

CHARLES DICKENS, THE VICTORIAN. NOVEL WRITING AND THE NEW SPIRIT OF REFORM

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ABSTRACT. The present study aims to discuss the way in which Charles Dickens devoted his great literary talent to writings which exposed the vulnerability of the disadvantaged segments of British society, indirectly urging the social reforms of the Victorian times. His profound commitment to the social cause gained him a well deserved place among the first English urban novelists who used fiction both to criticise and reveal the social abuses and illnesses, but also to influence the public opinion and rise the collective awareness of the reading public, a public that was gradually gaining an increasingly widespread influence on the lawmakers. Dickens exhibited an extraordinary ability to empathise with the victims of economic, social and moral abuses and aimed to shock his readers with the images of poverty, injustice and crime he depicted in his novels. Without being a radical thinker, he wanted to generate a shift in the general mentality of the Victorians, and to become the social conscience of his times, an ideologist and a promoter of a real, authentic social change. All his social novels are nothing but a tool for a better understanding of the downside of urbanization and its social consequences on the lowest classes. Dickens also used his characters to depict those feelings, emotions and reflections that were illustrative for all social layers and which were to be instructive to readers who might have undergone similar experiences. By offering, through his novels, models of social ethics, moral conduct and righteousness, Dickens managed to stir the collective awareness of his reading public, like no other writer before him, and produce a shift in the general mentality of the time. Dickens believed in the transforming potential of literature in general, and of the novel in particular and played an active role as a vocal participant in the social reformation of the Victorian society. Indirectly, Dickens contributed to a series of legal, social reforms such as housing and sanitary reforms, poor law reforms and abolition of the imprisonment for debt, the restriction of the capital punishment and a series of legislations on child labour and the children's rights to schooling and education.

KEY WORDS: social novels, reforms, Victorianism, change

Introduction. Victorianism as the Age of Change

The Victorian period was an age of stark contrasts and paradoxes, but mostly a period of transformation and change. Although Victorianism in Britain is often portrayed as comfortable, traditional and peaceful, it was actually a time of breathtaking transformation, progress and expansion in nearly every aspect of life. The early part of the nineteenth century had seen Britain

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consolidate its position as a world power following the defeat of Napoleon. The Industrial Revolution continued and a new urbanized society was being created. The rest of the nineteenth century was to see Britain reach heights of wealth, power and prestige that were unmatched at any other time in its history. While Britain was at the height of its wealth, power and influence, a large section of its population, especially farmers and peasants migrated from the countryside to the large cities seeking for work and living in appalling conditions. The effects of that demographic shift were terrible for the working class and long lasting. Abroad, the British Empire continued to claim new territories while, at home, age-old rural communities were disappearing.

If there is one defining aspect of the Victorian England, that aspect is change. Everything that was considered important and promoted in the previous century was shaken by a quick and unpredictable change. Scientific and technological advances were paving the way for a better future, but many traditional religious beliefs began to crumble under the weight of these new scientific discoveries which eventually undermined the position of the Church in daily life.

The rapid changes and transformations that took place during the continuing industrialization, the social tension that all these triggered, gave way to all sort of discussions and debates about what the core values of society should be. Not all of England's citizens accepted that increased material wealth was the only worthwhile value. Men of letters stood for the views of those who felt that over-emphasis on materialism was turning nineteenth-century Britain into a superficial society, where culture, philosophy and arts were to easily considered mere distractions from the main objective of becoming increasingly richer. Victorian era scholars were mixed in their impressions and reactions to the process of industrialization. For some, all the changes taking place in England meant progress and were a source of confidence and optimism, but for the majority of writers and thinkers the condition of England was a morbid one that would sooner or later reach an unbearable limit. While some of them greeted the new era of hope, development, and triumph, others challenged the supposed benefits of industrial growth that was affecting so negatively the masses. Most men of letters saw it as an obligation to speak out against the upcoming threats that Victorian society was facing and to write about the damaging effects on both people and products due to the expansion of industrialization and urbanization and the gradual suffocation of rural England at the hands of industry. All these changes created a strong, influential background for a new type of literature that flourished during the Victorian age: the Victorian novel.

