THE SOCIAL CRITICISM OF CHARLES DICKENS: A POINT OF VIEW

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BY

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: This thesis deals with Dickens' social criticism in Oliver Twist (1838), Dombey and Son (1846), Hard Times (1854) and Little Dorrit (1855). The major consideration is the discrepancy between Dickens' stated intentions and his achievement as a social critic. The analysis of the four novels revolves around an examination of the characterization, the explicit and implicit levels of meaning, and the escapist tendencies in the fiction.

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TEXTUAL NOTES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Frequent reference will be made to the following works:

1. Dickens, Charles. Oliver Twist. Introduction by Kathleen Tillotson. (ed.) Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966 (first published as a book in 1840).

2. -------. Dombey and Son. Introduction by H.W. Garrod. London: Oxford University Press, 1966 (first published as a book in 1848).

3. -------. Hard Times. Introduction by Dingle Foot. London: Oxford University Press, 1966 (first published as a book in 1854).

4. -------. Little Dorrit. Introduction by Lionel Trilling. London: Oxford University Press, 1966 (first published as a book in 1857).

All further reference to these works will appear in the following abbreviated forms:

1. Oliver Twist.

2. Dombey and Son.

3. Hard Times.

4. Little Dorrit.

INTRODUCTION

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".[1] 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.[2] One must assume that these critics are basing their judgments exclusively on the passages of explicit condemnation of the social order, for a close reading of the texts reveals contradictions in Dickens' social attitudes. This thesis is an attempt to clarify Dickens' social attitudes and reappraise his criticism of Victorian society. I will consider four novels which are mainly concerned with social issues: Oliver Twist (1838), Dombey and Son (1846), Hard Times (1854) and Little Dorrit (1855).

It is true that in Dombey and Son Dickens writes that all men stem from a common origin and owe a duty to their common Father to work together to make the world a better place for all.[3] But the novels themselves reveal that Dickens believed in a social hierarchy in which some men are inherently superior to others, and therefore deserve a better position in society. As we will see in the following chapters, Oliver Twist escapes from the workhouse world because he does not belong there. He is a child of the middle class and by

definition superior to his fellow orphans. Conversely, Rachel of Hard Times, is a working class woman and deserves no more than her "natural lot"[4], working in the factories until her old age. John Chivery of Little Dorrit will always be a "poor common little fellow"[5] no matter how hard he tries to make his conduct resemble that of a gentleman.

Reinforcing and justifying this social hierarchy is a moral hierarchy. Dickens may state that man's environment determines his character[6], but it is evident that his characters have 'given' moral natures which are only affected temporarily by their surroundings, if they are affected at all. George Orwell describes Dickens' characters as "pictures or pieces of furniture" who "have no mental life. They say perfectly the thing that they have to say, but they cannot be conceived as talking about anything else. They never learn, they never speculate".[7] Orwell has overlooked characters like Louisa Gradgrind and Arthur Clennam who do learn in the course of the novel. But the important point about these characters is that they have an inherent goodness which has only been clouded by their environment. We can be sure that Louisa and Arthur, like Mr. Dombey and Mr. Gradgrind, will find their true 'good natures' by the end of the novel. Their lesson involves the uncovering of their inherent goodness. However, Tom Gradgrind or Tip Dorrit can never hope to learn Louisa's lesson because they are 'whelps' by nature, individuals incapable of any selfless or noble actions. The moral natures of Dickens' characters are fixed; they are created with an absolute propensity to good

or evil, and it is this propensity which is unchangeable.

E.W. Knight, in his study of the Classical novel, maintains that this concept of a fixed moral nature, or what he terms 'the character's given identity', is the basis of much nineteenth-century fiction.

> The classical novel is 'instructive'in the sense that it always ends appropriately; its 'statement' consists in showing that, given this identity, an ending of this sort inevitably follows.
>
> If, however, we are to be sure that an ending is appropriate we must be sure that there has been no change of identity; and therefore in the classical novel no change of identity ever occurs (otherwise of course it could not be a given). What can happen, is the concealment of identity for a greater or lesser period. These notions are of the utmost importance.[8]

Identity then, can be hidden, but never changed. Knight goes on to argue that the implicit understanding of each character's fixed nature necessarily takes for granted the existence of a moral order.[9] This moral order undermines any social or political criticism which the author makes because it implies that those who are morally deserving succeed, rather than those who are given the social advantages. Thus, for Dickens, the basic message is that the poor are unfortunate because they deserve to be, rather than because they are the victims of an oppressive society. He can criticize the middle-class treatment of the poor[10] and yet implicitly endorse the middle-class attitude by depicting poor people, like Stephen Blackpool's wife, who deserve their impoverished existence.

W.W. Crotch writes that Dickens refused to think of the poor

as a class apart, "conspicuous either for wickedness or inertia. He held that the fault of their condition lay not in them, but in bad laws, defective social arrangements, inefficient administration and general neglect. In short they were the creatures of their environment."[11] One need only examine the characters of Oliver Twist or Amy Dorrit to see the falsity of this interpretation of Dickens' work. Both characters miraculously maintain their virtue even in the most degenerate surroundings. Nothing can alter their inherent goodness. And by implication, characters like Nancy or Fanny Dorrit who are maimed by their environment, are regarded as inferior beings. For Dickens, it is not the environment which determines an individual's nature; he is born with an inherent inclination to either goodness or evil. An unfavourable environment can affect an individual permanently only if he already has a propensity for evil. Rob the Grinder in Dombey and Son develops into a sullen and selfish individual as a result of his treatment at the Charitable Grinders' School. And yet, in the same novel, Walter Gay shows no signs of having been adversely affected by his educational experience. Walter, like Oliver, is incapable of entertaining an evil thought. Had Robin been made of finer stuff, he too would have survived his experience.

F.R. Leavis and Peter Coveney dismiss the question of Dickens' social reform altogether. Coveney writes:

> To discuss him [Dickens] as a realist, to discuss the exactitude of his social commentary, is to confuse the essential purposes of his art. His account of the world was continuously moral.[12]

Leavis, in the introduction to Peter Coveney's book writes:

> This truth is manifest in the distinc tive greatness of Dickens; the greatness we take stock of when, dismissing the time-honoured traffic in his claims as a 'social reformer', we contemplate the profoundly creative response to Victorian civilization that his strongest work, his classical 'criticism of life', is.[13]

George Orwell[14] and J.C. Reid[15] also emphasize Dickens' moral criticism, and like Coveney and Leavis, consider his works important criticisms of Victorian society. However, it seems to me, all considerations of social criticism aside, that the question of moral reform in Dickens' work is suspect. How can one expect a moral reformation in a world where each individual has a predetermined nature? Rigaud is as incapable of doing good as Little Dorrit is of doing evil. Characters like Dombey, Scrooge and even Charley Bates do not undergo a moral transformation, but merely find their real natures which were hidden over the years. Florence Dombey knows from the beginning that her father is good beneath his callous exterior.[16]

Coveney also finds in Dickens an awareness of the danger of "the new society seeking a solution to its predicament among the values of the momentarily triumphant middle classes".[17] As I have said above, I can only find in Dickens a positive endorsement of the values of the middle classes. He certainly is in favour of the middle class solution to the problem of trade unions in Hard Times. And the poor whom he praises accept the ideals of the middle class--Rachel, as a working-class woman should accept her lot without question; Tattycoram should not question or attempt to alter her servant status.

Indeed, one must question the basis from which Dickens writes his novels. In the initial article in the first issue of Household Words, Dickens writes that his goal is to teach "the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination" and to "show to all, that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellant on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out".[18] The purpose of his novels is to broaden the imaginative world of his readers so that they will find it easier to accept their lot. The romantic realm of the novels is a compensation for the workers' meaningless lives, a means by which they can be manipulated to accept their impotent positions in society. Imagination, Dickens tells them, can transform even their 'repellant' environment into something beautiful.

But the novels are also written for the "utilitarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up infidels, gabblers of many little dog's-eared creeds".[19] Dickens' message to those in control of society is that we must preserve the system, make it as palatable as possible so the working classes will not revolt. As Humphrey House remarks, Dickens "could never have taken his public along with him ...unless he shared with it, not only familiar details which were there for all to see, but also a moral mood fairly widely diffused among those who could buy or borrow the precious numbers as they came out".[20] Dickens could never have been as popular as he was if he advocated the changes

which W.J. Dawson or G.B. Shaw claim he did.

The following chapters are an attempt to uncover Dickens' social attitudes, to jump the hurdle of existing critical opinion and to come to terms with the actual ideas and sentiments which Dickens expresses in his novels.

CHAPTER ONE: OLIVER TWIST

> What an excellent example of the power of dress young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him his proper station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once--a parish child--the orphan of a workhouse--the humble half-starved drudge--to be cuffed and buffeted through the world--despised by all and pitied by none.[1]

With these words the reader is introduced to Oliver Twist and the apparent basic concern of the novel which bears his name. We could understandably expect to be made aware of the plight of a parish child and the faults of a society which could tolerate such conditions. From the novel's opening, the workhouse and its disregard for human life dominate the reader's mind. The vision of oppression and fear is depicted in a compellingly realistic manner. However, in the above passage, one is also aware of a seemingly irrelevant interest on the narrator's part in Oliver Twist's 'proper station in society'. Why is he concerned with the opinion of 'the haughtiest stranger' on Oliver's social position? One might answer that he is at pains to demonstrate that parish children are not born to be the dregs of society, but are made that way by their environment, by the inhuman institution which badges and tickets them. But I intend to demonstrate that this mention of Oliver Twist's proper social position is the first indication of Dickens' major concern in the novel. Oliver is not a representative

of the oppressed classes of nineteenth century England. He is a middle class child who has come into the workhouse world through an unfortunate error. The novel then, is not the story of the survival of a workhouse orphan, but the story of a middle class child who finds his way back to his 'proper station in society'. The moving force of the work is the myth of the foundling child who is returned to his rightful family.

