

THE TREATMENT OF CHILDREN IN THE
NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

AUGUST 1948

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PREFACE

The status of children in society has not always been high. With the exception of a few English novels, notably those of Fielding, children did not play a major role in fiction until Dickens' time. Until the emergence of the Industrial Revolution an unusual emphasis had not been placed on the status of children, and the emphasis that followed was largely a result of the insecure and often lamentable position of children in the new machine age. Since Dickens wrote his novels during this period of the nineteenth century and was a pioneer in the employment of children in fiction, these facts alone make a study of his treatment of children an important one.

While a great deal has been written on the life and works of Charles Dickens, as far as the writer knows, no intensive study has been made of the treatment of children in his novels. All attempts have been limited to chapters, or more accurately, to generalized statements in relation to his life and works. This thesis, then, is a more detailed study of Dickens' employment of children in his novels. Because there is a dearth of criticism on his treatment of children, the writer has depended largely on direct evidence from the novels in which he treats children. Listed in chronological order, they are: Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, Old Curiosity Shop, Hard Times, Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, Little Dorrit, and Great Expectations.

The study is divided into four chapters. In Chapter I reasons for Dickens' interest in children are studied, with especial attention given to facts about his life. Chapter II is an analysis of the types of children he employed in his novels. In Chapter III the function of Dickens' children is discussed, and an attempt is made to show how they

served to mirror certain evils which existed during the nineteenth century. Chapter IV is concerned with Dickens' technique in portraying children.

The writer is indebted to Dr. Thomas D. Jarrett for his capable guidance in the preparation of this thesis. In addition, she wishes to thank the reference room staff of the Atlanta University Library for securing books which were not available in the Atlanta University Library.

CHAPTER I

REASONS FOR DICKENS' INTEREST IN CHILDREN

To know Charles Dickens' children, it is necessary to know the man himself; for his treatment of children is so tied up with his early life there can be no real separation. For example, it is not remarkable that the majority of the children in Dickens' novels are expressions of insecure childhood, either economically or spiritually. Dickens, in his own early childhood, belonged to the insecure middle class.¹

With very few exceptions, Dickens' young life was about as pathetic as the young life of Oliver Twist. Born to John and Elizabeth Dickens on February 7, 1812, Charles knew at an early age the lot of the persecuted. His father, who was a good man but not very wise in the handling of his pecuniary affairs, was consigned to the Marshalsea for his debts.² Mrs. Dickens made a courageous effort to sustain the family by opening an educational establishment to which nobody came. As a result, Dickens secured employment in a blacking warehouse at the age of nine.³ Those were hard days for young Dickens, and he has recounted them in David Copperfield. Having a special love and more than ordinary sympa-

¹ George Saintsbury, "Charles Dickens," Cambridge History of English Literature (New York, 1917), XIII, 331.

² Marshalsea was long used as a debtor's prison, but was abolished in 1842. Encyclopedia Britannica, 14th edition, XIV, 872.

³ A blacking warehouse is a place where a compound for the polishing of leathers is made. It was "at one time a large and flourishing industry." Encyclopedia Britannica, 14th edition, III, 683.

thy for suffering children, he could never understand the seeming lack of interest shown him by his father's friends during this period of his life. Forster quotes him as saying:

It is wonderful to me that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me- a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily, or mentally- to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out. No one made any sign.⁴

The lasting feeling that something could have been done to alleviate some of the suffering that he experienced as a child served to make Dickens ever aware of the problems of children. The expressed desire to be placed in "any school" is indicative of the insatiable appetite young Dickens had for learning.

Dickens' education began early under his mother, who taught him the fundamentals of English and Latin. Earlier than this, however, he had begun to read from the English masters. Through his child character, David Copperfield, he tells us that his

. . . father had left a small collection of books in a little room up stairs to which I had access (for it adjoined my own), and which nobody else in our house ever troubled. From that blessed little room 'Roderick Random,' 'Perigrene Pickle,' 'Humphrey Clinker,' 'Tom Jones,' 'The Vicar of Wakefield,' 'Don Quixote,' 'Gil Blas,' and 'Robinson Crusoe' came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time- they, and the 'Arabian Nights' and the 'Tales of the genii'- and did me no harm;⁵

⁴John Forster, Life of Charles Dickens (New York, [n.d.]), p. 10.

⁵Charles Dickens, David Copperfield (Boston, [1910]), p. 51. All subsequent references to this work will be made by title only.

These tales of fancy and human emotions Dickens considered as an important part of his education, and as an important part of the education of every child. Consequently, in Hard Times we will see him fight against schools which had as their mottoes, "Facts alone are wanted in life."⁶

What may be considered his formal education are the two years which he spent under Mr. William Giles, the son of a Baptist minister, and the two years he spent at Wellington House Academy after his father had been discharged from the Marshalsea. It was between these two periods that he worked at the blacking warehouse, experiencing hunger many days. Indeed, according to Forster, he said, "I know that, but the mercy of God, I might have easily been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond."⁷ This is perhaps why he had such tolerance and sympathy for the young criminals found in the novels we will analyse.

His early experiences helped Dickens to form what might be termed his religious philosophy. Though he had a religious philosophy, he had no definite creed. The matter of sects seemed a waste of time to him. Nevertheless, as Walter remarks,

...scarcely one book, scarcely a single sketch which came from his untiring hand, which had not its special appeal, its enunciation of moral truth, its rebuke of some besetting sin in the individual or the race, its subtle or rousing call to man's nature.⁸

⁶ Charles Dickens, Hard Times (London, 1910), I, 1. All subsequent references to this work will be made by title only.

⁷ John Forster, op. cit., p. 12.

⁸ J. C. Walter, Phases of Dickens (London, 1911), "Introduction," XIV.

So while he professed no religious faith, the basic principles of Christianity expressed themselves in the constant fight for justice for the underprivileged. From both his novels and his life, we may conclude that the foundation of Dickens' religion is charity. All conventions, all institutions which impeded charitable deeds, or instincts, were to be disposed of. And it is true, as Walters notes, that

No iconoclast demolished more idols; no Juvenal lashed with more pitiless scorn injustice, imposture, tyranny and wrong, whether in the institution or individual, whether in a hard Gradgrind doctrine of soul-destroying materialism, ...or in a perverted Bumbledom with its bungling and malicious maladministration, or in the dealings of man with man.⁹

These things being true, there is no real separation between Dickens' attitude toward religion and his attitude toward politics. Both go hand in hand. If there is in human nature a spiritual desire for charity, it follows naturally that there is an interest in the welfare of the human being. If we were to place him in a political group which expresses more nearly his political concepts, we would of necessity classify him as a democrat. However, this would be a fallacy; for though a democrat by sentiment, Dickens claimed no political affiliations. Yet we cannot go along with Somervell when he asserts that Dickens "had no interest in, and realization of the significance of the democratic movement of his day."¹⁰ In proof of this, we shall show later that many of the economic reforms had taken place before Dickens had published his first novel. And, moreover, Forster shows that Dickens was well aware of the problems

⁹Ibid., XV.

¹⁰D. C. Somervell, English Thought in the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1936), p. 170.

of the day. Forster writes:

I doubt if he [Dickens] ever enjoyed anything more than the power of thus taking part occasionally, unknown to outsiders, in the sharp conflict the press was waging at the time....He would at times even talk, political outlook, of carrying off himself and his household gods, like Coriolanus to a world elsewhere.¹¹

It is true, however, that the only remedy for correcting political and social evils in his novels is Christian charity.¹² This is the remedy he prescribes in his treatment of children. Also, as Somervell notes, Dickens

...lays his finger upon one thing and another thing; he makes one thing and another thing stink in the nostrils of the public, and his task is done.¹³

The implication is not that Dickens was merely a theorist working with what he knew nothing about. Walters has truly said that Dickens "was a moulder of national character, a regenerator of his race, a reformer of his time. An intense patriot, he was dissatisfied with the England in which he lived."¹⁴

Along with his own experience as a child, Dickens had an innate quality of humanitarianism. Through the long hard days of his childhood suffering, through the awareness of social evils which he portrays so vividly in his novels, he is always able to maintain an optimism which is remarkable. In none of his novels- no matter how tragic they may be-

¹¹ John Forster, op. cit., p. 79.