The Proliferation of Victorian Realistic Novel

The social milieu became a favourable theme for all Victorian men of letters. Furthermore, one of the outstanding aspects of the Victorian times was that, more than in other age of English literature, the great Victorian writers deliberately and consciously participated in thought, feeling and action in the actual life of their times.

There are several reasons for this outstanding triumph of fiction. The most significant one has to do with the rapid growth of the middle classes who, even since the eighteenth century, had been avid consumers of this form of literature. This form of literature was also easier to be read and understood by simple people. The plots, the characters and the settings of the novels were built in such a way as to represent the same people who read them, in their own environments. There was a close relationship between the writer and his or her readers because they shared the same opinions, values and ideals since they belonged to the same middle class. The novelists represented society in a realistic way, being aware of the problems created by industrialization, exploitation of women and children, lack of education or terrible living conditions. The writers used their novels in order to display these evils and to urge people to find solutions to them. Therefore, the novel was a vehicle of communication between the writers and their audience. It significantly contributed in stimulating the practical reformers in industry, politics or social life. Consequently, one of the assumed and proclaimed aims of the literature written during Victorian era was “didacticism”. Usually, the omniscient narrator judges people and actions and makes his novels finish with a wise and fair distribution of punishment for the evil characters and reward for the good ones.

Other factors that contributed to the proliferation of the novel were related to the improvement and the spread of education, which led to greater literacy. Because of the advances in printing technology, publishers could provide more and various kinds of texts to a lot of people. This also led to a fall in book prices so books were now more affordable to buyers. Cheaper transport costs also contributed to the dissemination of the novel. Circulating libraries became very popular and allowed people to borrow books for a relatively modest fee.

The most avid consumers of fiction were the women, who had been freed from traditional chores such as candle and bread making, had the money to buy or borrow books and more time and privacy to dedicate to reading. Indeed the period is characterized by the emergence of women not only as readers but also as influential writers. The Victorian age abounded in journals, magazines, and pamphlets as well. It was a period that witnessed enormous growth in periodicals of all kinds. The informal agency of Victorian education was the press: newspapers and magazines:

In 1815 the United Kingdom possessed 252 newspapers; ten years later, the number had scarcely risen at all; but in 1875 there were about 1600. In 1800 a circulation of 2000 copies was thought to be phenomenal, but by the end of Victoria's reign a quarter of a million was not a remarkable figure. (Holt 1949: 432)

Serializing Fiction in Victorian Age

Most of the early Victorian novels first appeared in a serialized form, in installments and not in book form. Weekly or monthly, few pages or complete chapters of the novels were included in one of the periodicals issued. This form of serial publications became increasingly popular, and soon these pieces were being bound and sold in their complete forms. Publication in serial form influenced the writing process and had a direct impact on both the style and the plot. The Victorian novelists were forced to somehow bridge the gap between one periodical and the next, so writers had to create highly memorable characters, and episodes usually ended with some form of suspense (the cliff-hanged technique which is still used in today's soap operas). Moreover, the experience itself of reading serialized novels is very much similar to that of the modern television viewer watching a program that develops in a series of episodes.

The plot of the then novel was also influenced by this new type of publication and suffered different transformations. It was generally very long and complicated by secondary sub-plots in which the life adventures and intricacies of the secondary characters were presented. The narrator is generally omniscient: he or she knows everything about everyone, he judges people and actions and usually operates a clear division between good and evil characters. Writers had to keep the readers' interest high in order to encourage them to continue buying their work, but they could also test the reaction of the public to the development of the plot and, if needed, they had the opportunity to change it in accordance with the readers' taste and demand. Dickens, one of the representative writers of the early Victorian period, made full use of both the serial format and cliff-hanged technique, and his novels still reflect the episodic arrangement imposed by this publication method.

