

Bleak House: Dickens's Nostalgia in the Portrait of Children

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Introduction

The Victorian era was the period that heralded the dominance of middle-classes. There was a tangible gap between the working-class and the bourgeoisie. Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81) coined the term 'Two nations' in his novel, *Sybil or The Two Nations* (1845), claiming that England was divided into two nations, one for the rich and the other for the poor, due to the class society of Victorian times. While Disraeli points out the economic gap between the middle-class and the lower-class, Dickens illustrates the interconnection between them in *Bleak House* (1852-53). 'Bleak House' is a model of English society in which all English men from the working-class Jo to Sir Leicester Dedlock are linked together like members of one family (Miller 30). It suggests that the rotten Victorian society is embodied as the small community 'Bleak House.' In addition, all characters from different social classes are related by litigation, *Jarndyce and Jarndyce* in the Court of Chancery in England.

In the society 'Bleak House,' Dickens depicts child characters from the middle-class to the working-class, such as Esther Summerson (who grows up as the story proceeds), Jellyby children, Pardiggle children and Jo. The conditions which surround them are improper and they seem to be neglected by adults. Esther is born as an illegitimate child and the orphaned Jo works and lives in the slum. As to Jellyby's and Pardiggle's children, it is ironic that their mother is involved in philanthropy and absolutely indifferent to her own children. However, the child characters tend to be emotionally strong. It is little wonder that Dickens represents child characters as a symbol of hope in the corrupt society and as an ironic device to criticize adults. This essay will examine the images of childhood Dickens represents in the miniature Victorian society 'Bleak House.'

Esther Summerson: A Girl with Ideal Victorian Femininity

Bleak House is a story in which one of the narrators, Esther Summerson, discovers the truth about her birth and her unknown mother. She is an orphan who is raised by her aunt and godmother, Miss Barbary. Lady Dedlock who is later revealed to be Esther's mother is a disgrace to Miss Barbary as well as to the society since she is unmarried when giving birth to Esther. The child without father was considered to be dishonour in the Victorian society. Though the sin does not lie in Esther, Miss Barbary asserts that she is not worthy of being alive owing to her mother: 'It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you never been born!' (*Bleak House* 26) Since her childhood, Esther is "nobody," which means that she is not allowed to acknowledge the real self as Ayres states (141). It is as though Esther represented her father named "Nemo" which means "no one" in Latin, who dies a mysterious death.

Instead, Esther's doll, to which she discloses all her secrets, reflects her true self. D.W. Winnicott argues that children use transitional objects such as [a] doll to compensate for anxieties that accompany the process of differentiation from the mother (91). However, the doll is a medium for Esther to release her suppressed feelings towards Miss Barbary. In spite of Miss Barbary's stern treatment, Esther blames herself for her inability of loving Miss Barbary by saying, 'I must have loved her [Miss Barbary] if I had been a better girl' (*BH* 25). She is a self-tormentor, which helps her succeed in fulfilling her duty as the illegitimate child. The act of Esther burying her doll under the tree in leaving for Bleak House signifies that she abandons her self-consciousness. By doing so, she gives up her real self and determines to sacrifice herself for helping others for the rest of her life. Indeed, she is required to suppress her feelings as Miss Barbary says, "Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it" (*BH* 26). The existence of Miss Barbary is an essential element for Esther's stoicism. Not giving up her disgraceful origin, Esther accepts Miss Barbary's education and promises to herself that she will grow up to help others.

[...] I would try, as hard as ever I could, to repair the fault I had been born with (of which I confusedly felt guilty and yet innocent), and would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself I could (*BH* 27).

Esther's nature is contrasted with one in Estella in *Great Expectations* whose character is formed by Miss Havisham and who accepts that it is inevitable by saying 'It is in my nature [...] I can do no more' (362). Her declaration results in unconsciously attaining ideal qualities as a Victorian woman because the elements to be submissive and hard-working are exactly what Victorian femininity should be. Esther is adopted into Bleak House where Mr Jarndyce lives when she reaches puberty. She lives in harmony with her surroundings as a governess. She becomes a reliable housekeeper for Mr Jarndyce and achieves her usefulness. It is easier for her to be a love giver than to be a taker. Esther's contribution to Bleak House is ironically symbolic from her nicknames, Old Woman, Little Old Woman, Cobweb, Mrs Shipton, Mother Hubbard and Dame Durden, and among others. She is responsible for the house keeping and the nicknames show the lack of her youthfulness. All she has to do is to keep the house clean, according to Mr Jarndyce. Given these nicknames, Esther begins to lose her own identity as a young girl. Nevertheless, she accepts it as her fate to be born as an illegitimate child.

Children as Family Victims

Jellyby children are victimized by their mother, Mrs Jellyby who is involved in volunteering for African projects and neglects her duty as a mother. In the Victorian era, the mother was idealized as a caretaker of children and a homemaker staying in the private sphere, that is, home. An untidy house and neglected children highlight that Mrs Jellyby is completely irresponsible in the domestic realm. She causes havoc for her children because of her apathy towards mothering. Her eldest daughter, Caddy, is always compelled to take the business of dictating and exploited. Indeed, Caddy

is only a writing tool for her mother. Her suppressed anger can be seen from her statement, 'I wish I was dead! [...] I wish we were all dead. It would be a great deal better for us' (*BH* 57). The home should be the place to comfort children but it is complete chaos for Caddy. The absence of the mother has negative impacts not only on Caddy but on the youngest child, Peepy. It is obvious from his appearance that Mrs Jellyby never expresses concern for her son. Peepy is neglected and dressed in either too small or too big clothes. His whereabouts are not the family concern.