¹² D. C. Somervell, op. cit., p. 170.

¹³ Ibid., p. 169.

¹⁴ J. C. Walters, op. cit., XVIII.

does he end on a hopeless note. This has been criticized as being one of the faults of Dickens' writings.¹⁵ This may or may not be true. We can say, however, that his optimism is not a shallow sort. Rather, it is an optimism based on a profound belief in human worth. This is the instinctive humanitarianism which drew him to the slum areas to learn more thoroughly the needs of poverty stricken children so that he could better champion their cause. There is the instinctive humanitarianism which led him to believe that there is a sympathy which man has for his brother, and which necessitates his doing something about his plight.

Believing this, Dickens felt that if he appealed to their sympathy, many wrongs would be righted. He chose to do this by the most effective method he could think of, the employment of children in his novels.

Wagenknecht notes in his study of Dickens that

Children had for Dickens a distinctly religious appeal. Something of God was bound up in a child, and right minded people could not help but feel it as the poor country folk feel it in Little Nell.¹⁶

The suffering of neglected and maltreated children was the surest way to the heart of his reading public. Who is able to read passionless of a starving child pleading for "some more" as does Oliver Twist? Or who is able to read without deep feeling of a child who starves for want of a kind word from his parents as does David Copperfield? It is evident, then that one reason for Dickens' employment of children in his novels is to bring about an awareness on the part of the English people of the odious

¹⁵G. K. Chesterton has a chapter in which he discusses Dickens' optimism at length. See Charles Dickens (London, 1906), pp. 263-287.

¹⁶E. Wagenknecht, The Man Charles Dickens (Boston, 1920), p. 139.

evils of nineteenth century England, "to arouse them so effectually that they could know no peace until they had done their best to remedy the evils so ably put before them."¹⁷

But there was more than Dickens' own background and his own humanitarian instinct which motivated him to employ children as he did in his novels. The over all socio-economic milieu of nineteenth century England had a tremendous effect on the status of children. The Industrial Revolution brought with it many changes. First of all, it brought with it the factory system as we know it today, which in turn brought with it a host of evils. Perhaps the greatest evil was the introduction of child labor for which starvation wages were paid. Schapiro tells a sad tale about the effects of the Industrial Revolution in his Modern and Contemporary European History.

Pauper children were "apprenticed" to the factory by the overseers of the poor, their only wages being food and clothes of the coarsest kind. These child slaves, some only five and six years old, slept in relays in dormitories near the factory. Early every morning they were awakened and taken to the mill, "where in stench, in heated rooms, amid the constant whirling of a thousand wheels, idle fingers and little feet were kept in ceaseless action, forced into unnatural activity by blows from the heavy hands and feet of the merciless overlooker, and the inflection of bodily pain by instruments invented by the the sharpened ingenuity of insatiable selfishness."¹⁸

With the Industrial Revolution there came about a more rapid urbanization. It too had effects on economic England and on children. With the influx of people coming to the cities to seek employment, housing became a great problem. A realistic description of the slum areas of London

¹⁷E. A. Norris, "Dickens and Children," The Living Age, August 12, 1911, p. 395.

¹⁸J. S. Schapiro, Modern and Contemporary European History (London, 1912), p. 50.

during the nineteenth century is given in *Oliver Twist*.¹⁹ These areas were hot beds for juvenile and adult crime. Education which would have been beneficial for these people was out of the question; for "it was generally regarded as an evil to themselves and to the community at large."²⁰ Such schools run by private religious and philanthropic societies which had poorly paid teachers were the only schools open to those who had the time to spare from earning their daily bread.

The general results of these evils was the starvation of the lower classes, both spiritually and physically. But an epoc of reform came in with the end of the Tory Regime in 1830. Under the new regime, there was passage of the Reform Bill of 1832, which gave rise to many socio-economic reforms. Those which affected Dickens' treatment of children are the Factory Act of 1833, the Poor Law of 1834, and the Education Act of 1833.²¹

The Factory Act destroyed some of the evils of child labor by prohibiting children under nine years of age to work in textile factories, cutting down on the long hours of those children between nine and thirteen years of age, and establishing schools for child laborers. In 1833, the first annual grant for education was set up and the money was distributed chiefly among schools run by religious societies. Then came the Poor Law of 1834, which was enacted to get rid of pauperism. Actually, many paupers died in the process, for there was a curtailment of outdoor relief and a

¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London, 1910), I, 57. All subsequent references to this work will be made by title only.

²⁰ J. S. Schapiro, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

demand for those seeking help to enter workhouses. While in the long run some of the reforms offered advantages, for the present they only served to mirror many of the problems. Indeed, "the age was still sending men to gaol for sleeping under a hedge, and still dosing with hard labor the starving miscreant who stole a turnip."²² Children still suffered from maltreatment and neglect. Dickens saw these things and was thoroughly affected by them.

Finally, it is necessary to note that there was a certain psychology in Dickens' employment of children. He knew that sentimentalism and sensationalism appealed to the public. His use of sentimentalism and a kind of satirical humor is characterized by an exaggeration which amounts to sensationalism. But, as Edgar states, "sensationalism was the soul of cheap miscellanies by which literature reached the mid-Victorian multitude."²³ Such sensationalism in his employment of children meant a greater appeal to the public. Knowing this, he used it without reservation.

The causes, then, for Dickens' interest in children may be said to be a result of three things: his own background, his humanitarian spirit, the socio-economic milieu of the times which he lived and wrote, and his cognizance of the effect that his novels would have on the English reading public because of the employment of sentimental and melodramatic elements.

²² J. C. Walters, op. cit., pp. 169-170.

²³ Pelham Edgar, The Art of the Novel (New York, 1934), p. 117.

CHAPTER II

TYPES OF CHILDREN IN DICKENS' NOVELS

In the main, Dickens' children fall into three categories, those who are good, those who are bad,²⁴ and those who may be called mature. While the latter group of children exhibits certain qualities which may be attributed to children, they almost always are representative of children who are mature for their age. To understand more fully Dickens' children, then, it is necessary to discuss them in relation to the category into which they fall. For simplification, we have chosen to use the term "types" to denote the kind of children he wrote about.

David Copperfield and Pip are the only two of Dickens' children whom he treats as ordinary children. There is no truer picture of early childhood than in the first chapter of David Copperfield. Through David, Dickens recounts vividly all of the feelings and impressions that a young child experiences. But even in the character of David, there is a static element, for we have in him nothing but noble instincts. On the other hand, Pip of Great Expectations, having come into prosperity, becomes a snob almost immediately. Thus Dickens allows him to be susceptible to human frailties. These two children are exceptions.

As has already been suggested, Dickens' children are either good or bad or mature. On close observation, however, we find that the bad children differ in degree of badness. But in considering Dickens' treatment of bad children, we must look at his attitude toward criminals.

²⁴Hugh Walker expresses the same idea about all of Dickens' characters, that they are either "eminently good or emphatically bad." Hugh Walker, Literature of the Victorian Era (Cambridge, 1931), p. 684.

According to Wagenknecht, Dickens' felt that criminals were frequently without conscious altogether, that often they struggle toward crime as diligently as decent people struggle away from it."²⁵ We place in this category the children who are hopelessly bad. But it must be remembered, too, that Dickens believed that there are criminals who are victims of circumstances, and who feel remorse for their misdoings. We place in this category those children for whom there is hope. Having some idea of how he felt toward criminals, we may look at his child criminals.