Charles Dickens, an Outspoken Conscience of the Age

One of the most representative writers of the Victorian era and the first great popular novelist in England remains Charles Dickens. He still is one of the best known and widely read authors of that time. He wrote melodramatic plots about the poor and the oppressed condemning the social illness of his times. By denouncing social inequalities and obsession with scientific advancements at the expense of the common men, the need for reform in the system of education, law and wealth, he quickly appealed to a popular readership, and gradually became the social conscience of his age. Dickens produced works of increasing complexity at an incredible rate. During his

lifetime, his novels brought him unprecedented notoriety and he was considered the most famous novelist in Europe and America. As the nonconformist Victorian preacher, James Baldwin Brown, states, "There have been at work among us three great agencies: The London City Mission; the novels of Mr. Dickens; the cholera" (Young 1977: 69).

With Dickens, journalism and melodrama are gathered into the novel to give it a new life and an important place in middle-class entertainment. Many of his novels came out in monthly installments and were awaited by his readers as eagerly as viewers today await the next episode of their favorite serial or soap-opera. His popularity lay in his ability to write gripping, sentimental stories filled with memorable characters whose stories offer a detailed account of both the good and bad sides of Victorian life.

In his times, Dickens was not only the first major urban novelist in England, but also a powerful, influential social figure and participant in the social reforms of the age. While Britain was becoming the greatest empire the world has ever seen, renewed social and moral values emerged and completely changed the face of the society of this time. The rapid changes and transformations that took place during the continuing industrialization, the social tension that all these triggered, gave way to all sort of discussions and debates about what the core values of society should be. Not all of England's citizens accepted that increased material wealth was the only worthwhile value. Many men of letters and Victorian era scholars were mixed in their impressions and reactions to the process of industrialization. For some, all the changes taking place in England meant progress and were a source of confidence and optimism, but for the majority of writers and thinkers the condition of England was a morbid one that would sooner or later reach an unbearable limit. While some of them greeted the new era of hope, development, and triumph, others challenged the supposed benefits of industrial growth that was affecting so negatively the masses. Most men of letters saw it as an obligation to speak out against the upcoming threats that Victorian society was facing and Charles Dickens was one of them. He was an outspoken conscience of the Victorian Age, a prolific writer who manifested compassion and great empathy for the less privileged classes of English society, fact mirrored in most of his novels which were animated by a sense of social injustice and moral critique. In almost all of his writings, Dickens assumes the role of an insightful social commentator and a powerful critic of the poverty and social stratification of Victorian society. The novelist's aim was to shock his readers with the images of poverty and crime he depicted in his works, challenging the social conscience of his time and making impossible any pretence to ignorance about what poverty entailed.

Dickens' deep social commitment for the vulnerable and disadvantaged social classes is clearly stated in his writings that all urge the need for social

reform. A letter he addressed his friend Charles Knight, in March 7, 1854, is more than illustrative for Dickens' deep empathy for his oppressed fellow citizens: "The English are, as far as I know, the hardest worked people on whom the sun shines...They are born at the oar and die at it" (Storey 1992: 294). In his novelistic writings, like in his journalistic endeavours, he became an outspoken critic of the unjust economic and social conditions. Dickens believed in the transforming potential of literature, of the novel in particular, and considered that the writer had the social duty to influence the public opinion by uplifting the collective awareness of his reading public. In another letter, addressed to his friend Wilkie Collins, dated September 6, 1858, Dickens clearly states his sense of social commitment:

Everything that happens [...] shows beyond mistake that you can't shut out the world; that you are in it, to be of it; that you get yourself into a false position the moment you try to sever yourself from it; that you must mingle with it, and make the best of it, and make the best of yourself into the bargain. (Marlow 1994: 132)