Early in the novel we come to understand that Oliver could never have been the son of a beggar. He retains the marks of an identity given him at birth. In spite of his rude apparel, he looks and acts the part of a young gentleman. Mrs. Bedwin is drawn immediately to the "grateful little dear", the "Pretty creetur" (p.68) and Oliver addresses everyone in a most refined and perfect speech. In his biography of Dickens, John Forster writes that Dickens felt that his own conduct and manners were different enough from those of his fellow workers in the blacking factory to place a space between them and cause him to be called 'the young gentleman'. But Oliver has never had occasion to develop these manners, having spent all of his time in the Poor House and at Mr. Sowerberry's. It is evident that Dickens has formed Oliver, in part, from his own self-conception; the child has inherent qualities which necessarily keep him above the lower classes of the world. Oliver is the same "child of singular abilities: quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally"[2], a child who was never meant to be in a workhouse. Although he never expresses this sense of superiority with the same openness in the novel as in his

conversations with Forster, Dickens does have Oliver feel intimations of his birthright. The first night he spends in Mr. Brownlow's house he feels his mother's presence in the room. The portrait on the wall sets his mind alive with sensations of which he had never before been conscious. "It [the portrait] makes my heart beat...as if it was alive, and wanted to speak to me, but couldn't". (p.71) Later in the novel, the Maylie's house brings to Oliver "dim remembrances of scenes that never were in this life;...some brief memory of a happier existence, long gone by". (p.191)

Thus from the beginning, Oliver is given an identity which separates him from his companions in the workhouse. Dickens explains Oliver's uniqueness by means of his "good sturdy spirit" (p.5) willed to him by nature or his ancestors. That is, through some intentionally vague means, Oliver has inherited a nature which makes him morally and socially superior. He is, as Dickens tells us in his Preface to the third edition of Oliver Twist, "the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last".[3]

Any social criticism which Dickens makes will be in conflict with his method of characterization. If Oliver is destined to triumph, his environment can have no effect upon him. The institution, no matter how corrupt, cannot warp those who are inherently good. However, Dickens does not admit openly that his characters have static natures; it is an implicit assumption behind the work. On the surface he tells us that Oliver is destined to be 'cuffed and buffeted through the world--despised by all and pitied by none'. From this contradiction

arises the paradoxical nature of the novel; the reason Dickens can, on the one hand, seem to criticize society, and on the other, implicitly reinforce it. It is the peculiar quality of Dickens' work that he can simultaneously affirm a character's given moral nature and yet be at pains to disprove it.

Mr. Brownlow recognizes Oliver's uniqueness from the first:

> 'There is something in that boy's face,'...'something that touches and interests me. Can he be innocent? He looked like--. By the bye,' exclaimed the old gentleman, halting very abruptly, and staring up into the sky, "Bless my soul!--where have I seen something like that look before?' (p.61)

Rose Maylie feels an instinctive kinship with him:

> 'Oh! as you love me, and know that I have never felt the want of parents in your goodness and affection, but that I might have done so, and might have been equally helpless and unprotected with this poor child, have pity upon him before it is too late.' (p.192)

Even Fagin and his thieving companions recognize Oliver's identity. "'I saw it was not easy to train him to the business' replied the Jew; 'he was not like other boys in the same circumstances.'" (p.170) Fagin knows that he will never make Oliver a thief; his good nature is immutable.

Thus, Dickens implies that the error of the gentleman in the white waistcoat was not in categorizing a child's nature, but in fail- to recognize Oliver's classification. "'It's a simple question of identity, you will observe'". (p.195) Doctor Losberne's words referring to the arraignment of the thief who had entered the Maylie

household, contain much significance beneath their literal meaning. They form the key to understanding the novel. The Maylies and the doctor know that it was Oliver in the basement of the house, but are definitely convinced that he is not a thief because they recognize his true nature. "'He cannot be hardened in vice,' said Rose; 'it is impossible.'" (p.193) "'But, can you--oh, sir! can you really believe that this delicate boy has been the voluntary associate of the worst outcasts of society?'". (p.191) The narrator himself provides the answer early in the novel. "It was impossible to doubt him; there was truth in every one of its [Oliver's face] thin and sharpened lineaments." (p.72)

Oliver Twist is an early example of the innocent, peculiarly ageless child-hero whom Dickens often employs in his novels. Within the fictional world, the child is a symbol of innocence and goodness unperverted by society. But this very symbol of purity limits any valuable criticism of the social order which Dickens presents because, to qualify as one of these symbols, the child must be passive and have an inherent inclination to goodness. There is an unspoken assumption that if he waits, his goodness will be rewarded. But any action, any assertion of his rights will cause him to be guilty, undeserving of the love and respect he will inevitably attain. Only by enduring all the hardships and by sacrificing himself to a moral principle, can Oliver attain his birthright. His father's will specifies that he must "never have stained his name with any public act of dishonour, meanness, cowardice or wrong." (p.351)

Thus, the implicit message of Oliver Twist is that the individual's moral nature, not his environment, determines the outcome of his life. Oliver's conduct is set forward as an example for Dickens' reading audience, but he is immediately suspect because he is programmed only for good behavior. "'He is a child of a noble nature and a warm heart,' because, as Rose Maylie states, 'that Power which has thought fit to try him beyond his years, has planted in his breast affections and feelings which would do honour to many who have numbered his days six times over.'" (p.278) He can never find himself in a dilemma about how to act because he is instinctively virtuous. Indeed, one comes to understand that all Dickens' 'good' characters have a built-in mechanism which prevents them from committing evil deeds. There is not a good character in Oliver Twist who reasons out his behavior; their goodness is merely an instinctual response. Doctor Losberne acts only upon impulse, but "the nature of the impulses which governed him" (p.208) is incorruptibly good. Mr. Brownlow is himself "somewhat of an impetuous gentleman" (p.89) but has a heart "large enough for any six ordinary old gentleman of humane disposition". (p.71) Grimwig is the only character who expresses some opposition to the natural benevolence of the Brownlow-Maylie world. And even his irascibility is merely a pose to hide his tender feelings; he is "not by any means a bad-hearted man". (p.91)

The presentation of absolute virtue necessarily establishes a corresponding existence of absolute evil. Thus any intended satire

behind the following statement of Charlotte is nullified by the premise upon which the novel is based. "'I only hope this'll teach master not to have any more of these dreadful creeturs, that are born to be murderers and robbers from their very cradle.'" (p.38) In the Dickens world each character is born morally determined. Charlotte's error, like that of the gentleman in the white waistcoat, is merely in mistaking Oliver's identity, not in assuming that there are characters who are inherently evil. In his Preface to the third edition of Oliver Twist, Dickens considers this question of determinism. There he states that "there are in this world some insensible and callous natures, that do become utterly and irredeemably bad".[4] Whether they are born evil or become evil is irrelevant. If one is not born with Oliver's 'good sturdy spirit' and natural inclination to goodness, one will succumb to the evil of the world.

However, we should not underestimate the power of Dickens' vision of the ills of his society. He saw clearly a situation much in need of reform and depicted its horrors with a striking intensity. Humphrey House in The Dickens World, comments on the relevance of the criticism in Oliver Twist:

> There is no need to trace again here the growth of hatred for the Poor Law among the working classes. It is enough to say that the extremely severe winter of 1837-8, the high price of corn, trade depression, and unemployment then made the law even more unpopular than it had been before. A novel could hardly have been more topical than Oliver Twist: the season made it so.[5]

As House informs us, there is no exaggeration of the facts to

diminish the power of the vision. "Under Gilbert's Act or one of the numerous local acts such a workhouse as that described in the first chapter was perfectly possible; there were in certain districts, under Gilbert's Act, unions of parishes to maintain them."[6]

The reader is overwhelmed by the hostile and indifferent universe which threatens Oliver at every turn. His survival at birth, Dickens tells us, was in itself a triumph against a system which encourages death. Everywhere he turns he is faced with prognostications of his end. The gentleman in the white waistcoat predicts death by hanging; Mr. Gamfield can imagine any number of torturous demises for Oliver as a chimney sweep; the elderly female of the branch workhouse does her best to starve him to death, and Bumble would gladly dispose of him in the most convenient manner. Even the landscape is hostile, ready to crush Oliver with its weight or to devour him with the plague.

> Some houses which had become insecure from age and decay, were prevented from falling into the street, by huge beams of wood reared against the walls, and firmly planted in the road; but even these crazy dens seemed to have been selected as the hightly haunts of some houseless wretches; for many of the rough boards, which supplied the place of door and window, were wrenched from their positions, to afford an aperture wide enough for the passage of a human body. The kennel was stagnant and filthy. The very rats, which here and there lay putrefying in its rottenness, were hideous with famine. (p.31)

Dickens spares us no sordid details in his depiction of the utter degradation of the life of the impoverished. When Oliver

accompanies Sowerberry to the home of the dead woman, we involuntarily shudder with him at the desperate madness of the husband and the suffocating atmosphere. It is a world of darkness, there is neither fire nor candle, and the family, bereft of all signs of humanity, move about mechanically, made mindless by their deprivation. The narrator offers no moral judgment here; the husband is neither good nor evil. He is merely an unfortunate victim of a society whose only offer of assistance is a coffin in which to bury the dead.

> 'I begged for her in the streets: and they sent me to prison. When I came back, she was dying; and all the blood in my heart has dried up, for they starved her to death. I swear it before the God that saw it! They starved her!' He twined his hands in his hair; and, with a loud scream, rolled grovelling upon the floor: his eyes fixed: and the foam gushing from his lips. (p.32)

It is evident that in such circumstances, references to an individual's moral nature are absurd. How could Oliver's 'good sturdy spirit' save him from such organized oppression? Dickens tells us nothing can save Oliver; he is destined to be 'despised by all and pitied by none'. However, it becomes increasingly clear that the principle of good receives assistance from some vague providential power. Again and again he is rescued from disaster by a fortunate coincidence. He is saved from becoming a chimney sweep because the old gentleman could not find his inkstand. The arrival of the book seller in court at the last minute keeps him from imprisonment. And both times he participates in a robbery, the victims happen to be part of his rightful family and recognize his

innocence.

The first few coincidences in the novel seem to emphasize the chaotic and indifferent nature of the universe, but as they increase, the reader becomes aware of the implicit assumption behind the work. The universe follows a pattern in which the morally superior individuals are saved. This pattern necessarily limits any social criticism Dickens makes. If the outcome of one's life depends on one's moral nature, how can a change in the social system alter its course?

Kathleen Tillotson, in her introduction to the Oxford Edition of Oliver Twist, remarks that Dickens uses the Poor Law Bill only as a means of getting under way, and that his main concern is the plot, the triumph of the good forces over evil.[7] In the opening chapter, as we have seen, Dickens lays the ground work for the basic movement of the plot, the unmasking of Oliver's identity and his return to his rightful inheritance. In his "glance at the Poor Law Bill"[8], Dickens gives a frighteningly accurate vision of the oppressive nature of Victorian society which he cannot maintain if he wants to develop a plot resting on individual moral natures. Indeed, the generalized view of fear and oppression of the first chapters is translated into the evil personalities of Sikes and Fagin. In the beginning, Oliver has to fight for his life against a social system which is determined to destroy him, but as the plot begins to unfold, it is his moral nature which he has to preserve from contamination by the thieves. Although the descriptions of filth and disease remain

constant, Dickens has subtly changed the source of the vile atmosphere from the organized brutality of society to the organized underworld of the theives.