Jack Dawkins or the Artful Dodger and Noah Clypole of Oliver Twist fall among the children of the bad group. Jack Dawkins represents the hardened youth who has lost all sense of right and wrong. He is willing to orientate the innocent Oliver Twist in the ways of crime. Indeed, he considers his criminal profession an art which must be cultivated. And even when he is finally taken by the police, he does not realize the full significance of his punishment. The scene in which he is brought before the bench is evidence of this. Such a scene would ordinarily hold a great deal of humor; however, the tragic element overshadows the humor. On receiving his sentence, the Dodger shouts:

"You'll pay for this, my fine fellows. 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!"²⁶

Dickens' last words about the Dodger are that he is "doing justice to his bringing up, and is establishing for himself a glorious reputation."²⁷

²⁵ E. Wagenknecht, op. cit., pp. 124-5.

²⁶ Oliver Twist, II, 339.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 339

In other words Dickens felt that the Dodger's rearing, or lack of rearing, had a great deal to do with the type of youth he finally turned out to be. He is without conscience because society and circumstances have made him so. And though he is a victim of circumstances, such hardness of heart of necessity places him among the bad children.

While Noah Claypole, too, is a victim of circumstances, he also has a personality which is base. Gissing states that Dickens never again "draws a figure so peculiarly base as that of Noah Claypole."²⁸ This can be seen to be true early in the story when he starts a fight with Oliver and later lies so that Oliver gets the licking. His baseness is more pronounced after he joins Fagin's gang. When asked to "dodge" Nancy, he admits proudly, "I can do that pretty well, I know. I was a regular cunning sneak when I was in school."²⁹ And although he is pardoned for his crimes at the end of the story, he still is of dubious character. Dickens writes of him:

Mr. Noah Claypole: receiving a free pardon from the crown in consequence of being admitted approver against Fagin: and considering his profession not altogether as safe a one as he could wish: was, for some little time, at a loss for the means of a livelihood, not burdened with too much work. After some consideration, he went into business as an informer, in which calling he realises a genteel subsistence.³⁰

Noah Claypole is one of Dickens' thoroughly bad children. He is like the Dodger in that he too is a victim of circumstances, having been a work house boy. However, he is unlike the Dodger in that he does not

²⁸ G. Gissing, Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens (New York, 1924), p. 54.

²⁹ Oliver Twist, II, 347.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 416.

mitigate his baseness by arousing humor within the reader. He leaves with a feeling of disgust.

Charles Bates, friend and accomplice to Jack Dawkins, never developed the hard and uncaring attitude of his friend. His sense of humor acted as a kind of safety valve to keep him human. When the artful Dodger is caught, he experiences a kind of despondency if not real remorse. Thus, as Gissing asserts,

Charles Bates it is impossible to condemn; his jollity is after Dickens's own heart, and as there is always hope for the boy who can laugh, one feels it natural enough that he is last heard of as "merriest young grazier in all Northamptonshire."³¹

In addition, when Charley hears about Sike's crime, he turns against him. And the result is that he gives up his life of crime. In the end, "he struggled hard and suffered much, for some time; but, having a contented disposition and good purpose succeeded in the end."³² We see, then, that though Charley Bates must be listed as a bad child, he was capable of change. Thus he differs from the Dodger and Noah Claypole in degree of badness.

Like Charley Bates, Trabb's boy exhibits a sense of humor. Consequently, there is the feeling that he too is capable of change. Actually, however, Trabb's boy was more mischievous than bad. He had no motive except to make Pip feel uncomfortable; his annoyance of Pip served as compensation for the prosperity he had missed. However in Pip's opinion, he was incorrigible. Pip says about him,

³¹G. Gissing, op. cit., p. 56.

³²Oliver Twist, p. ii.

...he Trabb's boy was a boy whom no man could hurt; an invulnerable and dodging serpent who when closed into a corner, flew out again between his captor's legs.³³

Looking at him critically, however, he is really an expression of vigor and energy. As Chesterton has so well put it:

Trabb's boy is among other things a boy; he was a physical rapture in hurling himself like a boomerang and in bouncing to the sky like a ball.³⁴

Here we must look at another child of Dickens who differs from the children who are placed in the category of bad children by virtue of the fact that she is chosen to represent the idea of snobbery. However, she cannot be called one of the good children, for she crushes the heart of young Pip. Estella is perhaps best described as the personification of snobbery. Even in her attempts to be kind, Pip experiences the feeling that she is being patronizing. The following passage is evidence of this:

I kissed her cheek as she turned it to me. I think I would have gone through a great deal to kiss her cheek. But I felt that the kiss was given to the coarse common boy as a piece of money might have been, and that it was worth nothing.³⁵

The good children are predominant in Dickens' novels. These are the children who are born good, live the same way, and die good. Outstanding examples are: Florence Dombey, Amy Dorrit, and Little Nell. These children possess an inner goodness which gives them fortitude and courage.

Let us look first at Florence Dombey of Dombey and Son. Though driven from home by the cruelty of her vindictive father, she later saves him from

³³Charles Dickens, Great Expectations (London, 1910), p. 417. All subsequent references to this work will be made by title only.

³⁴G. K. Chesterton, Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens (London, 1911), p. 203.

³⁵Great Expectations, p. 87.

a suicidal death and takes him to live with her. She even begs his forgiveness.

"I never meant to leave you; I never thought of it before or afterwards. I was frightened when I went away, and could not think. Papa, dear, I am changed. I am penitent. I know my fault. I know my duty better now.... You will come home with me."³⁶

In relation to types, the above quotation shows the constant and enduring goodness of Florence.

Amy Dorrit is another example of consummate goodness. Quiller-Couch is correct when he asserts that Dickens "would fain keep her, born and bred in that unwholesome den [the Marshalsea] its one uncontaminated "prison-flower."³⁷ He points out that the only thought which resembles evil comes in the following scene:

Little Dorrit had been thinking too. After softly putting his grey hair aside, and touching his forehead with her lips, she looked toward Arthur, who came nearer to her, and pursued in a low whisper the subject of her thoughts.

"Mr. Clenam, will he pay all his debts before he leaves here?"

"No doubt. All."

"All the debts for which he has been imprisoned here, all my life and longer?"

"No doubt."

There was something of uncertainty and remonstrance in her look; something that was not all satisfaction. He wondered to detect it, and said:

"You are glad that he should do so?"

"Are you?" Asked Little Dorrit, wistfully.

"Am I?" "Most heartily glad!"

"Then I know I ought to be."

"And are you not?"

"It seems to me hard," said Little Dorrit, "That he should

³⁶Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son, (London, 1910), II, 862. All subsequent references to this work will be by title only.

³⁷A Quiller-Couch, Charles Dickens and Other Victorians (New York, 1925), p. 87.

have lost so many years and suffered so much and at last pay all the debts as well. It seems to me hard that he should pay in life and money both."

"My dear child-" Clenam was beginning.

"Yes, I know I am wrong," she pleaded timidly, "don't think any worse of me; it has grown up with me here."

The prison, which could spoil so many things, had tainted Little Dorrit's mind no more than this. ...it was the last speck Clenam ever saw, of the atmosphere upon her.³⁸

This episode indeed shows the strength of Little Dorrit's goodness. Like Florence Dombey she exhibits a goodness that is lasting through trials and hardships.

The whole story of the life of Little Nell is goodness, her wanderings, the loyal care of her father until her death. Thus what Dickens expresses in his preface to Oliver Twist can be applied to all of these children - namely, to show "the principle of good running through adverse circumstances, and triumphing at last."³⁹ Each of these children has his share of adverse circumstances; each triumphs in the end.