Dickens was one of the first novelists to depict the downside of urbanization and the social consequences of some negative aspects of Victorian times. He is also one of the first novelists to write from the point of view of the lowest classes living in a large city. The personalities of the characters from his novels are as representative as their author. Dickens was not, however, a radical thinker and his characters never considered rebellion. He used his characters to depict those feelings, emotions and reflections that were illustrative for all social layers and which were to be instructive to readers who might have undergone similar experiences. By offering in his novels a stereotyped and simplified version of the growth of social ethics, righteousness and moral conduct, Dickens managed to stir the conscience of his reading public like no other novel writer before him. He shows his contemporaries scenes of poverty and despair and provides suggestive information about all social aspects of the Victorian life. He persuasively depicts the poverty, decay and misery of the new, "modern" industrial world aiming at making the public opinion more receptive and aware of the current social problems. Dickens' ultimate goal was to directly influence and transform, through literature, human relations and conducts.

Dickens' plea was not for a specific social reform legislation, but for a shift in the general mentality of the age. Through his prolific journalistic endeavours in his magazines, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, through his many speeches on social injustice, but especially through his novels, he advocated for the eventual betterment of the working Victorian classes. Indirectly, he contributed to a series of legal reforms, including anti-pollution legislation, intelligent town-planning, health and safety measures in factories, a humane education system, the abolition of the inhumane imprisonment for

debts, purification of the Magistrates' courts, a better management of criminal prisons, and the restriction of the capital punishment (see Andrzej Diniejko, *Charles Dickens as Social Commentator and Critic*). Overall, Dickens' social novels are a great tool for a better understanding of the psychology and of the whole general mental climate of the Victorians, for his novels "are as valuable as any external evidence in our assessment of these people" (Cazamian 2013: 10).

Dickens's Social Novels. The New Reformist Spirit

Dickens dedicated his considerable energies and talent to writing, and the quantity and often quality of his output was phenomenal. When Queen Victoria succeeded to the throne in 1837, Charles Dickens published the first monthly installment of *Oliver Twist*. The publication of this famous novel continued in monthly parts until April 1839. Between 1837 and 1843 he wrote, besides *Oliver Twist*, four more novels, all initially published in serial form: *Nicholas Nickleby* (begun in 1838 and continued through October 1839), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (begun in 1840 and continued through February 1841), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (begun in 1843 and run through July 1844), and *A Christmas Carol*, the first of Dickens' successful Christian books (begun in October 1843 and published during the holiday season of the same year).

American Notes for General Circulation is a travelogue by Charles Dickens detailing his trip to North America from January to June, 1842. The book included in *Notes* a powerful condemnation of slavery. In Dickens' own words, the travelogue was dedicated "to those friends of mine in America, who giving me a welcome I must ever gratefully and proudly remember, left my judgement free; and who, loving their country, can bear the truth when it is told good humouredly, and in a kind spirit" (Dickens 1842: 3). Whilst in the New World, he acted as a critical observer of North American society, almost as if returning a status report on their developements. In 1843, shortly after his return from America, Dickens began work on *A Christmas Carol* one of his most popular novels, a work whose primary source of inspiration was Dickens' trip to Manchester where he witnessed the appalling conditions of the factory workers. His American journey was also an inspiration for his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* part of which was set in a not very flatteringly depicted New World.