It is surprising that the narrator who related with such compassion the tale of the unfortunate husband and his deprived family could so easily condemn Charley Bates or the Artful Dodger. The boy robbers live in the same world of deprivation where one's choice is the Poor House or the prison, and thieving is their method of self-preservation. On the one hand, Dickens portrays the thieves' underworld as a mimicry of respectable society:

> That when the Dodger, and his accomplished friend Master Bates, joined in the hue-and-cry which was raised at Oliver's heels, in consequence of their executing an illegal conveyance of Mr. Brownlow's personal property, as has been already described, they were actuated by a very laudable and becoming regard for themselves; and forasmuch as the freedom of the subject and the liberty of the individual are among the first and proudest boasts of a true-hearted Englishman; so I need hardly beg the reader to observe, that this action should tend to exalt them in the opinion of all public and patriotic men. (p.73)

The same self-interest dominates in both realms; the thieves' behavior is to be understood as the reflection of a society based only on self-interest, "putting entirely out of sight any considerations of heart, or generous impulse and feeling". (p.73) Yet, on the other hand, Dickens depicts the underworld of the thieves as the spawning ground for all that is vile in the society. Fagin is a "loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved". (p.121) He is the devil incarnate who spreads evil by

poisoning the souls of the young people whom he captures.

By treating evil as some sort of disease, and villainous natures as carriers of the contagion, Dickens is able to talk about those who are immune to the illness or those who have recovered after a period of sickness. There is no example in the novel of an integrated nature, of an understanding of selfish or altruistic impulses, but only, as we have seen, those who are immune to villainy or those who are susceptible. The individuals whose moral natures are infected with self-interest can never understand the 'considerations of heart, or generous impulse and feeling'. What Dickens forgets, is that he has already stated that the whole society is infected--all public and patriotic men. Instead, he centres the vice in the characters of Sikes and Fagin, and the generous impulses in the Brownlow-Maylie world. This division of good and evil allows him to deal with social questions within the framework of the plot. He need only destroy Sikes and Fagin to destroy the evil of the world. He need only marry Bumble to a shrew to improve the conditions in the workhouses.

The Artful Dodger, according to the novel's classification, has, like Nancy, lost all traces of his better feelings. He is on the negative side of the moral spectrum and deserving of punishment. However, as Arnold Kettle points out, his speech in court is a scathing condemnation of the judicial system and has an irony beyond any other statements in the novel. Seen in the light of Mr. Fang's courtroom procedures, the Dodger is justified in asserting his rights

before a corrupt system. He is, as Kettle states, the only character who "does stick up for himself, does continue and develop the conflict that Oliver had begun when he asked for more".[9] But it is this very rebelliousness which keeps the Dodger 'evil'. Oliver realizes after his first outspoken gesture that this is not the behavior required of him. He is not to fight society; rather he is to wait patiently until society recognizes his goodness and takes him into the fold of its chosen members. We have already considered the stipulations of his father's will. This implicit condemnation of rebellious behavior is surely the reason why the Artful Dodger is sentenced to imprisonment while Charley Bates re-enters the social order. The Dodger refuses to submit to a system which is doing its best to ruin him. He will play the game only as he sees it played about him.

> 'Ah! (to the Bench) it's no use your looking frightened; I won't show you no mercy, not a ha'porth of it. You'll pay for this, my fine fellers. I wouldn't be you for something! I wouldn't go free, now, if you was to fall down on your knees and ask me. Here, carry me off to prison! Take me away!' (p.300)

And when we understand that Monks is not punished for his actions because of his social position, we cannot but sympathize with the Dodger's fight. It is an unequal world and Dickens seems to agree that it should be left that way. Mr. Brownlow is "in a fever of excitement wholly uncontrollable" (p.338) to see Sikes and Fagin dead, but unquestioningly promises to keep Monk's guilt a secret.

With the disposal of the villainous characters, Dickens transports

the virtuous to a country retreat and leaves the city and all its ills behind. The country poor are tidy and reverent and a God of mercy and benevolence shows his face everywhere. The world of Bumble and Fang, hunger and pain has vanished as if it never had existed.

CHAPTER TWO: DOMBEY AND SON

Dickens once more takes up the theme of the perversion of childhood in Dombey and Son (1846). The setting has changed from the squalid poverty of low-class London to the stark elegance of the wealthy, but the problem is the same--the failure to understand the nature and needs of childhood. However, in Dombey and Son, the situation is depicted, in part at least, in a more realistic manner; Dickens does actually show us a child who is destroyed by his environment.

Paul Dombey is born into the autumn coldness of upper-class Victorian society.

> The chill of Paul's christening had struck home, perhaps to some sensitive part of his nature, which could not recover itself in the cold shade of his father; but was an unfortunate child from that day.[1]

Dickens skillfully develops the metaphor of the child as a flower; young Dombey is an unhealthy specimen from the beginning. There is a strong suggestion that his illness is congenital, that he has inherited the spiritual disease of which his mother died--"a certain degree of langour and a general absence of elasticity". (p.4) He is given no light or water to nourish him, but is kept in the chilly shadow of his father. The unhealthy atmosphere enters into his already weak frame and begins to gnaw at his body and spirit. Unlike Oliver, he has no inborn 'good sturdy spirit' to save him from the

infection of his surroundings.

> Vainly attempt to think of any simple plant, or flower, or wholesome weed, that, set in this foetid bed, could have its natural growth, or put its little leaves off to the sun as GOD designed it. (p.647)

The world of Dombey has no place for children; they are endured only because they will become adults. Hence, Dombey loves his son, not as a boy, but as a grown man, the potential 'Son' of the firm. The period of maturation is an unfortunate delay in his business proceedings and so Dombey sends his child off until the time when he will be of some importance to the commercial world. Paul Dombey has the same peculiar quality of precocious maturity which Oliver Twist manifests, but in this novel, Dickens does not have to base it on an exceptional nature. Paul's adult manner is an understandable result of and a damning comment on an egocentric society. It is ironic that the world which never allowed Paul to be a child, is surprised and uneasy about his old-fashioned behavior.

In his creation of Paul Dombey, Dickens has deepened his vision of the nature of Victorian society. The result is an exposure of a mode of living which Oliver and his 'good nature' could never have revealed. Young Dombey is an unnatural child, born of a father who considers everyone, himself primarily, as an object. "Dombey and Son had often dealt in hides, but never in hearts". (p.3) The "decay" of his wife causes him "to find a something gone from among his plate and furniture and other household possessions". (p.5) His young son is an important piece of stock while his daughter is "merely a piece

of base coin that couldn't be invested". (p.3) The boy is a monster-child, the unnatural issue of his father's ego. "He looked(and talked) like one of those terrible little Beings in the Fairy tales, who, at a hundred and fifty or two hundred years of age, fantastically represent the children for whom they have been substituted." (p91) The suffocating world of pride and wealth can never produce normal, happy children.

> Coop up any son or daughter of our mighty mother within narrow range, and bind the prisoner to one idea, and foster it by servile worship of it on the part of the few timid or designing people standing round, and what is Nature to the willing captive who has never risen up upon the wings of a free mind--drooping and useless soon--- to see her in her comprehensive truth! (p.646-7)

Dickens extends this question of the destruction of childhood to a criticism of educational institutions. Dombey sends his offspring to be "forced open" by Mrs. Pipchin the "ogress and child-queller" (p.99) and to "acquire everything" (p.145-6) in the high and false temperatures of Dr. Blimber's hothouse. He never comes to visit his child, but stands outside the glass pane watching the forced maturation process. Philip Collins points out that Dickens' depiction of the schools and their masters is verified by the educational theorists of the time and by later historians of education.[2] Like the society which they mirror, the schools refuse to understand or cater to childhood. "The Doctor, in some partial confusion of his ideas, regarded the young gentlemen as if they were all Doctors, and were born grown up." (p.165) Yet, as Collins himself suggests, the

criticism of Blimber's institute is, in the end not borne out in the novel.[3] Toots, it is hinted, would have been weak-minded no matter what his educational background. It seems that he lost his brains at puberty; everything went into his whiskers. And, he is in no way antagonistic to his instructors. Paul feels a great affection for his persecutors who "were always kind to him, and glad to see him". (p.187) Indeed, we become more interested in the teachers themselves and their eccentricities, Mr. Feeder B.A.'s passionate desire for Miss Cornelia Blimber, his giddiness after several custard-cups of negus, and we cast a final glance at them, a crowd of bright and shining faces, wishing Paul well.

The alternative to the Blimber world is the deep sea world of Old Glubb. The old man is a symbol for the understanding of the needs of the imagination; the sea-monsters stimulate Paul in a way which Dr. Blimber's curriculum can never do. There is a suggestion that if Paul had been left to the world of imagination, he might have survived. The sea, which is an almost overpowering symbol of death in the novel--Paul cannot look at it without recalling his deceased mother--becomes, in the company of Old Glubb, a source of life and vitality.

The symbolism associated with the sea is extended to incorporate the world of "The Wooden Midshipman". As in Oliver Twist, Dickens divides his novel into two worlds. Old Sol and Captain Cuttle, like the Brownlow-Maylie group, are placed in opposition to the forces of evil. But the evil of Dombey and Son is pride and selfishness rather than the 'absolute' villainy of Sikes and Fagin. Old Sol cannot adjust to the city life of wealth and commerce:

> 'But competition, competition--new invention, new invention--alteration, alteration--the world's gone past me. I hardly know where I am myself; much less where my customers are.' (p.38)

Walter Gay is a child nurtured on "the spice of romance and the love of the marvellous". (p.110) He has attended a weekly boarding school, but like Sissy Jupe in Hard Times, is unaffected by the institution because he has been raised with warmth and understanding. This points to a basic assumption which lies behind both Dombey and Son and Hard Times. The life of imagination and love symbolized by "The Wooden Midshipman" and Sleary's circus provides an insulation against the cold factual world of Blimbers, Dombeys and Gradgrinds. But Robin Toodle has also been raised in a milieu of warmth--his mother is one of the major figures embodying this quality--and yet he is perverted by the Charitable Grinders. He becomes a dishonest and morose individual, ready material for Carker's evil intentions. We cannot but conclude that he does not have the right nature or personality to survive such harmful influences. And this is the point upon which the plot of the novel hinges; it is not a question of how educational institutions or vile surroundings affect the populace as a whole, but how they affect individuals. It is the identity of the individuals which concerns Dickens; the environment is only important in so far as it reveals each character's given nature.

With young Paul's death, Dickens focuses on Florence and her life within the austere walls of the Dombey house. It is at this

point that the novel swings back to the pattern followed in Oliver Twist. Florence is not subject to Paul's illness; instead, she is equipped with an insulation similar to Oliver's 'good sturdy spirit'. She feels the deprivation of her life as keenly as Oliver did, but she manages, like Oliver, to remain unchanged by it. Dickens tells us that her heart had been deeply and sorely wounded and yet tries to convince us that this in no way changed her natural loving nature. She is the embodiment of suffering, patiently waiting for her goodness to be recognized. Walter's image of her gives a clear indication of what Dickens intended Florence to represent in the novel.