So we come to the children whom we may call mature children. Indeed, Chesterton states that

...whatever charm these children may have they have not the charm of childhood; the beauty and divinity in a child lie in his not being conscientious, not being like Little Nell.⁴⁰

It is necessary to say here that it is possible for mature children to be good or bad; for while Artful Dodger is bad, there is no doubt about his maturity. And, while Little Nell is eminently good, she is

³⁸Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit (London, 1910), I, 437. All subsequent references to this work will be made by title only.

³⁹Oliver Twist, "Preface," I, x.

⁴⁰G. K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (New York, 1924), p. 122.

mature. We can say, however, that the children in Dickens' novels who show the greatest maturity are those who are good. For example, Little Nell had a sense of responsibility which is seldom found in people three times her age; and little Paul Dombey is endowed with an uncanny sense of maturity. Whipple quotes Dickens as comparing Paul to

...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.⁴¹

Other instances of mature children are found in the Little Dorrit and Florence Dombey. By the time she is eight years old, Amy Dorrit had taken the responsibility of her family on her shoulders. She was dubbed "Little Mother." Until Paul Dombey died, Florence was mother as well as sister to him. Chesterton has suggested that perhaps Dickens had a peculiar interest in the strange sort of girl having premature sense of responsibility, because he once knew a girl of this kind.⁴² Whatever the reason, he has made his mature children the most appealing to his readers. It is not possible to appreciate the extent of the maturity of these children unless one follows their actions throughout the novels. However, in the listing of types, it is necessary to at least mention Dickens mature children.

A study of the types of children Dickens employed in his novels shows that he was interested in all children, whether they are good, bad or mature. All have a certain charm; all are to be loved. Moreover, such a study shows that in order to gain full appreciation of Dickens children,

⁴¹E. P. Whipple, Charles Dickens (Boston, 1912), p. 263.

⁴²G. K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (New York, 1924), p. 124.

one must be aware of the differences in the types of children he employed in his novels.

CHAPTER III

THE FUNCTION OF CHILDREN IN DICKENS' NOVELS

At heart, Dickens was a reformer; however, there are two distinct types of reformers. First, there are the reformers who advocate the revolutionization of overt practices in favor of that which is evil; second, there are the reformers who seek to change basic concepts and ideas, gradually evolutionizing practices which are a menace to happiness and well-being. Dickens was of the latter type. Consequently, it is not unusual to find that he had an ulterior motive in his treatment of children. His children were to serve a definite function. This function was to show the effect of socio-economic institutions, and to express certain moral ideas. However, while these children have a functional purpose, Dickens does not treat them as robots. As Taine suggests, they "are of extreme sensibility; they love much, and they crave to be loved."⁴³ And, indeed, Dickens shows through such characters as David Copperfield and Florence Dombey that love is as necessary to children as the air which they breathe and the food which they eat.

Looking first at the socio-economic institutions which in many cases served to destroy the inherent goodness of mankind, and particularly children, let us view Dickens' children in relation to the workhouse system, which he censured. This system was established in 1834 under the Poor Law. Actually, according to George Gissing, Dickens was in error when he censured the law. For though good results did not follow immediately after the passing of the law, in good time it justified itself. "Dickens,"

⁴³H. A. Taine, History of English Literature (London, [n.d.]), p. 363.

he notes, "seeing only the hardship of the inevitable reform, visited upon the authors of that reform indignation merited by the sluggishness and selfishness which had made it necessary."⁴⁴ In his imagination, he could see only the suffering caused by the tyranny of such a law. Consequently, in Oliver Twist we get his fight against the workhouse system.

With the exception of his persistent goodness and innocence, young Oliver is a typical product of the workhouse. Starved and frightened as a wild young animal, it is remarkable how he lived to reach the age of nine, for his friend Dick didn't live. The gross neglect and indifference to the individuality of workhouse children is seen in the following episode. In answer to a query as to where Oliver got his name

The beadle drew himself up with great pride, and said,
"I invented it."

"You, Mr. Bumble!"

"I Mrs. Mann. We name our fondlings in alphabetical order. The last was a S,-Swibble, I named him. This was a T,- Twist, I named him... I have got names ready made to the end of the alphabet, and all the way through it again, when we come to Z."⁴⁵

The offence of such negligence and indifference was minor, however, in comparison to the offence of starving the poor paupers. Once being desperately hungry, Oliver rose from the table and

...advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand,
said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

"Please, sir, I want some more"...

"What!" said the master at length, in a faint voice.

"Please, sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.⁴⁶

⁴⁴George Gissing, op. cit., p. 47.

⁴⁵Oliver Twist, I, 8.

⁴⁶Ibid., I, 14.

For Dickens the above incidents were enough for the quick and complete abolition of the Poor Law. No law, he felt, is beneficial if it causes unhappiness and misery. Through *Oliver Twist* he shows both.

But Dickens' interest did not stop with the fight against the physical miseries suffered by children because of institutions. The child is to experience the full happiness of childhood both physically and mentally. Another function of the children of his novels was to show this. Here we come to another evil against which Dickens rebelled, poor schools.

The schools which Dickens wrote about were primarily of two types: those run for profiteering purposes, often having ignorant school masters, and those run for the express purpose of eradicating all imagination and fancy from the mind of the child. In many cases these two evils were combined. Louise and Tom Gradgrind of Hard Times are products of the last systems. Trained in the tradition that facts are everything, at a deciding moment in her life Louise is able to say to her father,

"How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here!"⁴⁷

In Dombey and Son, Dickens expresses the same idea and shows the effect of such a school system on the children who were exposed to it. Anxious to prepare young Paul early for his position in life, Mr. Dombey sends him to Dr. Blimpers' establishment. Dr. Blimpers' school was a private, classical one which was to educate young gentlemen. Dickens

⁴⁷Hard Times, II, 194.

satirically describes the educational system which brought about Paul's death in the following lines:

They knew no rest from the pursuits of strong hearted verbs, savage non- substantive, inflexible syntatic passages, and ghosts of excercises that appeared to them in dreams. Under the following system a young gentleman usually took leave of his spirit in two weeks; he had all the cares of the world on his head in three months; he conceived bitter sentiments against his parents and guardians in four; he was an old misanthrope in five; envied Quintus Croetus that blessed the refuge on the earth at six; and at the end of the first twelve months had arrived at the conclusion, from which he never afterwards departed, that all the fancies of the poets and lessons of the sages were a mere collection of words and grammar and had no other meaning in the world.⁴⁸

The school run by Mr. Squeers in Nicholas Nickleby and Mr. Creakle in David Copperfield are typical examples of the profiteering schools which existed during the nineteenth century.⁴⁹ Nicholas Nickleby is the first overt attack on such schools made by Dickens. While the children who are at Dotheboys Hall are suppose to be gentlemen, Dickens shows them as tortured and emaciated children who are victims of avaricious Mr. Squeer and his wife. He gives a vivid picture of these pupils who were fed on brimstone and treacle.

Pale and haggared faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys stunted of growth, and others whose long meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together;...There were little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with the scowl of sullen dogged suffering, there was childhood with

⁴⁸ Dombey and Son, I, 148.

⁴⁹ Mr. Squeers' establishment was an actual place Dickens visited during his lifetime. See D. C. Somervell, English Thought (New York, 1936), p. 169.

the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone, and its helplessness alone remaining.⁵⁰

It is noteworthy that these things did not matter to Mr. and Mrs. Squeers, who found a lucrative business in these children. Dickens satirically writes:

Now the fact was, that both Mr. and Mrs. Squeers viewed the boys in the light of their proper and natural enemies; or, in other words, they held and considered that their business and profession was to get as much from every boy as could be screwed out of him.⁵¹

The method of teaching at Dotheboys Hall cannot be overlooked. A days lesson proceeds as follows:

After some half hours delay Mr. Squeers re-appeared, and the boys took their places and their books, of which commodity the average might be one to eight learners. A few minutes having elapsed, during which Mr. Squeers looked very profound, as if he had a perfect apprehension of what was inside all the books, and could say every word of their contents by heart if only he chose to take the trouble,...