Between 1844 and 1847, Dickens traveled and resided in Italy, Switzerland and France, while continuing to write without respite. His attention to social problems increased in the novels he wrote in the 1850s: *David Copperfield* (appeared from December 1849 to November 1850), *Bleak House* (appeared monthly from 1852 to September 1853), *Hard Times* (appeared weekly in *Household Words* in 1854 and continued until August that year), *Little Dorrit* (began to appear in October 1855 and continued in monthly parts until June

1857), and *A Tale of Two Cities*. He was also preoccupied to found newspapers such as *Daily News*, *Household Words*, *All the Year Round*, and a theatrical company. In his magazines he discussed a large range of social and political issues, from sanitation reforms to prostitution, or the need for protection of authors and their copyright. During 1861-1867, Dickens was also busy with his immensely popular tours of public readings in Britain and America. These years also saw the publication of some of his best works: *Great Expectations* (1860-1861) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865). Although his health was worsening, he took over another exhausting task, editorial duties at *All the Year Round*, which he edited until his death. During 1869 he kept on with his readings in England, Scotland and Ireland, continuing his frantic professional life until he had a mild stroke. He cancelled some of his provincial readings but began one more novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which was never completed.

Social concerns are addressed in almost all his novels. *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* show the macabre life of a considerable number of poor children in workhouses and orphanages. According to Diniejko “Dickens explores many social themes in *Oliver Twist*, but three are predominant: the abuses of the new Poor Law system, the evils of the criminal world in London and the victimization of children” (Andrzej Diniejko, *Charles Dickens as Social Commentator and Critic*). In *Nicholas Nickleby* the attention focused on child maltreatment in the vicious context of the Victorian education system where poor children were starved and abused. With *Bleak House* Dickens not only introduces “the first police detective into fiction” (Sutherland 2014: 180), but also deals with the consequences of delays in the justice system, exposing the abuses and the incompetence of the court of Chancery. The novel is also one of the most important novels about the condition of the Victorian England for it depicts a realistic panorama of London with its slums, foggy streets populated with criminals, murderous villains, prostitutes among other positive, virtuous characters. What they all have in common is that they all become victims of a defectuous judiciary system.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens exposes the conflicts between the working class, the proletariat, and the middle class, the bourgeoisie, the evils of the industrialization and the shortcomings of the utilitarian doctrines of the influential philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Overall, the novel is a harsh critique and attack against the contemporary tendencies towards exacerbated materialism, rationalism, anonymity, and ultimate dehumanization. The subtitle of the novel’s first edition, *For These Times*, emphasizes the actuality of the problems it raises. Moreover, *Little Dorrit* depicts the increasing bureaucratization of government and the social and psychological consequences of the financial scandals and imprisonment of individuals for debts. The action is centered on the story of a prisoner in Marshalsea debtors’ prison who inherits a

fortune, falls into debt, and goes to jail where he is joined by his family. Little Dorrit, his youngest daughter, is born in Marshalsea and turned out to be the one who would support her entire family. Spiritual debt and bankruptcy go hand in hand with the prison theme in this novel, for corrupt bankers are nothing but a social symbol for a capitalized, decadent society. Therefore, the imprisonment theme receives both literal and metaphorical meanings. Also, in his semi-autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield*, Dickens depicted a wide range of the social problems of Victorian society from the oppression of women and child abuses, to critics of a defective education system, poverty, corruption, good vs. evil, or romantic love. The novel offers a graphic picture of the living conditions of the urban poor and criticizes the education system for its overemphasis on the fact and its unwillingness to develop creativity and imagination. It also denounces the exploitation of children by adults and the cruel competitive nature of the Victorian society. The richness, flexibility, and strength of this novel give it a special place among Dickens' works.

Social Reforms in Dickens's Times

Dickens is not only the author of numerous works that are now considered classics, but he is also the creator of whole worlds of characters, exaggerated but unforgettable, exposing the social illness and the appalling living and working conditions of the lower classes. His keen, precise descriptions, his sympathy with the oppressed, his sharp social criticism and indignation against human injustice, made him a significant voice in the Victorian Age. His aim was to use literature as a means of influencing and raising the awareness of the reading public and, ultimately, to urge the process of social and political legal reforms.