> In a word, Walter found out that to reason with himself about Florence at all, was to become very unreasonable indeed; and that he could do no better than preserve her image in his mind as something precious, unattainable, unchangeable, and indefinite--indefinite in all but its power of giving him pleasure, and restraining him like an angel's hand from anything unworthy. (p.216)

Florence, like Oliver, is not a character, but merely a personification of goodness. These child-heroes (in the following chapters we will see Sissy Jupe and Amy Dorrit in the same roles) are necessary to the plot because they provide the redemptive force needed to bring the wayward characters to a moral rebirth. But they are hollow at the centre; we can know nothing about them because they have no existence apart from their natural inclination to goodness. Their very presence can only undermine the social criticism in the novel, because, as we have seen, they are immune to the evils of the society which Dickens berates. The obvious implication is that if we were

all like Oliver or Florence--and he is indubitably holding them forward as examples since they are praised and rewarded in the end--society would not need to be changed. If we were all like Oliver, the poor would not be vicious or demanding; if we were all like Florence we would be kind and loving to our families. This implicit assumption that the individual is responsible for his own outcome naturally undermines the criticism of society at the novel's beginning.

Thus, Florence, like Oliver, spends most of her childhood years unhappily, her goodness only bringing her more pain. We are to understand that the virtuous are the persecuted of the world, but that the maintenance of virtue is the only way to salvation. Yet, on another level, Dickens gives us to understand that virtue is an inborn quality, not a mode of behavior which we are to work at, but an indentity which we are born with. We have already seen how Florence and Oliver are instinctively good. But what saves Dickens' novels from falling into a simple struggle of the good forces against the bad is the possibility of an erroneous identity. All characters are not conscious of their natures.[4]

> His previous feelings of indifference towards little Florence changed into an uneasiness of an extraordinary kind. He almost felt as if she watched and distrusted him. As if she held the clue to something secret in his breast, of the nature of which he was hardly informed himself. As if she had an innate knowledge of one jarring and discordant string within him, and her very breath could sound it. (p.29)

Florence has an understanding of Dombey's 'true nature' which

he himself does not possess. She can forgive his cruel treatment because she knows he isn't meant to behave that way. It is possible in the Dickens world to act in direct contradiction to what you really are. In the Preface to Dombey and Son, Dickens explains:

> Mr. Dombey undergoes no violent change, either in this book, or in real life. A sense of his injustice is within him, all along. The more he represses it, the more unjust he necessarily is. Internal shame and external circumstances may bring the contest to a close in a week, or a day; but, it has been a contest for years, and is only fought out after a long balance of victory.[5]

From this passage one would assume that Dickens views character or personality as a combination of factors; one is always becoming and never is in a static form. But then how are we to understand Florence's 'unchangeable' goodness or Sike's irredeemable evil? How can Harriet Carker's face be a "mirror of truth and gentleness" (p.476) when Dickens tells us in the Preface that it is almost impossible to perceive an individual's nature from his physiognomy? As we have seen in Oliver Twist, Dickens' characters fall into categories dictated by the demands of the plot. There are those who are inherently good, those who are irredeemably bad and those who seem to possess one nature but are actually the opposite beneath the false exterior.

Mr. Dombey experiences a conflict only because he is not living in accordance with his identity. Carker has no qualms about behaving in an evil manner because he has recognized and accepted his evil nature. He is able to feign goodness, to hide "himself beneath his

sleek, hushed, crouched manner, and his ivory smile," (p.601) because his identity is as clearcut as Florence's. His vile behavior is as instinctive as Florence's virtue. Similarly, Carker Junior can once again feel at home with himself because he has returned to living in accordance with his true nature.

> 'He was an altered man when he did wrong,' said Harriet. 'He is an altered man again, and is his true self now, believe me, Sir.' (p.477)

Kathleen Tillotson maintains that Dickens is successful in portraying Dombey's inner conflict. "In Mr. Dombey Dickens achieves the remarkable feat of making us aware of the hidden depths of a character while keeping them largely hidden...What makes him interesting is the moral suspense."[6] It is this very moral suspense which is the driving force behind the novel, not the psychological insight for which Miss Tillotson lauds Dickens. Our interest is maintained because we wonder if Dombey will expose his true nature, not because we are in any doubt as to what his true nature is. Like Florence, we are given the clues to the secret nature in Dombey's breast. He is possessed by a "moody, stubborn, sullen demon" (p.562) and yet has "a vague yearning for what he had all his life repelled". (p.561)

In spite of Miss Tillotson's enumeration of the 'suggestions' of Dombey's inner turmoil, it is not the depiction of his mental workings which leads us to expect Dombey's change of heart nearly as much as the authorial intrusions. The omniscient narrator breaks in repeatedly to build up the suspense by reminding us of the impending

collapse of Dombey's mental and physical world.

> Let him remember it in that room, years to come. It has faded from the air, before he breaks the silence. It may pass as quickly from his brain, as he believes, but it is there. Let him remember it in that room, years to come!
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Let him remember it in that room, years to come. The rain that falls upon the roof: the wind that mourns outside the door: may have foreknowledge in their melancholy sound. Let him remember it in that room, years to come! (p.256-7)

Once we understand that "the master-motive of the novel, the mainspring of all its events" is Mr. Dombey's pride,[7] we are able to see what happens to the social criticism in the novel. Dickens' major concern is not the environment which brought about Paul's death, but how the fact of Paul's death accelerates Mr. Dombey's revelation of his true identity. What at first seems an exposure of the evils of Victorian society becomes incorporated in the figure of Dombey. We lose all sense of the social situation and come to see Dombey as the source of the wrongs in the environment rather than an example or manifestation of the ideas and goals of his social class. The abuses of his firm find their source in Mr. Dombey's pride and selfishness; no mention is made of the general industrial policies of the time. Walter Gay is sent to the West Indies not because it was a policy of the firm to separate young boys from their loved ones, but because "the great man [Dombey] thought himself defied in this new exposition of an honest spirit, and proposed to bring it down". (p.207)

Similarly, the criticism of the educational institutions

gives way before the exigencies of the plot. Walter Gay is not tainted by the school which he attended because he is needed to provide the redemptive force within the novel. But Robin Toodle becomes a whining, dishonest creature at the Charitable Grinders' school and is therefore suitable material for the novel's evil forces. As I have mentioned, Collins argues that there is valid criticism in Dickens' depiction of the educational system, but it is surely a very limited criticism when we realize that it is only those with weak moral constitutions who are perverted. The criticism is actually centred on individuals rather than institutions. As we have seen in examining Oliver Twist, it is much easier for Dickens to deal with individuals because he can avoid any real criticism of the society.

As George Orwell points out in his article,[8] Dickens' target is not so much society as human nature. His novels leave us with the impression that if men would only behave decently, the world would be decent. Although Orwell admits that this attitude on Dickens' part reinforces the social institutions instead of criticizing them, he still maintains that "it is not certain that a merely moral criticism of society may not be just as revolutionary...as the politico-economic criticism which is fashionable at the moment". My disagreement with this viewpoint stems from the fact that I feel that even Dickens' moral criticism is questionable.

In a lengthy passage midway in the novel, Dickens halts the movement of the plot to lecture his readers on their social responsibilities.

His basic point rests on the Rousseauesque doctrine that all men are born naturally good and are only perverted by their environment. "It might be worthwhile sometimes to inquire what Nature is, and how men work to change her, and whether in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural." (p.646) We have already observed that in the Dickens world it is just as natural to remain untainted by your environment. But what is most important in the whole passage is Dickens' statement that every human being is related to and tainted by the foulness of the universe, that no one is free from the contagion of society's evils. When we study Dickens' characterization, we realize that a statement of this kind is blatantly false. Florence Dombey and Rose Maylie are beings of another world; the very descriptions of them link them with the realm of angels.[9] They are incapable of understanding evil and vice. In the interview between Rose and Nancy, Dickens makes us fully aware of the "wide contrast" between the two women and the natural revulsion Rose feels as she falls "involuntarily"[10] from her strange companion. She cannot and never will understand "the fascination" that could make Nancy "cling to wickedness and misery".

The whole point of Dickens' fiction is to establish who is good and who is evil and to separate the two groups from each other, the latter in the prisons and death houses and the former in a community of virtuous people. It cannot but jar us when Dickens writes that it will be a blessed morning when men "apply themselves like

creatures of one common origin, owing one duty to the Father of one family, and tending to one common end, to make the world a better place!" (p.648) The main point of Oliver Twist is to prove that Oliver does not stem from an origin which he shares with his companions in the workhouse but is a member of the bourgeoisie and deserves to be returned to them. There is no hint in the novel that the Brownlow-Maylie group are concerned with helping workhouse children in general; their only concern is removing Oliver from a milieu which he was not born to.[11]

Similarly, in Dombey and Son, there is no hope of redeeming Carker from his life of evil. He is the middle class version of Fagin, the personification of the devil who delights in converting others to villainy. Dickens gives us every opportunity to shun him rather than to recognize a humanity he shares with us. He is "a false and subtle" man (p.770), a cat whose attack we must watch out for. We have seen that, like Florence's, his character is static and absolute; and it is interesting to note that he can perceive Edith's evil nature as readily as Florence can perceive her father's goodness.[12]

How is it possible to have moral criticism in a novel where all the characters have given natures? The only possible people there are to criticize are those who are not living in accordance with their identities. Thus Dombey falls under attack because he is acting in opposition to his true nature. But Carker is presented as a given; he cannot be changed and must be disposed of. Edith Dombey

is set forward as an example of what Florence might have become had she not been saved by her sweet nature. However, like Nancy, she knows that once tainted with evil, she can never return to the world of the good.

Thus in the end, we are left with the same division with which we found ourselves in Oliver Twist. We leave the company of the good on the sea-beach amid warmth and love and the life of Dombey and Son, the austere mansion with its pride and selfishness, fade, in the words of Cousin Feenix, "like the shadow of a dream". (p.872)

CHAPTER THREE: HARD TIMES

A strong current of critical opinion holds that Hard Times (1854) is a radical departure from Dickens' earlier novels and an important step in the development of a serious criticism of Victorian society. F.R. Leavis finds that the "casual and incidental" criticism of the earlier novels has developed in Hard Times into a "comprehensive vision, one in which the inhumanities of Victorian civilization are seen as fostered and sanctioned by a hard philosophy, the aggressive formulation of an inhumane spirit".[1] G.B. Shaw equates the Dickens of Hard Times with Karl Marx, informing his readers "you must therefore resign yourself...to bid adieu to the lighthearted and only occasionally indignant Dickens of the earlier books, and get such entertainment as you can from him now that the occasional indignation has spread and deepened into a passionate revolt against the whole industrial order of the modern world".[2] Even Humphrey House who judges Hard Times as a failure in terms of social criticism remarks that the plot is "a vehicle of more concentrated sociological argument".[3]

Thus, in dealing with Hard Times, we are faced with a novel which is supposed to have as its centre a criticism of the philosophy upon which Victorian society is based. As Humphrey House points out, the main character, Mr. Gradgrind, is the only major figure in Dickens' work who is meant to be an intellectual. He is infected

with the same vices of pride and selfishness as Dombey was, but the rationale behind his behavior is found in his philosophy of life. We are not asked to accept the vague aura of pride like that which surrounds the self-enclosed Dombey; Dickens explains clearly that Gradgrind's behavior stems from his allegiance to the utilitarian philosophy, his belief in the supremacy of facts.