"This is the first class in English spelling and philosophy, Nickleby," said Squeers...

"Now then where is the first boy?"

"Please, sir, he's cleaning the back parlor window," said the temporary head of the philosophical class.

"So he is to be sure," rejoined Squeers, "We go upon the practical mode of teaching, Nickleby; the regular educational system. C-L-E-A-N, clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-I-N, win, D-E-R, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of books, he goes out and does it. It's just the same principle as the use of globes Where is the second boy?"⁵²

⁵⁰Charles Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby (London, 1910), p. 89. All subsequent references to this work will be made by title only.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 88.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 91-92.

And so the sad story goes on and on. Almost the same story can be told of David Copperfield's experience at Salem House. Indeed, he says that

In a school carried on by sheer cruelty, whether it is presided over by a dunce or not, there is not likely much to be learned. I believe our boys were generally, as ignorant a set as any school boys in existence; they were too much troubled and knocked about to learn; they could no more do that to advantage, than anyone can do anything to advantage in a life of constant misfortune, torment and worry.⁵³

Leaving the evils of the school, then, it is necessary to look at another problem which was near to Dickens' heart, the debtor's prison. Himself a frequent visitor of Marshalsea during his father's confinement, he knew the humiliation that a child experiences when it learns that his father is a prisoner. It is no wonder that he used children to point up this evil. It was easy for him to write about Amy Dorrit, the child of the Marshalsea; it was easy for him to fight against a system which marks innocent children as burdens of society for the remainder of their life. Little Dorrit, in the novel by the same name, was one such child; for she was born in the Marshalsea. Dickens writes of her,

At what period of her early life the little creature began to perceive that it was not the habit of all the world to live locked up in narrow yards surrounded by high walls with spikes at the top, would be a difficult question to settle. But she was a very little creature indeed, when she had somehow gained the knowledge, that her clasp of her father's hand was to be always loosened at the door which the great key opened; and that while her own light steps were free to pass beyond it, his feet must never cross the line.⁵⁴

⁵³David Copperfield, p. 95.

⁵⁴Little Dorrit, I, 70.

The child's constant striving for the emancipation of her sister and brother from the shame and humiliation that goes along with being children of a prisoner seemed to Dickens a tragedy which could happen to any child as long as a debtor's prison existed. Dickens looks with compassion on this child who has

...no knowledge even of the common daily tone and habits of the common members of the free community who are not shut up in prison; born and bred, in a social condition false even with a reference to the falsest condition outside the walls; drinking from infancy of a well whose waters had their own peculiar stain, their own unwholesome and unnatural taste...⁵⁵

Having looked at the children whose function it is to point up certain socio-economic conditions, we shall look at those children who are employed to express certain moral ideas. Dickens felt that phases of life involving children extended further than those of social and economic insecurity. There are, for example, the moral phases, especially those having to do with parent-child relationships. The stories of Amy Dorrit and Little Nell are the most beautiful expressions of filial loyalty; on the other hand, the stories of Florence Dombey and David Copperfield are the most pathetic expressions of parent-child relationships.

Both Amy of Little Dorrit and Nell of The Old Curiosity Shop have unbounded fortitude and are the embodiment of filial affection. In addition to the long years of toil for her family, Amy Dorrit gives spiritual consolation to her father, who through years of imprisonment has lost all faith and confidence in himself. Dickens says of her,

Little Dorrit, though of unheroic stock and mere English, did much more, in comforting her father's

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 73.

wasted heart upon her innocent breast, and turning it to a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or waned, through all his years of famine.⁵⁶

And though she is an adult when we meet her, there is still the childhood faith in her father. It is only after he has gained his freedom as well as a fortune that she ceases to be his devoted slave.

Little Nell's story differs from Amy Dorrit's in hardship and trials only in the point that Nell does not live to see her grandfather gain a fortune. The long wanderings of Nell with her grandfather in order to save him from his enemies and then from himself, marks a fidelity which is astounding. He begs Nell not to leave him, and when their funds have given out, Nell finds work at Mrs. Jarley's Wax Works to support her grandfather. Though she is robbed by her grandfather, who has an incurable weakness for gambling, she never loses faith in him. She looks at him

Fast asleep-... This was not the gambler, or the shadow in her room;...this was her dear old friend, her harmless fellow-traveller, her good, kind grandfather.⁵⁷

Loving her with a love that was sincere but selfish, the old man accepted the fruits of Nell's labor. Only when she began to show signs of exhaustion and fatigue did he take cognizance.

...he, who had seen her toiling by his side through so much difficulty and suffering, and had scarcely thought of her otherwise than as the partner of his miseries which he felt severely in his own person, and deplored for his own sake at least, as much as hers, awoke to the sense of what he owed her, and those miseries made her.⁵⁸

On the other hand, Florence Dombey of Dombey and Son represents the

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 328.

⁵⁷Charles Dickens, Old Curiosity Shop (London, 1910), p. 227. All subsequent references to this work will be made by title only.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 405.

child who suffers from deliberate parental neglect. When his son is born, Mr. Dombey makes everything and everyone secondary to him, including his daughter. In fact, he is so insensible to Florence's existence, when asked how many children he has, he states that he has only one, Paul. In his blindness he could not see her "passionate desire to run clinging to him, crying, as she hid her face in his embrace, "Oh father, try to love me!"⁵⁹ The most affection ever showed her by her father came after she had been lost.

The entrance of the lost child made a slight sensation, but not much. Mr. Dombey, who had never found her, kissed her once upon the forehead and cautioned her not to run away again.⁶⁰

Florence, having her approaches to her father constantly rebuffed on every hand, finally flees from her home. Before this time, however, he strikes her.

...she looked at him her father, and a cry of desolation issued from her breast. For as she looked, she saw him murdering that fond idea to which she had held in spite of him. She saw his cruelty, neglect, and hatred dominant above it, and stamping it down. She saw she had no father upon earth, and ran out, orphaned from his home.⁶¹

But the epitome of parental indifference and neglect is the disinterest Mr. Dombey shows when Florence runs away. He does not try to find out where she has gone.

David Copperfield is another of Dickens' children who represent parent maltreatment. As the result of a second marriage, the relationship

⁵⁹Dombey and Son, I, 32.

⁶⁰Ibid., I, 85.

⁶¹Ibid., II, 680.

between David and his mother becomes strained, and he suffers under the cruelty of a step-father. Many days he suffers from want of a kind word or an affectionate look. To defend himself, he bites Mr. Murdstone, his step-father. But he reaps the consequences; for he tells the reader;

He beat me then, as if he would have beat me to death.... Then he was gone; and the door was locked outside; and I was lying, fevered and hot, and torn, and sore, and raging in my puny way, upon the floor.⁶²

Later on in the story David states that, "He ordered me like a dog, and I obeyed like a dog."⁶³ And after the death of his mother, he states again, "Day after day, week after week, month after month, I was coldly neglected."⁶⁴ After a time, David also runs away. And so we have another story of neglect. For Dickens, David represents countless children who perish for lack of affection. His purpose in employing such children as Florence and David is to bring about a change of heart in England at large.

