
Dickens: Novels Inspired By His Own Experiences

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We know that most of Dickens' works have been inspired by his own experiences. Depending on what he lived, his novels did not take the same turn. His works can often be linked with his own experiences of life or with people he knew. We can easily establish the link between some of his characters to people he met during his life, or situations his characters experience to his own. With his harsh acquaintance with childhood, his youngster characters were very vulnerable and in poor conditions. Either orphan or with unclear family relationship, those characters were often exploited or abused.

A Christmas Carol for example, follows Tiny Tim, who is considered to be the most famous of Dickens' characters. He is a sick and mild child, and he is to die if his family cannot afford better food and medicines. Cecilia Jupe, also known as Sissy, in Hard Times has been abandoned by her family and lives in a care home.

a) Pip in Great Expectations

Great Expectations is a bildungsroman, which is a novel that follows the life of one character from childhood to adulthood, following the life of Philip Pirrip, alias Pip, who is the protagonist and narrator of this story. He is an undereducated orphan who has a huge imagination. With this character, Dickens brings to light the lightness that can be brought by children. Indeed he, somehow, presents children as simple-minded, but not in a bad way. Pip, as a child, had no consciousness of social classes the way he will later do, neither is he selfish as life will eventually make him. He represents innocence in all ways. This is a pattern that Dickens tends to recreate with his children characters.

Dickens portrays childhood negatively, children often get mistreated in his novels, they have a 'bad' family situation, and are often very poor. Pip is a relevant example of this. Great Expectations focuses on Pip's exclusion from society, as well as poverty in London, and social standards.

Pip has never known his parents, but Mrs Joe, his big sister, who is more than twenty years older than him, can be considered as a sort of substitute mother to him. But she is a very cold woman, she can even be referred to as evil and cruel. We can see here a metaphor with 'mother society' who is letting Pip, as well as the lower classes in general, down, not helping him getting a better life, imposing him how to behave and what to become, without giving him a chance to progress in social classes – As we can see that pip ends up indebted and cannot pay for it himself. Society is, with this metaphor, seen as harsh on people as Mrs Joe is having a "hard and heavy hand" (Great Expectations, Charles Dickens) on pip and her husband. Dickens here, depicts not only the situation of poor children in the Victorian Era, but society which does not give people the opportunity to change their poor fate.

In Great Expectations, Dickens perfectly mixes sarcasm and caricature with a poignant story. The choice of a first person narrator also leads the reader to feel what the protagonist feels and

to immerse within the Victorian society that Dickens depicts here with his finest style.

b) Oliver Twist

Oliver Twist, also called the Parish Boy's Progress is a semi-biographical novel written and published by Charles Dickens. The protagonist, Oliver Twist, was born out of marriage and, at the time pregnant-unmarried women were a shame to society, especially when they were poor (which can be considered as a sort of double shame). Oliver's mother did not abandon him, but died right after giving birth to him. During the Victorian Era, the number of abandoned children was very high, mostly because poor families could not afford to take care of a child. Also, during the Victorian Era, purity and honor were two very important principles which was another reason why children were abandoned by single mothers.

In Oliver Twist, Dickens depicted the terrible living conditions of children in workhouses. Mr Bumble and Mrs Mann, the people in charge of the workhouse where Oliver was raised, are perfect examples of parish officials of the Victorian Britain. Readers can observe the violent behaviour of workhouses' officials. Indeed they do not hesitate to abuse the children under their care by brutalizing and, half starving them. In the second chapter of the novel, Dickens establishes a link between starvation in the street and starvation in workhouses, saying that no matter what, poor people were meant to starve. This chapter also learns the reader about children's living conditions in workhouses. As I said, they are being half-starved and in the second chapter of the novel, one of the children even says that he could eat one of the boys which emphasizes the hunger present in the workhouse. A little bit later in the story, the other boys required Oliver to ask for more food at dinner, "Please sir, I want some more." (Great Expectations, Charles Dickens). The officials were so offended that they decided to get rid of Oliver. So they decided to offer five pounds to whoever was willing take Oliver. Dickens here, denounced the process of "selling" children, which was not an uncommon operation during the Victorian Era, as it was a source of compensation.

In this novel, Dickens does not only have a critical look over workhouses – which he often compared with slavery – but he also shows that when Oliver had been kicked out of the workhouse, readers could think that this was a good thing for him, but the author showed here, that the actual outcome can be as dark as the workhouse life. Oliver ends up in the street, in a bad health situation, starved and exhausted. He meets John Dawkins, a boy as old as him and a group of pickpocket-children under the control of Fagin. Oliver is then being trained for a couple of days and eventually goes to a pickpocketing mission with other boys. He eventually realizes that he does not want to be a pickpocket when he witnesses the other boys stealing a handkerchief to a man, and thus runs away from Fagin's hold. But the criminal repeatedly comes back into Oliver's life to take him back in his grip. Indeed, even though Oliver had a sort of happy ending, he had been trapped in the hold of a frightening gangster for a very long time. With this novel, Dickens managed to denounce the critical living conditions experienced the lower classes during the Victorian Era.