An important aspect that made working in Victorian era so burdensome was represented by the lack of specific regulations. Whether it was in factories, workhouses, or the case of the servants who were required to work in rich households, there was no such thing as rules, schedules or noon-break. When one was hired, the only non-variable was represented by the workload he or she was expected to deliver. The working conditions were often insalubrious and poisonous. Given the fact that the industrial revolution had already been implemented throughout the whole country, there was a strive for cheap work force that would also give the needed amount of products. One would expect such a civilized country to have a quite developed business ethics, but that was not the case: there were few laws to regulate hours, wages, safety, job security (Mitchell 1996: 41). A fair argument in supporting the statements made above is the one that concerns the unity of workers: the famous trade unions that were always on the verge of a strike against their exploiters were also underdeveloped, thus making a riot impossible. Consequently, even if the population was indeed aware of the inappropriate

working conditions or the insufficient money, there was not a proper mechanism that allowed people to make requests to their supervisors, or to have their complaints listened to and solved. Therefore, one can conclude that the trades in question were developed poorly and inefficiently. All these called for an explicit adequate social reform.

The process of social and political reform which had begun earlier in the century continued throughout the Victorian period. In fact, the Victorian age has often been called “The Age of Reform” because during this period a lot of political, economic and social reform acts and bills passed, successfully or unsuccessfully, through Parliament at the time. Most of them dealt with the social problems and abuses determined by the development of capitalist industry and the increasing number of the urban population. They included health and factory acts, mainly concerned with the hours and work conditions of factory children and women. In 1833, the Factory Act banned children from working in textile factories under the age of nine. From nine to thirteen they were limited to nine hours a day and 48 hours a week. In 1834, the Poor Law Amendment Act was introduced, known widely as the “New Poor Law”. It was an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom passed by the Whig government, a law that aimed to reform the country’s poverty relief system and change the way welfare was provided to those in need of public assistance. The law replaced earlier legislation based on the Poor Law of 1601 according to which the poor were supported in their own homes by their local parishes. The New Poor Law organized 15,000 parishes into some 600 poor law unions with responsibility for overseeing a new system of relief centered on workhouses, of which 350 ones were built at this time. Another purpose of the law was to reduce the expense of providing relief to the poor by rehabilitating those able to work (Frawley 2008: 412).

The system worked like this: the poor were required to enlist to a Local Workhouse for support. These workhouses were actually part warehouse, part jail and the whole system was as much a punishment as one of welfare. The idea behind these workhouses was to reduce the number of the beggars in the street, to encourage the poor to work hard in order to support themselves and, ultimately, to reduce the governmental expenses of looking after the poor. In a workhouse they were housed, clothed and fed and the children would receive some schooling. In return for all this care, the workhouse inhabitants would have to work for a pre-established number of hours each day. The general atmosphere, the living and working conditions were purposely made as unpleasant as possible. Women were separated from men and the families were broken. The work was boring, dirty and often meaningless and nobody was allowed to socialize or talk during meals.

During 1830s and 1840s the first wide-ranging political activist movement by working-class people took place in England. In 1838 they produced a

People's Charter (hence the name Chartists), a document presented to the House of Commons in July 1839 with 1,280,000 signatures. The Charter contained six major demands: annual parliaments, voting rights for all adult men, the end of property qualifications for the members of the House of Commons, voting by secret ballot, equal electoral districts, and salaries for members of Parliament so that men without private wealth could afford to run and be elected (Mitchell 1996: 6). Although the Chart was rejected and the movement only partially achieved its aims, it marked the beginning of organized working class politics in Britain. Gradually, the Chartist movement faded away as things began to improve and prosperity of the middle classes began to grow.