Another moral evil in which Dickens expressed a deep interest was snobbery. It is the function of both Pip and Estella of Great Expectations to point up the evil of the kind of snobbery which comes with social and economic security. Estella's haughtiness is the result of such a rearing by Miss Havisham. The following passage is an indication of Estella's snobbery:

Miss Havisham beckoned her to come close, and took up a jewel from the table, and tried its effect upon her fair young bosom and against her pretty brown hair. "Your

⁶²David Copperfield, p. 58.

⁶³Ibid., p. 120.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 151.

own, one day, my dear, and you will use it well. Let me see you play cards with this boy."

"With this boy! Why he is a common labouring-boy!"⁶⁵

Here it is significant that although Pip could not understand this attitude in Estella, he adopted it himself once he had been given social and economic security. The following episode portrays this:

"Since your change of fortune and prospects, you have changed your companions," said Estella.

"Naturally," said I.

"And necessarily," she added, in a haughty tone; "what was company for you once, would be quite unfit company now."

In my conscious, I doubt very much whether I had any lingering intention left of going to see Joe; but if I had, this observation put it to flight.⁶⁶

As Chesterton points out, "the study of Pip is meant to indicate that with all his virtues Pip is a snob."⁶⁷ It may well be added that the study of Estella shows the evil results of snobbery; for, she experiences great unhappiness later in life.

In his treatment of children, Dickens did not overlook those individuals who cry out for benevolence and toleration because of the imperfection of intellect. Such a person is Toots of Dombey and Son whom we meet for the first time at Mr. Blimper's establishment. Since he is a product of such a school system, he has learned so much until he knows nothing at all. While he can be looked upon as a comic figure, there is a lesson to be learned from this simple-minded fellow. For, as Chesterton reveals,

Nowhere else did Dickens express with such astonishing insight and truth his main contention, which is that

⁶⁵Great Expectations, p. 55.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 224.

⁶⁷G. K. Chesterton, Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens (London, 1911), p. 199.

good and idiotic is not a poor fate, but on the contrary, an experience of primeval innocence, which wonders at all things.⁶⁸

The same quotation may be applied to Smike of Nicholas Nickleby, who is a product of Mr. Squeers' school. These two characters are expressions of humility, and show, above all, Dickens' tolerance of imperfection. Toots' constant reference to Walter Gay as "Lieutenant Walters," and his dogged affection for and utter distraction because of Florence's running away only make him more lovable. The scene in which he finds Florence portrays him humility. "He ran up to her, seized her hand, kissed it, dropped it, seized it again, fell upon his knees, chuckled."⁶⁹ His constant desire to help, his dog-like loyalty, and his joviality mark him as a creature to be loved instead of scorned. Perhaps Chesterton expresses better than anyone else the commendation for Dickens treatment of Toots. He says:

When we think of the unclean and craven spirit in which Toots might be treated in a psychological novel of today; how he might walk with a mooncalf face, and a brain of bestial darkness, the soul rises in real homage to Dickens for showing how much simple gratitude and happiness can remain in the lopped roots of the most simplified intelligence.⁷⁰

So it is in Dickens' treatment of Smike of Nicholas Nickleby. However, he is more pathetic than Toots. Gissing states that "precisely because this figure is meant to be consistently pathetic, it fails to take effect."⁷¹

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 127.

⁶⁹Dombey and Son, II, p. 127.

⁷⁰G. K. Chesterton, op. cit., p. 128.

⁷¹G. Gissing, op. cit., p. 64.

But just as Nicholas saw him as a pathetic boy who needed to get away from the harsh treatment of Squeers, is it not likely that the reader will feel the same necessity? And the effect is lasting, because Smike is a constant shadow in the book. Moreover, who can read the following comment about him and not be affected?

Although he could not have been less than eighteen or nineteen years old, and was tall for his age, he wore a skeleton suit, such as is usually put upon very little boys, and which, though most absurdly short in the arms and legs, was quite wide enough for his attenuated frame ...God knows how long he had been there, but he still wore the same linen which he had first taken down; for round his neck, was a tattered child's neckerchief.... Nicholas could hardly bear to look at him.⁷²

From this discussion, we have seen that at heart Dickens was a reformer, and that his children had a functional purpose; they served to point up conditions which provoked the insecurity and maltreatment of children and affected society in general.

CHAPTER IV

DICKENS' ART IN HIS TREATMENT OF CHILDREN

So far, we have noted why Dickens was interested in children and the kind of children he was interested in. The aim of this chapter is to show how he treated children through the use of such literary devices as characterization, pathos, and humor. We shall also note how his children reveal "an overflowing humor and a human sympathy that has quickened the hearts of millions of readers,"⁷³ through the use of these devices. Indeed Chesterton is correct when he says that Dickens

...has created creatures who cling to us and tyrannise over us, creatures whom we would not forget if we could, creatures whom we could not forget if we would, creatures who are more actual than the man who made them.⁷⁴

This statement is true, for Dickens leaves his readers with a sense of moral guilt, making him wonder whether such creatures are still existing, and if so, whether such is due to negligence. In other words, Dickens preaches through his characters a kind of lesson that we cannot forget. Again in the words of Chesterton,

...Dickens is not most effective when he is preaching charity seriously; he is most effective when he is preaching it uproariously; when he is preaching it by means of massive personalities and vivid scenes.⁷⁵

And his child characters stand out as moral lessons in all of his novels.

⁷³ A. H. Thorndike, A History of English Literature (New York, 1930), p. 397.

⁷⁴ G. K. Chesterton, Criticism and Appreciation of the Works of Charles Dickens (London, 1933), p. 138.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

It can be easily seen that plot was secondary for Dickens; for often his stories are so long and drawn out that they become laborious. One reason is that a great many of his novels were published first in serial form; another reason can be attributed to the vast number of characters he used in his novels; still another reason is his preoccupation with the status of children, which is worked in as an integral part of the plot, but frequently impedes the natural progress of incident. For example, Dickens often stops to envelop the child in a stream of sentimentalism, as can be seen in an excerpt from a chapter in The Old Curiosity Shop.

"It happened that as she was reading in the old spot by herself one day, this child came running in with his eyes full of tears, and after holding her from him and looking eagerly for a moment, clasped his little arm passionately about her neck.

"What now?" said Nell, soothing him, "What is the matter?"

"She is not one yet!" cried the boy, embracing her still more closely. "No, no. Not yet."

She looked at him wonderingly, and putting his hair back from his face, and kissing him, asked what he meant.

"You must not be one, dear Nell," cried the boy. "We can't see them. They never come to play with us or talk to us. Be what you are. You are better so."

"I do not understand you," said the child. "Tell me what you mean."

"Why they say," replied the boy looking up into her face, "that you will be an angel, before the birds sing again. But you won't be, will you? Don't leave us, Nell, though the sky is bright. Do not leave us!"⁷⁶

Or, he stops to moralize or insert his own opinion as he does in the following passage from Oliver Twist:

I wish some well fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ The Old Curiosity Shop, p. 407.

⁷⁷ Oliver Twist, p. 28.

Since incident is important in the conflict and unraveling of a plot, Dickens preoccupation with the status of children of necessity detracts from his art as a novelist. However, knowing that he had an end in mind in his treatment of children, the reader is able to understand such preoccupation.

Dickens genius lay in his ability to create characters and in his vivid imagination. However, he does not characterize in the ordinary sense of the word. For instance, he does not make a point of saying that Oliver Twist is a good and innocent boy; rather, through Oliver's own persistent goodness we know that he is unusually good. Nor does he write that Smike is a pathetic boy and must be pitied; instead, he draws such a clear picture of Smike and his imperfections through Smike's own speech and actions that the reader can do nothing but pity him. Gissing has pointed out that Dickens "is not given to analysis; it is his merit that he makes us see and know his people directly, rarely endeavouring to dissect the minds for us."⁷⁸ However, though he does not analyze his character, "we are given the minutest of personal details."⁷⁹

But while Dickens' characters are extremely alive and vigorous, there is a marked lack of character movement or character development. This is just as true about his children as about his adults. Almost all of them remain unchanged by time or circumstances; one trait exists throughout. The result is that Dickens characters are static. Indeed, on thinking about it, Pip of Great Expectations is the only child who shows a definite

⁷⁸G. Gissing, op. cit., p. 93.