The novel opens in the school room and we are again given the direct criticism of the British educational system which was offered in Dombey and Son. David Craig, in his introduction to the Penguin Edition of Hard Times, states that "the first two chapters of the novel are an almost straight copy of the teaching system in schools run by the two societies for educating the poor".[4] The curriculum is centred upon facts and no allowance is made for imagination or human feeling. Gradgrind

> seemed a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, and prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge. He seemed a galvanizing apparatus, too, charged with a grim mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away.[5]

We have noted that the criticism of the educational institutions follows the same tenor in Hard Times as in Dombey and Son, (the metaphor of the cannon blowing the children out of childhood is reminiscent of the "blow, blow, blowing"[6] in Doctor Blimber's hothouse), but a more important similarity is the fact that in both novels, the schools are the only institutions which Dickens presents in such a degrading light. What is most revealing about Dickens'

social attitudes is the extent to which he delves into the actual situation which he is holding up for criticism. We are taken right into the school room and shown exactly what he considers wrong. Again, we are allowed inside the Gradgrind home to witness the children's unhappiness. But when the criticism centres on the factories, the whole perspective is altered. Our view is from the outside of the building and it is presented to us as "the head of an elephant in the state of melancholy madness" (p.22) or a fairy palace which bursts into illumination. (p.69) We are never taken inside the factory as we are the school room, and Rachel glides in and out without a word of complaint or even explanation. In the same way, we are never made aware of Dombey's business, but in a novel which deals with an industrial town it is much harder to evade such an issue.

Instead of presenting the industrial situation, Dickens gives us four examples of the working class. As we have seen in the previous novels, a criticism based on individuals has little to do with the institutions which they belong to. If Dickens had presented M'Choackumchild as a character instead of a symptom of an appalling situation, we could have understood that he, like Scrooge or Dombey, was merely operating under a delusion and that his personal reformation would be a cure for the educational problems. Because we find one method of criticism applied to the educational institutions, and another applied to the industrial institutions, it is not difficult to perceive Dickens' bias. The whole system of education needs reforming, Dickens tells us, but the factories are adequate as they are;

they only need kind-hearted managers.

Stephen Blackpool, one example of a working class man, is completely satisfied with his employment. His honour, self-respect and tranquility are torn to pieces by his unfortunate marriage, not his position in society. Dickens makes it clear that Stephen is bound to his marriage because of his social status; Bounderby informs him that the divorce laws are only for the wealthy. But instead of concentrating on the unequal laws, Dickens directs his indignation towards the "moral infamy" (p.67) of Stephen's wife. The implication is that if all the poor were like Stephen and Rachel, there would be no need for them to ask for divorces. The problem lies with the poor themselves, not with the laws which control them. Stephen leaves Bounderby's house, obsequiously polishing the door-plate which his hand had clouded, and expresses no bitterness or even desire for change.

Although Dickens explicitly presents an anti-capitalist viewpoint:

> This, again, was among the fictions of Coketown. Any capitalist there, who had made sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, always professed to wonder why the sixty thousand nearest Hands didn't each make sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, and more or less reproached them every one for not accomplishing the little feat. What I did you can do. Why don't you go and do it? (p.117)

on the implicit level he reveals his prejudice against the poor. Stephen notices the old woman from the country "with the quick observation of his class". (p.77) The atmosphere of Blackpool's room is "tainted" with the black ladder of various tenants. (p.67)

And Dickens can hardly contain his disgust at Mrs. Blackpool:

> Such a woman! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her. (p.67)

Only two pages later, Dickens tells us that it is impossible to tell:

> the capacity for good or evil, for love or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice,or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions. (p.69)

However, it is evident from the description of Blackpool's wife that she can only act in a foul manner. Surely Dickens is guilty of the sin for which he charges Gradgrind. At his first observation of Mrs. Blackpool he is "ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to". (p.3) Mrs. Blackpool does not exist as a character beyond her label, 'morally infamous'; she is one of the foul poor for whom Dickens feels only disgust.

A consideration of his treatment of the trade union gathering reveals Dickens' social attitudes even more clearly. From the satire behind the statements of Mrs. Sparsit and Bitzer, the reader is justified in assuming that Dickens is in favour of trade union meetings.

> 'What are the restless wretches doing now?' asked Mrs. Sparsit.
> 'Merely going on in the old way, ma'am. Uniting, and leaguing, and engaging to stand by one another.'
> 'It is much to be regretted,' said Mrs. Sparsit, making her nose more Roman and her eyebrows more Coriolanian in the strength of her severity, 'that the united masters allow of any such class-combinations.' (p.114)

Bitzer, a spy and an informer, is a product of the school system which Dickens has discredited, and Mrs. Sparsit is a vicious old woman with pretensions to nobility. Both are morally placed within the novel, and yet we find Dickens implicitly expressing their very sentiments. The union gatherings are 'much to be regretted' in Dickens' opinion.

> That every man felt his condition to be, somehow or other, worse than it might be; that every man considered it incumbent on him to join the rest, towards the making of it better; that every man felt his only hope to be in his allying himself to the comrades by whom he was surrounded; and that in this belief, right or wrong (unhappily wrong then), the whole of that crowd were gravely, deeply, faithfully in earnest; must have been as plain to any one who chose to see what was there, as the bare beams of the roof and the whitened brick walls. (p.139)

The men are sincere in their efforts; they are merely acting under a delusion. Dickens gives no explanation for their being 'unhappily wrong', but it is evident that he fears the possible violent outcome of such gatherings. It is not difficult to perceive Dickens' hatred of the passion which Slackbridge is able evoke. His address to the workers is merely "froth and fume" (p.138) to Dickens. It is a dilemma to admit on the one hand that the workers' intentions

are valid and yet still maintain that banding together is wrong. Dickens solves the problem by making Slackbridge an offensive character, emphasizing his sour expression, mongrel dress, and ill-made perspiring body. He is portrayed as a tyrannizer attempting to pervert the men's honest intentions.

Slackbridge will only bring out the worst in the workers. We are expected to witness his foul influence in the workers' rejection of Stephen. But the whole question of Stephen's refusal to join the union is left as vague as the reasons for Dickens' judging the gathering as wrong. The emphasis is placed on Stephen's unfortunate life rather than on his refusal to join the workers' fight to improve conditions. His unhappiness, although it is a result of the inequality which affects all his fellow workers, is his personal problem and he refuses to share it.

> ''Tis this Delegate's trade for t' speak,' said Stephen, 'an' he's paid for 't, an' he knows his work. Let him keep to 't. Let him give no heed to what I ha' had'n to bear. That's not for him. That's not for nobbody but me.' (p.142)

The implication behind these words is that Slackbridge is paid for an employment which has no relevance to the workers' conditions. His job is merely to shout the workers into a frenzy. In actual fact, Stephen Blackpool has even less sense of fraternity than Oliver Twist. Oliver was at least, at one point, prepared to stand up as a representative of his fellows and protest the injustice of their treatment. Stephen refuses to acknowledge that his life bears any relevance to his peers'. Even though Dickens discredits Slackbridge with such

terms as "gnashing and tearing", (p.141) it is difficult to ignore the justice of his words.

> 'And how shows this recreant conduct in a man on whom unequal laws are known to have fallen heavy? Oh you Englishmen, I ask you how does this subornation show in one of yourselves, who is thus consenting to his own undoing and to yours, and to your children's and your children's children's?' (p.141)

However, Dickens clearly implies that Stephen should feel no shame for refusing to join the union.

> He Stephen had never known before the strength of the want in his heart for the frequent recognition of a nod, a look, a word; or the immense amount of relief that had been poured into it by drops through such small means. It was even harder than he could have believed possible, to separate in his own conscience his abandonment by all his fellows from a baseless sense of shame and disgrace. (p.144)

Dickens reveals himself to be even less radical than he was in Oliver Twist. Stephen is "faithful to his class under all their mistrust"; (p.148) it is the other workers who were faithless when they repudiated him. He becomes the hero when he makes his address to Bounderby which "he had not spoken out of his own will and desire" but as "a noble return for his late injurious treatment". (p.151)

Dickens directs us to view Stephen as noble even in the face of injustice, and the other workers as the cause of this injustice. He is a martyr figure, rejected by his peers, yet still prepared to vindicate their actions. The workers are depicted as being as evil as the employers; both are determined to destroy Stephen.

> 'Then, by the prejudices of his own class, and by the prejudices of the other, he is sacrificed alike? Are the two so deeply separated in this town, that there is no place whatever for an honest workman between them?' (p.158)

The question of his refusal to join his fellows is left behind and we are expected to concentrate on his virtuous intentions in addressing Bounderby. Even though Dickens shows that Stephen makes no impression on Bounderby, he maintains that a single worker facing his employer is a superior means of bringing about change.

It is a curious contradiction in Dickens' work that he, on the one hand, acknowledges man's need for fullfilment within a community, yet, on the other, refuses to admit the justification of such organizations. Sikes is able to forget his own problems and for once feel human when he joins the ranks of the firefighters. The factory workers, Dickens himself tells us, believe that their only hope lies in a communal effort. But Stephen is unwilling to sacrifice his identity for a cause which he knows is justified. Dickens turns this refusal into a virtue:

> 'The masters against him on one hand, the men against him on the other, he only wantin to work hard in peace and do what he felt right. Can a man have no soul of his own, no mind of his own? Must he go wrong all through wi' this side, or must he go wrong all through wi' that, or else be hunted like a hare?' (p.252)

The union becomes a vulture hunting out the virtuous. Dickens does not acknowledge that 'working hard in peace' is necessarily a rejection of the workers' attempt to improve their situation. To work as an individual is to ignore your obligation to your fellow

employees. However,Dickens makes his solution to the workers' problems clear. Stephen tells Bounderby, "I donno, Sir. I canna be expecten to 't. 'Tis not me as should be looken to for that, Sir. 'Tis them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us. What do they tak upon themseln, Sir, if not to do 't?" (p.150) In other words, it is not the business of those within the social order to question the order itself; they must merely submit and hope that 'them as is put ower' will do the best for them. The message, then, is similar to the one in Oliver Twist and Dombey and Son. Virtue will be rewarded; one must not act but merely wait until one's goodness is recognized.

Hard Times then, is in no way the "passionate revolt against the whole industrial order of the modern world" that G.B. Shaw has described. It is rather a passionate revolt against those who are trying to change the order and a warning to those in power that their system is in danger. The criticism within the novel is an attempt to preserve the social structure, not to change it.

