartless realities of work. (McKnight, 187) In this respect, although in very rare cases, it is felt that Dickens blurs gender roles, he obviously observes the dominant gender norms within the social context. Therefore, most of his female characters are portrayed as embodying the passive and selfless traits of the angel in the house, and if they are depicted assertively, they are given monstrous qualities because "assertiveness is a male trait and therefore seems unnatural when adopted by a female who is supposed to be angelic". (192) Dickens punishes assertive and monstrous women such as Miss Havisham, Mrs. Joe, Miss Barbary, Mrs. Nickleby and Mrs. Skewton to revenge them for neglecting their own Victorian norms of motherhood and being bad subjects of the society. Besides, Dickens employs other Ideological State Apparatuses in his own novels to internalize dominant ideologies. According to Miller, "embodied in the prison, the workhouse, the factory, the school, discipline became, quite precisely a topic of Dickensian representation". (123) These are Ideological State Apparatuses, the means of transforming individuals into docile subjects. In this respect, Dickens's heroes become those like Oliver Twist who should turn and submit themselves to the demands of the middle class society. Oliver is promised to "access to the culture represented by the books in his (Mr. Brownlow's) library." It is Mr. Brownlow's books that will create an obedient subject from Oliver by "his absolute submission to the norms, protocols, and regulations of the middle class family". (Miller 124) It is worth mentioning that education and family, as two of major Ideological State Apparatuses, play important roles in Dickens's novels, and the characters who have access to them are rewarded by Dickens.

To conclude, we can say that Dickens's ability in understanding the Victorian age and its spirit as well as its demands makes him such a great novelist that some critics consider him a reformer of his own age. However, the prevailing trait in his novels is his concern with the individuals' social functions. What he tries to achieve is teaching his readers to be good civilized people. Therefore, he is much concerned with home, family, close personal ties, honesty, charity, and high standards of morality in his novels. He deals with these themes in order to lead the people to their social obligations. To do this he depicts bad characters as individuals who are isolated, withdrawn, vulnerable and passive, and if they are shown active, their activity is depicted as demonic and victimizing; they are shown friendless as well as identity-less because Dickens wants to make his readers not sympathise with them but hate them. What he desires to absorb his readers is the internalisation of the dominant ideologies of the middle class. Along with other mentioned qualities discussed, the middle class tries to internalise the idea of self-help and self-made man as well as competition in the society, and tries to deal with poverty as a sign of sin in people. Although many critics consider Dickens as a reformer because of his dealing with poverty in his novels, this dealing is in complete accordance with the internalisation of the idea of self-made man. All his successful characters reveal the point. However, his own words in 'Methodist Magazine' in 1863 are most revealing, "If a man does not succeed, it is his own fault". (885) As

such, he is better to be considered a compromiser, a real Subject, who compromises with the ruling class and interpellates the individuals of his society to make real subjects out of them.

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