⁷⁹S. Zweig, Three Masters (New York, 1930), p. 74.

development. He moves from the innocent lad who loves all humanity, to the young snob, and back again to a reconciliation with mankind and himself.

It has already been suggested that a great many of Dickens' children serve as types and that they are representatives of systems which, in many cases, do not allow for character development. We may take the Artful Dodger of Oliver Twist as an example. The life that he has led up to the time that we meet him in the story has not been conducive to anything but petty thievery. Indeed, until he is put in prison, thievery is the only means by which he is able to exist. In a system that has nothing to offer except poverty and filth, it is not likely that there will be any kind of development. As a result, Dickens' art in relation to character development is imperfect.

In considering Dickens' characters, one of necessity becomes aware of the ever-present controversy of whether he used characters or caricatures in his novels. It cannot be denied that he used caricatures; for a caricature is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary "a distortion by exaggeration of facts or characteristics."⁸⁰ And this is what Dickens does in many cases. He selects one single characteristic of a character and exaggerates it. Thus we get characters like Toots who is blissfully foolish, or the Dodger with his desire to perfect his art. Such characters cannot be separated from their particular traits. They are alive in our imagination, but are they real? Actually they cannot be viewed from the point of reality, for then "we are stuck with the monstrous exaggeration

⁸⁰ C. T. Onions (ed.), Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, 1936), 2nd edition, II, 266.

and Little Nell are all unusual children. They all had an unusual sense of responsibility; and they all were unusually good children. Moreover, he chose extreme cases. For example, *Oliver Twist* is an extreme case of a poor and homeless boy; Smike and the boys of Dotheboys Hall are extreme examples of children who are exposed to cruel educational systems. Consequently, although there is a marked departure from realism, there is realism in the use of characters that he knew. Examples of this are seen in Little Nell⁸⁵ and in the use of biographical material in *David Copperfield*. And there is, as Baker clearly notes, "nothing more palpably true than in the exactness with which he reproduces the intense sensitivity of childhood."⁸⁶ The long suffering of Little Nell and her constant desire to find the peace and security of a home is real enough in any child. The deep filial affection for her father, the deep love for her brother, is real enough in *Florence Dombey*. We may conclude, then, that Dickens' realism lay in his ability to treat realistically extreme and exaggerated cases, and in his frequent portrayal of people from life.

We have said earlier in this study that one of Dickens' purposes in employing children in his novels was to appeal to the sympathetic nature of the English public. One of the ways in which he achieved this was through the use of pathos. Knowing this fact, the reader can make some allowances for his frequent extravagance in his use of pathos. Like his characterization, his pathos is based on exaggeration. And in many cases

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G. K. Chesterton states a belief that Little Nell might have been an example of a personal experience. G. K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (London, 1906), pp. 121-122.

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E. A. Baker, History of the English Novel (London, 1924), II, 286.

which they represent."⁸¹ Of necessity, then, we must admit that Dickens used caricatures in his novels. This, however, does not completely negate his use of characters. For while there is an obvious lack of character development and analytical completeness, few of his children can be called caricatures. By analytical incompleteness is meant the kind of vagueness and sketchiness which keeps the reader from ever visualizing characters as living in the same community with them. One always thinks of Dickens' characters as living in a land of their own, a Dickens' land. Examples of this are found in Little Nell and Oliver Twist. We feel an intimacy with these children because we suffer with them through the whole of their hardships and tribulations. On the other hand, we do not feel that we know them as children who live in our own community. Such a feeling is evidenced in Nicholas Nickleby, a character in the novel by the same name. While his adventures are the central theme in the novel, we never get to know him as a hero, or for that matter, very much as a person. We know from his action at Dotheboys Hall that he has a temper and is impulsive. But that is about all.

Through the delicate handling of his characters, we know that Dickens loved them. We know that he suffered every agony and every humiliation that his characters suffered. This is the secret of his characterization. He entered every character and made them a part of his personal experience. He felt with his children, not for them.⁸² According to Whipple, "when

⁸¹W. Bagehot, Literary Studies (London, [n.d.]), VII, 176.

⁸²W. W. Crotch, Charles Dickens: Social Reformer (London, 1913), p. 41.

writing about his Little Nell, Dickens seemed to enter some inner sanctuary of his mind; her presence lifts and solemnizes his mood and makes it religious."⁸³ Thus we have one phase of Dickens' art in treating children - that of becoming a part of the mood which each character radiates.

However, in any discussion of Dickens' characterization, it is necessary to consider his realism. It is necessary to note also that the complicated theories of realism as we know them today were not in existence during the time he wrote. Consequently, we must look at realism as he knew it; for, indeed, he considered himself a realist. In his preface to Oliver Twist, he states,

But as the stern truth, even in the dress of this [in novels] much exalted race, was a part of the purpose of this book, I did not, for these readers, abate one hole in the Dodger's coat, or one scrap of paper in Nancy's dishevelled hair. I had no faith in the delicacy which could not bear to look upon them.⁸⁴

We may see from the above statement that Dickens' definition of realism was that of depicting things as they really were, or at least as they appeared to be. This, is also the definition which we shall adopt. It may of course be argued that Dickens exaggerated in portraying his characters. Such is true in part; however, as it has been previously pointed out, what has been called exaggeration many times is merely the domination of one trait over all of the other traits. In addition, he usually chose an unusual character to portray. Oliver Twist, Little Dorrit,

⁸³E. P. Whipple, op. cit., p. 21.

⁸⁴Oliver Twist, "Preface," V, vii.

as in the writing of Little Nell, "the writer sometimes lost control of himself; tears blurred his artistic proportion."⁸⁷ But whether Dickens created pathos deliberately to achieve an end, or because his own feelings ran away with him, there is nothing of affection; there is no lack of sincerity.

The pathos found in Oliver Twist has long been censured. But Whipple has pointed out that

There is something in the forlorn position of the little boy, starved, beaten, helpless and seemingly hopeless which beseechingly appeals to the hearts of mothers; and by obtaining possession, thus early in his career, of the hearts of mothers, Dickens received the audience among the real rulers of families and permanently domesticated himself at thousands of firesides.⁸⁸

The scene in which Oliver goes back to see Little Nell, who has to remain in the workhouse, is one of the most heart rending scenes in the book. It is worth recounting so that the effect may be gained.

Oliver stopped, and peeped into the garden. A child was weeding one of the little beds; and as he stopped, he raised his pale face, and disclosed the features of one of his former companions. Oliver felt glad to see him, before he went; for though younger than himself, he had been his little friend and playmate. They had been beaten and starved and shut up together, many and many a time.

"Hush, Dick!" said Oliver, as the boy ran to the gate, and thrust his thin arm between the rails to greet him. "Is anyone up?"

"Nobody but me," replied the child.

"You mustn't say you saw me, Dick," said Oliver. "I am running away. They beat and ill use me, Dick; and I am going to seek my fortune, some long way off. I don't know where. How pale you are!"

"I heard the doctor tell them I was dying," replied the child with a faint smile. "I am very glad to see you dear; but don't stop, don't stop."

⁸⁷Gissing, op. cit., p. 94.

⁸⁸Whipple, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

"Yes, yes, I will, to say good-bye to you," replied Oliver. "I shall see you again, Dick; I know I shall. You will be well and happy!"