> I entertain a weak idea that the English people are as hard-worked as any people upon whom the sun shines. I acknowledge to this ridiculous idiosyncrasy, as a reason why I would give them a little more play. (p.63)

In spite of the irony and self-deprecation, these lines contain the kernel of Dickens' ideas for improving society. Later in the novel he makes a direct plea to those who are in positions of power:

> Utilitarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up infidels, gabblers of many little dog's-eared creeds, the poor you will have always with you. Cultivate in them, while there is yet time, the utmost graces of the fancies and affections, to adorn their lives so much in need of ornament; or, in the day of your triumph, when romance is utterly driven out of their souls, and they and a bare existence stand face to face, Reality will take a wolfish turn, and make an end of you. (p.162-3)

Earle Davis in his essay "The Social Microcosmic Pattern" interprets this statement in economic and political terms. He argues that Dickens is advocating better wages and living conditions for the workers.[7] But surely it is evident that Dickens is not concerned with reorganizing the economy, but rather with giving the workers something to compensate for their impotent position in society. 'The poor you will have always with you'; Dickens agrees with the political and social structure and wants to maintain it.

F.R. Leavis is right to point out that the circus is much more than a source of amusement and diversion. Dickens is not so simple-minded that he merely suggests that weekly amusements will cure the workers' unrest. "Dickens was insisting that 'play' as a need is intimately bound up with 'wonder', imagination and creativity, and that any starving of the complex need is cruel, denaturing and sterilizing and may be lethal."[8] As we have noted in Dombey and Son, there is a strong suggestion that young Paul's death was a result of his starved imagination. Indeed, the urgency Dickens felt about the needs of man's imagination is the basis of his educational criticism both in the earlier novel and in Hard Times. He believed

that in a world which was becoming increasingly mechanical, it was extremely important for man to retain his humanity, his capacity for vitality and joy. This is surely the reasoning behind his preference for country life and the frequent placing of his good characters within a country setting. Nature provides a transfusion of vitality which the city drains. (In the later novels Dickens' solution is not the escape to the country which solves the city problems in Oliver Twist, but a 'country mentality' within the city, like Wemmick's castle in Great Expectations or the Plornish's indoor thatched cottage in Little Dorrit.)

However, we must admit that the workers could achieve this sense of their own humanity if they were given a share in controlling their lives. And it is this very control which Dickens refuses to admit is their right. The symbol of the circus is a replacement for the natural humanity which the social system has destroyed. By describing the factories as fairy palaces, Dickens is attempting to bring the realm of the imagination into the city, to combat the Gradgrind world of facts and statistics with an aura of magic, because for Dickens, the degradation of the factory is an inevitable fact of life:

> She tried to discover what kind of woof Old Time, that greatest and longest-established Spinner of all, would weave from the threads he had already spun into a woman. But his factory is a secret place, his work is noiseless, and his Hands are mutes. (p.95)

We can never hope to escape the factories just as we can never

escape time.

Thus, we come to understand how such severe criticism of the educational system can be compatible with Dickens' basic reaffirmation of the social structure. He is not attacking the whole philosophy which Gradgrind represents, but merely its exclusion of the imagination, because it is imagination which one needs to survive in the society which Dickens portrays.

What differentiates Hard Times from the two earlier novels which we have considered is not that Dickens' view of society has changed, but that his depiction of the society is more realistic. The characters are still divided into blacks and whites, but there is a greater concern with explaining the rationale behind their behavior. Gradgrind, like Dombey, is given a new insight into life's meaning by a character of incorruptible goodness. But as I have mentioned earlier, we are given a philosophical basis for Gradgrind's pride and selfishness; he does not, like Dombey, act without apparent motivation. And Sissy Jupe, although unmistakably one of the band of incorruptible child-heroes, is given a background which explains her immunity to the Gradgrind philosophy. Gradgrind tells her, "the circumstances of your early life were too unfavourable to the development of your reasoning powers and...we began too late". (p.91) Louisa, like Edith Dombey, has been deprived of her childhood and forced into an unhappy marriage, but she too is portrayed more realistically. She is an unhappy child, not a figure of evil who joins the ranks of the villainous. Her defence of her brother is

fully explained by her emotional needs which had never been satisfied. Even Harthouse, the 'villain' of the piece, has a philosophy behind him. His behavior does not stem from a nature of absolute evil like Carker's or Fagin's, but from a decision to live like those around him. "Everyman is selfish in everything he does, and I am exactly like the rest of my fellow-creatures." (p.177) He is possessed of a self-knowledge and understanding which none of Dickens' 'evil' characters have ever revealed before.

The realistic portrayal falters in the treatment of the lower classes. It has been stated that Dickens knew little of the working classes and that this ignorance resulted in a misrepresentation of customs and class manners.[9] But the characters of Stephen and Rachel reveal more than Dickens' ignorance of working class manners and customs. They are middle class individuals; they show as little understanding of the workers' plight as if they had never themselves been inside a factory. They reflect Dickens' fear of the lower classes. The factory workers are their enemies because they submit to and believe in middle class ideals and rationalizations. Stephen refuses to aid the workers because it is not his position in society to try to control his life. Rachel is "a woman working, ever working, but content to do it, and preferring to do it as her natural lot, until she should be too old to labour any more". (p.298) This pair of workers is the middle class dream; they accept their deprivation as their due. Mrs. Blackpool and Slackbridge are equally unrealistic. The former is an example of the 'bad poor' who satisfy

middle class rationalizations: they are poor because they prefer drinking and indolence to work. And much has been made of the fact that Slackbridge is a mere figment of Dickens' imagination, resulting from his fear of organized labour.[10]

However, the most important difference between Hard Times and the earlier novels is that Dickens can no longer maintain his happy ending. In Oliver Twist and Dombey and Son the novels' endings find the good characters living in bliss in an isolated country setting. But in Hard Times, Stephen, the embodiment of goodness, dies; Dickens seems to realize that no virtue is an insurance against the destructive forces of society. But if Dickens has taken a more realistic look at his society, and found that innocents like Oliver cannot survive, he is not led to alter his solutions. Rather, he turns away from society altogether, and places his faith in life after death. In recounting Mrs. Gradgrind's death he writes that she "emerged from the shadow in which man walketh and disquieteth himself in vain". (p.200) That is, Dickens regards life on earth as a trial to be endured and believes that, if we can no longer find our bliss on earth like Oliver, we will surely find it like Stephen, in our "Redeemer's rest". (p.274)

Thus Hard Times is a departure from Dickens' earlier work. But although it reveals a growing discomfort with the world around him, it gives no indication of the revolt which G.B. Shaw finds. The increasing pessimism leads him to an even more passive solution: life

on earth has little significance; we must try to make it as bearable as possible, but we will all find our just deserts after death.

CHAPTER FOUR: LITTLE DORRIT

Critical studies of Little Dorrit claim that it is one of Dickens' darkest novels[1] and that its author is in possession of a powerful vision which indicts the whole of Victorian society. Indeed, Dickens does state explicitly that the world is a prison[2] which casts its shadow on all of its inhabitants. The novel opens in the 'villainous' Marseilles prison which like a well, vault or tomb, has no knowledge of the sun's brightness. The rest of the novel is dominated by the stifling London atmosphere: the Marshalsea debtors' prison, Mrs. Clennam's house of death and decay and the Circumlocution Office with its endless corridors designed to keep all sanity and progress locked inside. As J. Hillis Miller remarks, "Dickens, then, has found for this novel a profound symbol for the universal condition of life in the world of his imagination: imprisonment. The enclosure, the narrowness, the blindness, of the lives of most of the characters in all Dickens' novels receive here their most dramatic expression".[3]

All the major characters, except Little Dorrit, are infected to some degree by the disease of society: blind self-interest and greed. Little Dorrit is the final example of the development of the child-hero which we have followed through Oliver Twist, Florence Dombey and Sissy Jupe. She represents an escape from the prison of society. In his creation of Little Dorrit, Dickens has fused the symbols of innocence--the garden and the child. As we have noted in

the earlier novels, rural life, for Dickens, is the last vestige of innocence in an otherwise perverted world. "In the country, the rain would have developed a thousand fresh scents, and every drop would have had its bright association with some beautiful form of growth or life. In the city, it developed only foul stale smells, and was a sickly, lukewarm, dirt-stained, wretched addition to the gutters."[4]

As a young child, Little Dorrit expresses an affinity with the country-side, although she has never experienced it, and at her request, the old turnkey accompanies her on excursions to pick grass and flowers. Much later in the novel, she brings Clennam flowers, and with them a vitality strong enough to conquer the Marshalsea atmosphere.

> Dozing and dreaming, without the power of reckoning time, so that a minute might have been an hour and an hour a minute, some abiding impression of a garden stole over him--a garden of flowers, with a damp warm wind gently stirring their scents. It required such a painful effort to lift his head for the purpose of inquiring into this, or inquiring into anything, that the impression appeared to have become quite an old and importunate one when he looked round. Beside the tea-cup on his table he saw, then, a blooming nosegay: a wonderful handful of the choicest and most lovely flowers.
>
> Nothing had ever appeared so beautiful in his sight. He took them up and inhaled their fragrance, and he lifted them to his hot head, and he put them down and opened his parched hands to them, as cold hands are opened to receive the cheering of a fire. (pp.755-756)

Little Dorrit is the life force within a slowly decaying world; she brings both the cool country breeze and the warmth of a cheering fire. And unlike Oliver Twist and Florence Dombey, she is completely alone in the world; she can find no Rose Maylie or Walter Gay to under-

stand and share her purity. However, in spite of F.R. Leavis' affirmation of her reality,[5] Little Dorrit does not have the psychological foundation which makes Sissy Jupe a convincing character. As I have stated in the previous chapter, Sissy Jupe is a product of the circus, the symbol of human warmth and understanding. Her early upbringing has provided her with an insulation against the cold world of Coketown; she has experienced love. But with Little Dorrit, Dickens reverts back to a characterization similar to that of Oliver Twist. "It is enough that she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest. Inspired? Yes. Shall we speak of the inspiration of a poet or a priest, and not of the heart impelled by love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life!" (p.71)

Little Dorrit is inherently good, inherently different from those around her. Dickens tells us she was "familiar yet misplaced" (p.100) and Pancks is encouraged to search into the Dorrits' history because "there was something uncommon in the quiet little seamstress". (p.410) The concept of the misplaced child is of course reminiscent of Oliver Twist, but in this later novel, although Little Dorrit is actually a child of the middle class, Dickens places the emphasis on her angelic nature rather than her social inheritance. Her brother and sister are not blessed with her good nature; they are more obvious products of their environment. But she is surely a recreation of the Florence Dombey figure, the "unchangeable and indefinite"[6] force who

remains suffering and submissive to the end. In a world which has cast its evil shadow on most of its inhabitants, she remains exempt from corruption. Her role within the plot is to bring the wayward characters to a moral awakening.