Among the most important social reforms of the Victorian age is The First Reform Bill of 1832 which extended voting rights to the middle classes and redistributed parliamentary representation to break up the conservative landowner's monopoly of power. The Factory Act of 1833 established rules and limitations in the exploitation of workers in factories. The act banned children from working in textile factories under the age of nine. In 1836 the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages enabled factory inspectors to check the age of children working in factories, a law only applicable in England and Wales (see The National Archives site). The Mines Act of 1862 banned children under the age of 10 and women to work in the mines. The Second Reform Bill of 1867 doubled the number of people who could vote and the Secret Ballot was introduced in 1872. Women still could not vote. The setting up of Health Commissions in 1867 and a Local Government Board in 1871 helped to improve municipal and public health services. In 1840 a cheap postal system was introduced and in 1855, after the abolition of stamp duties on newspapers, the entire press circulation began to rapidly increase. By 1870s popular newspapers began to appear.

In 1870, The Elementary National Education Act, also known as Forster's Education Act (from William Forster-a Liberal Party statesman who initiated the Act), had also been passed creating elementary schools and introducing the state compulsory education system. These schools were available for children between the ages of 5 and 13 and were financed from local rates. By 1880s attendance was available to every child in England and compulsory for elementary education. In 1884 Queen Victoria supported the Third Reform Act. This Bill gave the counties the same voting rights as the boroughs had – all adult householders and men who rented unfurnished lodgings to the value of £10 a year. The electorate after this act stood at 5,500,000 – though an estimated 40% of all men still did not have the right to vote as a result of their status within society (see Trueman, *The 1884 Reform Act*). Under a constitutional sovereign, England had become a democracy-that is, the people through their votes had become the final authority in government. This Bill

was largely the work of William Gladstone – leader of the Liberal party, champion of freedom, and prime minister during the greater part of Queen Victoria's later reign. The Trades Union Congress, the first long-lived national trade union organisation, was set up in 1869 to defend workers' rights and provide a united voice to defend worker's and tradesmen's rights. It supported thousands of workers who went on strike after 1870 when the economic boom turned into recession. An Independent Labor Party was created in 1893 proclaiming as the main objective the desire to secure the collective ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. The working class party obtained, in the following years, political representation enjoying great popularity and success in local elections.

The Public Health Act was passed in 1875 giving possibility to have sanitation, water and rubbish collection in the cities. The emergence of hospitals, schools, museums, town halls, police stations, prisons and public undergrounds were only some of the first facilities which significantly helped to improve the living conditions and lifestyle in great towns. All these reforms and implicit developments combined to improve living and working conditions for a population that had doubled between 1815 (thirteen million) and 1871 (twenty-six million). At the end of the Victorian era, British people could boast of being better housed, better clothed, better informed and more healthy than any other population in Europe (Delaney, Ward 2003: 125).

Conclusions

Although Dickens's novels may seem overly soapy to the present day reader, he used his fiction to criticize the social, politic and economic abuses, but also to promote compassionate, humanitarian norms, urging the need for social policy reforms. Dickens wrote to satisfy his Victorian public who claimed that he respected the predominant morality and unwritten norms of the time, but he was also the most successful and vocal Victorian writer who fully embraced the role of a social commentator and critic. Dickens spoke for the people and in the name of the people. His unquestionable literary genius emerges from his works and his message ultimately finds an echo in the most important reforms of the Victorian industrial age. As William Walter Crotch points out, in the midst of a highly industrialized society, Charles Dickens had the strength to suggest that industry shouldn't be regarded as the whole of life, nor a thing apart from life.

The organization of labour must neither involve the suppression of the personal human qualities of either employer or employed, nor must any commercial concern be conducted on such a basis, that a man, as a worker, was considered quite apart from his position as man, the human... Master and man prospered where the relationship between them was such as to bring the affection of both into full play. Gratitude, forbearance, kindness, sympathy, on the part of the master, has

its counterpart in the devotion and increased fidelity of the workman to his work. That was Dickens's theory. (Crotch 2020)

Charles Dickens is still considered by many to be the greatest of all novelists in the English language, one who had a tremendous influence on future novelists like Charles Kingsley, George Eliot, George Orwell, or on the postmodern writers such as Martin Amis and Zadie Smith.

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