"I hope so, replied the child. "After I am dead, but not before. I know the doctor must be right, Oliver, because I dream so much of Heaven and Angels; and kind faces that I never see when I am awake. Kiss me," said the child, climbing up the low gate, and flinging his little arm around Oliver's neck: Good-bye, dear! God bless you!"⁸⁹

This scene can easily be called one of sentimentalism and exaggeration to the point of mawkishness. Nevertheless Whipple is right when he says: "Such pathos may be called mawkish but it is a mawkishness which has power to open hearts that are shut and melt hearts that are hard."⁹⁰

Dickens' pathos reaches its zenith in the lachrymose story of Little Nell. Actually, pathos occurs in the whole of her suffering life. It is granted, however, that the sentimentalism which follows her death in which Dickens depicts the sorrow of her grandfather and friends, and particularly the burial scene, is too long and drawn out. Much of this sentimentalism could be left out. Let us take a look at the postlude of Nell's death. Though beautifully written, the following passage shows excessive pathos:

Along the crowded path they bore her; pure as the newly fallen snow that covered it; whose day on earth had been as fleeting. Under that porch where she had sat when Heaven in its mercy brought her to that peaceful spot, she passed again, and the old church received her in its quiet shades.⁹¹

But why prolong the agony with such paragraphs which begin with such sentences as "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust;" or "The

⁸⁹ Oliver Twist, pp. 50-51.

⁹⁰ Whipple, op. cit., p. 60.

⁹¹ Old Curiosity Shop, p. 538.

service done, the mourners stood apart, and the villagers closed around to look into the grave before the pavement stone should be placed;" or "They saw the vault covered and the stone fixed down;" and finally, "Oh! it is hard to take to heart the lesson that such deaths will teach, but let no man reject it, for it is one all must learn, and a mighty, universal truth?"⁹² Every detail of the funeral services having been described, Dickens gives a moral. Thus he has accomplished his purpose, heart appeal.

So in every story that Dickens has written in which he employs children, there is pathos. In Nicholas Nickleby, the pathos centers around Smike with his pathetic "has nothing been heard about me?"⁹³ In Little Dorrit, the pathos centers around Amy Dorrit with her plaintive face and her constant concern about her family.⁹⁴ The pathos centers around the mis-taught children of Mr. Gradgrind in Hard Times,⁹⁵ and around the forlorn little Davy in David Copperfield.

Another literary device which Dickens used in his treatment of children was humor. Like his characterizations and pathos, it too is based primarily on exaggeration, for he possessed an unusual power of observation and had the ability to idealize what he observed. Thus his humor is the result of two peculiarities: his ability to vivify external traits, and an

⁹²Ibid., pp. 538-539.

⁹³Nicholas Nickleby, p. 81

⁹⁴Little Dorrit, I, 74.

⁹⁵Hard Times, I, 44.

unual power of observation.⁹⁶ We perhaps do not see as much exaggerated humor in his children as we do in his adults. For the humor associated with his children is a pathetic humor, a laughter which grows out of something which is often malign. Indeed, Taine states that in Dickens humor, "there is a laughter akin to tears."⁹⁷ This kind of humor Chesterton writes about in Oliver Twist. He says: "The very first pages of Oliver Twist are stern even when they are funny. They amuse, but they cannot be enjoyed."⁹⁸ Even the humor derived from the caperings of Trabb's boy is of a pathetic sort.⁹⁹ For if one wants to be analytical, he may discover that that the basis of the humor produced in Trabb's boy is founded on an inferiority complex. Even such bubbling and effervescent laughter as done by Charley Bates is pathetic; for it is motivated by the wrong things. For instance, he laughs so heartily about Oliver's flight on their first pick-pocket expedition that he gets strangled from the smoke he is inhaling.¹⁰⁰ As for the Artful Dodger, Whipple states:

The impudent rascal so wins upon the humorous sympathies of the reader that many... have felt like speaking a mitigating word for him to the bench.¹⁰¹

But the humor which the Dodger arouses in the reader is a humor based on his artfulness in doing wrong.

⁹⁶Baghot, op. cit., p. 181.

⁹⁷H. H. Taine, op. cit., p. 351.

⁹⁸Chesterton, Criticisms and Appreciations (London, 1911), p. 44.

⁹⁹Great Expectations, pp. 232-233.

¹⁰⁰Oliver Twist, I, 134.

¹⁰¹E. P. Whipple, Charles Dickens (Boston, 1912), p. 123.

The following statement made by Pip in Great Expectations also smacks of something deeper than that which is expressed, perhaps cruelty to children:

My sister, Mrs. Joe Gargary, was more than twenty years older than I, and had established a great reputation with herself and the neighbors because she had brought me up "by hand." Having, at that time to find out for myself what the expression meant, and knowing her to have a hard and heavy hand, and to be much in the habit of laying it upon her husband as well as upon me, I supposed that Joe Gargary and I were both brought up by hand.¹⁰²

We see then that underneath Dickens' humor lies a subtle kind of satire. He satirizes a society that allows a boy to grow up as obdurate as the Dodger, or a child who has to feel the stinging humiliation of class stratification as does Trabb's boy. The affinity of his humor and satire is so great that they are inseparable. For while one is laughing at the Dodger, he is asking himself what makes the Dodger as he is. Inevitably the answer is a warped society. But Dickens knew that which is ridiculed is less likely to persist; consequently, "by his humor he made his fellow-men laugh at their own follies and become their own efficient censors."¹⁰³

We may summarize by saying that Dickens' technique in his treatment of children is outstanding because his characterizations are a result of his ability to experience the sufferings of his children; his realism is based on his ability to treat realistically extreme and exaggerated

¹⁰² Great Expectations, p. 6.

¹⁰³ J. C. Walters, op. cit., p. 278.

cases. While his pathos is often overdone, it is sometimes justifiable; and his humor has more to it than meets the eye.

SUMMARY

While there may be some question as to the greatness of the literary qualities of Dickens' novels, there is no doubt about his great sincerity in the treatment of children. He was no pedant expressing an erudite philosophy in grandiloquent language; he had no profound or esoteric doctrine in his treatment of children. His one philosophy was that of altruism; his one doctrine was that of charity. Both his selection of children and his art in treating them bespeak a conscious purpose of preaching a moral discontent in the present status of children. That such a purpose was motivated chiefly by his own unfortunate childhood does not lessen its value. For if we look deeply enough, we see an innate humanitarian spirit which would not allow him to over-look the existing evils suffered by children. It is for this reason that the children of Dickens had a specific function. However, such a purpose did not interfere to a great extent with his art as a novelist. If anything, it enhanced it; it showed Dickens' ability to integrate purpose and art so well that one is not easily extricated from the other.

But more specifically, this study has shown that Dickens' interest in children grew out of at least three things: his own background, his humanitarian spirit, and the socio-economic milieu of the times in which he lived and wrote. It has also been revealed that his children fall chiefly into three groups: those who are bad, those who are good, and those who are mature. The children of the first group differ in degree of badness, depending on whether they are capable of change. Those of the second group show an enduring goodness through all adversity. And those

of the third group, whether good or bad, show a maturity which goes far beyond their age.

That Dickens had an ulterior motive in employing children in his novels is obvious; for they are exemplars of certain existing problems which he believed should be remedied. Such a study has also shown that though Dickens frequently uses caricatures, his children are treated as characters; that while exaggeration is a dominant feature in his treatment of children, one is able to find a kind of realism based on his ability to treat realistically extreme and exaggerated cases; that since plot was secondary to the idea which he was trying to convey, his use of pathos is often justifiable. Moreover, the humor which he uses is a humor which provokes tears.

Dickens, then, must be commended as a toiler in the field of child-welfare. It would be a fallacy to assume that all of the reforms in favor of children came as a result of Dickens' novels; however, it is safe to say that through his treatment of children many a hard heart was made soft.

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