The innocence of the child is the true redemptive force within the world, the link between man's lost paradise and future happiness. But society has created a false Messiah, Mr. Merdle and his wealth. Dickens is attempting to show that the whole society has sacrificed itself to a false god. However, I intend to prove that Dickens himself does not have the clear vision of society which his novel seems to suggest. He, like the characters within the fiction, is unsure of his true redeemer, and lays his gifts at the feet of society's false god.

A study of the character of Mr. Meagles reveals certain contradictory elements. His deference to wealth and social status is both satirized and reaffirmed by Dickens. His pleasure at the Barnacles' presence at the wedding ceremony is criticized as is his satisfaction at seeing his daughter married, although unhappily, to a man of high social standing. Clennam can see in the cordial, affectionate Meagles, a " microscopic portion of the mustard-seed that had sprung up into the great tree of the Circumlocution Office". (p.194) It is evidence of Dickens' growing social awareness that he understands that class prejudice or self-interest is not solely the domain of evil characters but can manifest itself in the most humane individuals. And yet ironically, Dickens also reveals traces of the same class prejudice himself--

he is in full accord with Mr. Meagles' treatment of Tattycoram. The adopted child is an ingrate for not accepting the Meagles' charity. Dickens implies that the girl should be grateful for her servant status and never expect to rise above it or to be her own mistress. She should rather be like Susan Nipper of Dombey and Son who is prepared to sacrifice everything, even her husband's love, for her mistress. Dickens, on the one hand, resents Meagles' deference to the governing classes, yet, on the other, fully expects the same deference of Tattycoram. He is condemning her to the very social prison which he has been crying out against. It is difficult not to sympathize with Tattycoram's rejection of this patronizing Victorian charity. However, Dickens discredits her actions by making her the victim of Miss Wade's persecution complex. In the end, Tattycoram, "the headstrong foundling-girl" (p.811) sees her error and admits that she was under the control of an anti-social woman, and the Meagles are praised by Dickens for their forgiving natures.

Miss Wade is intended to act as a foil for Little Dorrit. She too has had a deprived childhood, but her deprivation has resulted in a sense of inferiority and an ill temper. For an author who professes such concern for children's needs, Dickens shows little sympathy for Miss Wade. Instead of criticizing the society's attitude to illegitimate children, Dickens criticizes Miss Wade's ill nature and her propensity to "turn everything the wrong way, and twist all good into evil". (p.811) She becomes a type of Fagin, imprisoning and perverting innocence. Dickens treated Louisa Gradgrind, whose childhood also left

her with an ill nature, with much more compassion and understanding. Yet, the portrayal of Miss Wade is far more convincing than the portrayal of Little Dorrit: it is almost impossible to imagine Little Dorrit having an inferiority complex, she is such a one-dimensional character.

However, Dickens' contradictory attitudes to society and its values are best illustrated in the character of Arthur Clennam. F.R Leavis and Lionel Trilling both remark on the importance of Dickens' personal history in the creation of this character.[7] But Leavis emphasizes that Clennam is not Dickens directly translated into fiction.

> But in that set inquest into Victorian civilization which Little Dorrit enacts for us he is a focal agent--focal in respect of the implicit judgments and valuations and the criteria they represent. We have here, representatively manifest, the impersonalizing process of Dickens' art: the way in which he has transmuted his personal experience into something that is not personal, but felt by us as reality and truth presented, for what intrinsic authority they are, by impersonal intelligence. His essential social criticism doesn't affect us as urged personally by the writer. It has the disinterestedness of spontaneous life, undetermined and undirected and uncontrolled by idea, will and self-insistent ego, the disinterestedness here being that which brings a perceived significance to full realization and completeness in art. The writer's labour has been to present something that speaks for itself.[8]

Leavis does not specify 'the implicit judgments and valuations' which he claims Clennam's actions reveal. And it is surely on this implicit level that the contradictions in Dickens' own social vision arise. Clennam is not a figure of purity; he too has been tainted by society and suffers from its delusions. It is by participating in his growth to awareness that the reader is expected to learn. As Leavis

states in his chapter on Little Dorrit, Clennam is the reader's immediate presence in the book.[9] However, Dickens treats Clennam with the same ambiguity which we have seen in his treatment of Meagles. The 'undetermined and undirected and uncontrolled' social criticism does not have the clarity of purpose which Leavis suggests. It is precisely because the novel 'speaks for itself' that we are left with the impression that Dickens endorses the very values which he seems to discredit. By concentrating on the 'spontaneous life' of the criticism, Leavis ignores the many contradictions in Dickens' social vision.

Clennam is first introduced to us as a man numbed by social pressures and parental mistreatment. Like Louisa Gradgrind, he was raised by parents "who weighed and measured and priced everything". (p.20) However, he has the fortune of possessing a good nature and can therefore never stray too far from the right path.

> He was a dreamer in such wise, because he was a man who had, deep-rooted in his nature, a belief in all the gentle and good things his life had been without. Bred in meanness and hard dealing, this had rescued him to be a man of honourable mind and open hand. Bred in coldness and severity, this had rescued him to have a warm and sympathetic heart. Bred in a creed too darkly audacious to pursue, through its process of reversing the making of man in the image of his Creator to the making of his Creator in the image of an erring man, this had rescued him to judge not, and in humility to be merciful, and have hope and charity.
>
> And this saved him still from the whimpering weakness and cruel selfishness of holding that because such a happiness or such a virtue had not come into his little path, or worked well for him, therefore it was not in the great scheme, but was reducible, when found in appearance, to the basest elements. A disappointed mind he had, but a mind too firm and healthy

> for such unwholesome air. Leaving himself in the dark, it could rise into the light, seeing it shine on others and hailing it. (p.165) [10]

He may occasionally express a deluded notion, (he at first does not think that Doyce should oppose the Barnacles), but on the whole, he has the right instincts. Early in the novel he expresses a firm aversion to money. Through Doyce he manages to find a job which brings back his sense of dignity and of social obligation. As Humphrey House remarks, Dickens means Clennam to be a representative of the respectable middle class, the employer who understands his employees and who works as hard as they do.[11] We are to understand that Clennam does not worship wealth after the manner of the Hampton Court Bohemians, but only makes use of it to better himself and those around him. The whole factory is considered respectable by Dickens because its owner, Doyce, has the right attitude. He sees nothing in his work for himself, but understands it to be the gift of the Divine Artificer. This is the key for Dickens; if the management only had the right attitude, that is a humanitarian attitude rather than one of self-interest, society would be in no danger of breakdown. Had Bounderby of Hard Times understood himself as merely an envoy of the Divine, rather than a self-made man, he would have given up praising himself and would have listened to his workers.

However, with the speculation disaster and the resulting bankruptcy of Doyce's firm, the importance which Clennam and Dickens himself place on money and social status becomes abundantly clear. Clennam contracts"the dangerous infection with which he[Mr. Pancks]

was laden"; (p.582) he develops the desire to emulate Mr. Merdle and his counterparts.

> 'Why should you leave all the gains to the gluttons, knaves, and imposters? Why should you leave all the gains that are to be got, to my proprietor and the like of him? Yet you're always doing it. When I say you, I mean such men as you. You know you are. Why, I see it every day of my life. I see nothing else. It's my business to see it. Therefore I say,' urged Pancks, 'Go in and win!' (pp.584-5)

It is important to note that Doyce cautioned Clennam against investing the company's wealth with Merdle. Doyce is the Little Dorrit of the industrial world; his purity is immutable. He is the noble employer, the solution which Dickens offers for the industrial problems of his time.

Clennam, on the other hand, has allowed himself to come under Merdle's influence and must go to jail to pay for his crime. And deprived of his wealth, he can never hope to be on Little Dorrit's social level. "'And if something had kept us apart then, when I was moderately thriving, and when you were poor; I might have met your noble offer of your fortune, dearest girl, with other words than these, and still have blushed to touch it. But, as it is, I must never touch it, never!'" (p.760)

Clennam was quite content to be a source of charity and aid the Dorrits in their distress. But he cannot accept the situation when it is reversed. Money is not merely something to be used; it is an integral part of one's identity as one of the moral and social elect. Clennam cannot accept Little Dorrit's money because he would

be placing his identity in doubt. He would no longer be the charitable middle-class man, but an impoverished beggar in need of assistance. Because he waits patiently, he is rewarded; he is released from prison and placed in a position where he can once again make his own fortune. It is important to stress that even love cannot conquer the supremacy of wealth and social status in Clennam's mind; he cannot marry Little Dorrit while he is socially degraded.[12]

Even though he goes to jail, Dickens leaves the reader in no doubt as to Clennam's true identity. Ferdinand Barnacle, a member of the social elite which Dickens criticizes throughout the novel, cannot look down on Clennam with scorn, but must treat him like a gentleman. Dickens satirizes Mr. Dorrit for his pretensions of gentlemanliness, yet takes great pains to remind us that Clennam is a gentleman even in jail. We can only assume that Clennam is right to behave as he does because he is a true gentleman, while Dorrit is satirized because he is a phoney. The prison cannot alter those who are inherently noble. Consequently, Dorrit thrives in his false situation while Clennam withers away, fully aware he is not where he belongs.

Clennam is tainted with the same vices of class prejudice as Mr. Meagles and there is not only no hint of criticism on Dickens' part; there is a strong note of affirmation. When Clennam imagines Little Dorrit in love with "young Mr. Chivery in the backyard or any such person", he finds it "disappointing, disagreeable, almost painful". (p.259) There is a strong element of condescension in such sentiments, but Dickens himself expresses prejudice even more clearly.

He writes that the heart of the same John Chivery "mere slopwork, if the truth must be known--swelled to the size of the heart of a gentleman; and the poor common little fellow, having no room to hold it, burst into tears". (p219) We come to understand that Dickens too is touched by the predudice and class pride for which mocks his characters.

Dickens' treatment of the prison reveals further contradictions in his social attitudes. As we have noted, he considers the whole of the social order to be an imprisoning force; the Marshalsea, like Mrs. Clennam's house or the Merdle mansion, is a physical manifestation of the spiritual condition of individuals in the Victorian world. And yet, part of his criticism of the Marshalsea is that it encourages the indolence of its inhabitants. Such sentiments are reminiscent of the statements of those who were in favour of making the workhouses more unbearable to deter the poor from staying.[13]

> Crushed at first by his imprisonment, he had soon found a dull relief in it. He was under lock and key; but the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out. If he had been a man with strength of purpose to face those troubles and fight them, he might have broken the net that held him, or broken his heart; but being what he was, he languidly slipped into this smooth descent, and never more took one step upward. (p.63)

The debtors' prisons, then, discourage the indolent portion of society from improving their lot. The prison doctor lauds the institution for its freedom and peace, claiming that man is better off inside than out. (p.63) Dickens makes it clear that a self-respecting man like Clennam would break his heart rather than become accustomed to

such bondage. But surely it is obvious that, in the Dickens world, a man like Clennam would either be rescued by providence or would die a martyr.