The Pardiggle children from age five to twelve suffer at the hand of their mother, Mrs Pardiggle. Mrs Pardiggle is also enthusiastic about African projects and denies her responsibility as a mother. The purpose of her work is to satisfy her career ambition and not to help the poor. She is just a hypocrite, enjoying engaging in her business and as a result, the children are used for their mother. Her mistreatment of the children makes them "look[ed] absolutely ferocious with discontent" (*BH* 114). Instead they give vent to their dissatisfaction to a third party, Esther, by demanding money of Esther and pinching her. Despite the fact that Esther is not a happy child, they [Pardiggle children] paid her [Esther] the compliment of being naturally brought up (*BH* 118). This shows how the children are exploited and abused by their natural mother, Mrs Pardiggle. The existence of negligent mothers poses a Dickens's warning to women who aspire to work outside the home. By means of the children, Dickens disapproves of women's participating in the public sphere and neglecting household duties.

Jo as a Victimized Romantic Child

The Romantics depicted children as 'creatures of deeper wisdom, finer aesthetic sensitivity, and a more profound awareness of enduring moral truths' (Heywood 24). The Romantic elements apply to Jo in a sense that he is morally mature. In addition, Dickens presents Jo as a child who is neglected by the society, yet plays an important role as an agency to reveal social problems and to

connect people from different social status. Dickens succeeds in representing the underclass Jo, as his childhood experiences in a blacking warehouse more or less coincide with Jo's. Because of his father's debts, Dickens was sent to the blacking factory and worked there for long hours as a young boy. Jo lives in the slum, Tom-all-alone's, working as a crossing-sweeper. He has "no father, no mother and no friends, and never been to school" (*BH* 162). Although nobody is concerned about him, he does not taste even charitable aid from well wishes yet. Jo "knows that it's wicked to tell a lie (*BH* 162) and it's hard to keep the mud off the crossing in dirty weather, and harder still to live by doing it" (*BH* 235). In the absence of protection from adults, Jo is capable of learning things from his experiences, which suggests that he is a self-made "man."

The society victimizes Jo by telling him to "move on," which means that society demands him to keep working and to be useful. He is not allowed to stop and rest in his life. If he stops moving on, he is doomed to die. As an orphan, he is compelled to be exploited by society. Despite the inhumane treatment, Jo never expects the mercy of the society. He is ignored but properly brought up even in the miserable conditions. Jo embodies a child who reveals a problem of Tom-all-alone's, an institution where the society neglects him. Jo contracts smallpox at Tom-all-alone's. The disease affects Esther's maid, Charley, and then the middle-class Esther. Consequently, it becomes a threat to the whole community. It is ironic that the less the society is concerned about Jo, symbolically the worse the community becomes.

Jo asks Mr Skimpole to write down his will on his deathbed. What he can bequeath after his death is not a will but the smallpox germ. When he is dead, it is romantic that "the light is come upon the dark benighted way" (*BH* 677). He is liberated from the strain to move on. As Charles Lamb presents, Jo is a "Child Angel" whose portion was and is to be a child forever. The child who is morally superior to an adult like Jo remains a child and never grows up. This is a type of child Dickens presents as a paradox to the society which is not caring enough to rear its own children.

There can be seen the irony Dickens deals with.

As a contrast to Jo, Mr Skimpole is described as childlike although he is around fifty. Mr Skimpole is like a child who is mentally ill and retarded.

'I [Mr Skimpole] am a child, you know! [...] but I am gay and innocent; forget your worldly arts and play with me!' [...] He [Mr Skimpole] was so full of feeling too, and had such a delicate sentiment for what was beautiful or tender, that he could have won a heart by that alone (*BH* 84).

Declaring to be innocent, Mr Skimpole claims to be a child, which is an anachronism of his own mental/physical growth. He suffers from Peter Pan Syndrome. He indulges himself in nostalgia and escapes from reality. Dickens creates Mr Skimpole as an example who is the grotesque and deformed child image of the Romantics. Mr Skimpole is also believed to embody the Romantic poet, Leigh Hunt (1784-1859). Not only does Dickens criticize morally inferior adults but he illustrates a grotesque type of child by means of Mr Skimpole.

Conclusion

There are two types of childhood seen in Dickens's *Bleak House*. One is that child characters are victims of the corrupt Victorian society and home. Like Esther, women were required to devote themselves to men in the Victorian era. Women were expected to fulfill their role as a homemaker. Dickens's critical view of women who play significant roles in the public sphere is noticeable. A middle-class man, Dickens, has an unfavourable view towards women seeking career such as Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle. He represents victimized children as a result of their total disregard to their role as a mother.

The other is the Romantic image of childhood, which places value on morally distinguished children. Jo is not realistic as he is a self-made child and he takes care of himself without any help

from adults. Moreover, the existence of Mr Skimpole who mentally remains a child becomes a good contrast to Jo as a whole child with innocence and wisdom. Dickens uses Mr Skimpole to emphasize the image of the Romantic child. As Dickens suggests that the middle-class is morally inferior to the working-class through Pip in *Great Expectations* as well as through Jo, it is the greatest irony that he shows that children are wiser than adults in *Bleak House*. In addition to class distinction, the gap between the exploiter (adults) and the exploited (children) in terms of their morality is questioned in this novel.

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