When Little Dorrit questions the justice of the law requiring her father to repay his debts after twenty years in prison, Dickens tells us that she has been slightly tainted by the prison malaise which has affected her father.[14] Prisoners, in Dickens' mind, are encouraged by the debtors' prison system to shirk their social responsibilities; incarceration in such an institution leads a man to question the system. This upholding of the system and the value of money reveals Dickens' social attitudes. William Dorrit and all other individuals owe complete allegiance to the moral commitments of a society which has destroyed them.

However, as Philip Collins points out, Dickens was expressing only moderate views even when he suggests that debtors' prisons should be abolished. "But in Little Dorrit...he is of course dealing with victims of the law who do not strain his charity by being guilty of those major crimes against the person and against property which tend to arouse indignation, disgust, and the desire for revenge. Dorrit is imprisoned for debt, under laws which, as Dickens's contemporaries agreed, were unjust and impolitic (they were finally repealed in the 1860s).[15] As Collins goes on to prove, Dickens' ideas about the punishment of criminals were far more severe.[16] In discussing the fall of Merdle's empire, Dickens writes:

> A blessing beyond appreciation would be conferred upon mankind, if the tainted, in whose weakness or wickedness these virulent

> disorders are bred, could be instantly seized and placed in close confinement (not to say summarily smothered) before the poison is communicable. (p.571)

As we have seen in the earlier novels, Dickens believes that some individuals are absolutely evil and a corrupting influence on society. As inconsistent as this seems in a novel which shows that it is the social structure which is corrupting individuals, it is nevertheless evident. And this is the very reason why Dickens' novels were so acceptable to the members of the society which he seems to be condemning.[17] He was reassuring them that evil is actually embodied in such figures as Fagin, Carker and Rigaud; a purge of these characters would provide a great step forward in social reform.

But if society is not prepared to look after its villains, Dickens assures us that they will not go unpunished. "Respectable Nemesis" (p.570) is ever present to hand each man his due. Rigaud is crushed by the timely collapse of Mrs. Clennam's house and Merdle takes his own life. Similarily Little Dorrit and Clennam are blessed. Thus, though Dickens tells us in the end that society remains unchanged--"the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar" (p.826)--we can rest assured that the omnipotent force which governs us all will make all right in the end.

Little Dorrit presents a much more realistic and necessarily depressing picture of Victorian society. Dickens can no longer believe in the perfect bliss on earth which ended Oliver Twist. But as

we have seen in Hard Times, he turns away from this world and encourages us to have faith in a more perfect afterlife. We must try, like Little Dorrit or Stephen Blackpool, to live virtuous lives, because, if we find little reward on earth, we will certainly be repaid hereafter.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an attempt to re-evaluate Charles Dickens' social criticism. He was certainly an author who was socially concerned and who felt a genuine indignation at the condition of life which he saw around him. But, as I have attempted to show, underlying this social concern, is an implicit belief in the given moral natures of his characters, a basic assumption that each individual gets what he deserves. It is the fact that he does not openly admit the determinism in his fiction which makes the study of Dickens' work interesting. As we have seen he writes that Oliver Twist is destined to triumph because he is the principle of good and yet, at the same time, tells us that Oliver is doomed to be despised and badly treated because of his social position. Dickens' social concern manifests itself in his depiction of the horror of the workhouses and low-class life, but it is undermined by the implicit assurance that Oliver and all those like him, that is, all those who possess inherent good natures, will triumph in the end. Only those whose moral natures are inherently bad are punished. There is an unspoken understanding in the Dickens world that a benevolent god watches over the world, punishing the bad and caring for the good.

In the later novels, like Hard Times and Little Dorrit, there is a marked change in Dickens' social vision. A world dominated by men like Bounderby or Merdle, a world where facts and wealth are more important than human beings, cannot be easily altered

or ignored, as it was in the earlier novels. Evil manifests itself in many forms and can even infect men with good intentions--Gradgrind and Clennam are mistaken but not inherently evil. Dickens develops the simple division of good and evil of Oliver Twist into a far more complex study of social evils. And yet, in spite of the intensified social awareness, the later books still contain the reassurance which we found in Oliver Twist. Good characters always find their reward; if they can no longer find it like Oliver Twist in this world, they will find it, like Stephen Blackpool, in their 'Redeemer's rest'. The basic assumption underlying all Dickens' work is the same: goodness is god-given, or inspired as he tells us in Little Dorrit, and will always triumph in the end.

A study of the social criticism in the novels of Charles Dickens must take into account the implicit reassurance which is at the basis of each novel. He certainly convinces us that society is wicked, but at the same time reassures us that if we attempt to imitate the passive virtue of his good characters we will have a chance to obtain the rewards which they do. One does not attain heaven by fighting the system like the Artful Dodger, but by waiting patiently for recognition like Stephen Blackpool, Little Dorrit or Oliver Twist.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER ONE

1
Oliver Twist, p.3. Further references to the text of Oliver Twist will be included in parentheses directly following the quotation.

2
John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, (London, 1927), I, p.23.

3
Oliver Twist, Preface, p.lxii.

4
Oliver Twist, Preface, p.lxiv.

5
House, pp.93-4.

6
House, p.95.

7
Oliver Twist, p.xvii.

8
Madeline House and Graham Storey, ed., The Letters of Charles Dickens, (Oxford, 1965), I, p.231.

9
Arnold Kettle, "Dickens: Oliver Twist", The Dickens Critics, p.268.

CHAPTER TWO

1
Dombey and Son, pp.89-90. Further references to the text of Dombey and Son will be included in parentheses directly following the quotation.

2
Philip Collins, Dickens and Education, (London, 1964), p.138.

3
Collins, p.142.

4
See E.W. Knight's discussion of concealment of identity quoted on page 3 of the Introduction above.

5
Dombey and Son, Author's Preface.

6
Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, (Oxford, 1954), pp.167-8.

7
Tillotson, p.165.

8
George Orwell, "Charles Dickens", Critical Essays, p.10.

9
See Dombey and Son, p.216 and Oliver Twist, pp.187-8.

10
Oliver Twist, pp.271-4.

11
Humphrey House writes in The Dickens World that "giving security and happiness to a few people for their lifetime is", for Dickens, "more important than providing a public endowment that might last for generations". p.61.

12
See Dombey and Son, pp. 29 and 549.

CHAPTER THREE

1
F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, (London, 1970), p.188.

2
G.B. Shaw, "Hard Times", The Dickens Critics, p.128.

3
House, p.205.

4
David Craig, in the Introduction to Hard Times, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969), p.22.

5
Hard Times, p.3. Further references to the text of Hard Times will be included in parentheses directly following the quotation.

6
Dombey and Son, p.143.

7
Earle Davis, The Flint and the Flame, (Columbia, 1963), p.221.

8
F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, p.210.

9
G.B. Shaw, "Hard Times", The Dickens Critics, p.133.

10
See G.B. Shaw, "Hard Times", The Dickens Critics, pp.132-3 and Humphrey House, pp.207-10.

CHAPTER FOUR

1
J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens The World of His Novels, (Massachusettes, 1958), p.227.

2
See Little Dorrit, pp. 486 and 728.

3
Miller, p.228.

4
Little Dorrit, pp. 30-1. Further references to the text of Little Dorrit will be included in parentheses directly following the quotation.

5
F.R. Leavis remarks that Little Dorrit "emerges for us out of the situation and the routine of daily life that produced her". (p.226) In my opinion, Little Dorrit's life is not determined by her environment; as Dickens tells us, she was divinely inspired--her identity of purity and goodness is a 'given'. She is 'real' in the sense that her identity is one of genuineness, but in terms of characterization, she is not 'living'. She is rather, in Frank Donovan's terms, "the embodiment of innocence--virginal, ethereal and essentially sexless". (Dickens and Youth, New York, 1968, p.20.)

6
Dombey and Son, p.216.

7
See F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, p.220 and Lionel Trilling, "little Dorrit", The Dickens Critics, pp. 290-1.

8
F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, pp. 220-1.

9
Ibid., p.237.

10
One ought to note the implicit criticism of Miss Wade in the second paragraph. If she had been more like Clennam, she would never have developed into the anti-social being that she is. But the whole point is that Clennam's insulation is a 'given' quality and since Miss Wade is not one of the chosen 'good', how can she be expected to behave in that manner?

11
House, p.165.

12
See Knight, pp.119 and 135.

13
See House, pp.92-4.

14
F.R. Leavis argues that Dickens is being ironic when he writes that Little Dorrit has been tainted by the prison. (p.223) I find it impossible to see the irony behind such words as 'confusion' and 'compassion'; Dickens praises Little Dorrit for her sincere compassion for her father. However, A.O.J. Cockshut's argument (The Imagination of Charles Dickens, New York, 1962, p.41) which Leavis refutes, is faulty. He writes that "this unobtrusive little scene" is "one of Dickens' greatest triumphs". He finds Little Dorrit's sentiments as reprehensible as Dickens does because, "it is beyond her imagination that the creditor also might have suffered hardship through unpaid debts". Surely the whole point is that Dorrit has paid for his sin against society and the concentration on his old debts is placing more value on money than on the individual. Society's concern should be with rehabilitating the prisoner.

15
Philip Collins, Dickens and Crime, (London, 1964), p.139.

16
See Collins, Dickens and Crime, p.84 where he quotes Dickens' policy for dealing with criminals.

17
George Orwell considers this question of the acceptability of Dickens' criticism. "Before I was ten years old I was having Dickens ladled down my throat by schoolmasters in whom even at that age I could see a strong resemblance to Mr. Creakle, and one knows without needing to be told that lawyers delight in Serjeant Buzfuz and that Little Dorrit is a favourite in the Home Office. Dickens seems to have succeeded in attacking everyone and antagonizing nobody. Naturally this makes one wonder whether after all there was something unreal in his attack upon society." ("Charles Dickens", Critical Essays, p.8.)
"Dickens voiced a code which was and on the whole still is believed in, even by people who violate it. It is difficult otherwise to explain why he could be both read by working people (a thing that has happened to no other novelist of his stature) and buried in Westminster Abbey." ("Charles Dickens", The Dickens Critics, p.170.)
E.W. Knight writes that "the nineteenth-century reading public could not have rejoiced in the sometimes deeply felt criticism of its way of life to be found in Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, or Zola; and if these authors were so widely and often so enthusiastically read, it could only be because they offered something their readers were looking for and could use...It will be expressed, if not quite unconsciously, at least implicitly; and it had to be implicit because its function was to permit the

bourgeoisie to comfort itself in a manner which had nothing to do with its declared political ideology". (p.63)

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