Victorian Sympathy and the Dickens’ Child

The image of a child with his head stuck between the railings of a banister greets us as we meet the Jellyby children in Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852). Ignored by Mrs. Jellyby’s “telescopic philanthropy,” her children are a bit like children of our own day, whose parents, distracted by business, are seldom home. Esther Summerson, who seemingly comes to their rescue, is the precursor of the modern daycare caretaker. The subdued and muffled pain we see in Dickens’s middle class and working class child characters is every much as poignant as the cry in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem “The Cry of the Children.” Dickens, like the poet, draws upon his readers’ sympathy and points to the ongoing struggle of the Victorian working class child.

Despite the farcical and ignoble image that greets us in *Bleak House*, the child in Charles Dickens’s fiction is generally a romantic figure. The Dickens child is one who, despite being victimized or injured by the surrounding world, suggests a life not alienated, one in touch with the spirit of wonder and imagination. Oliver Twist, born in a workhouse and orphaned, endures that place and rightfully deserves the “more” he asks for. In Fagin’s den, he remains heroic in his innocence and in his search for identity. Despite the hard “facts” of Coketown, Louisa Gradgrind, in *Hard Times*, still sees imaginative visions in the fire. So does Lizzie Hexam; in the panoramic satire of *Our Mutual Friend* she remains imaginative despite the drowning forces of the Thames River. Sissy Jupe defines a horse differently than the approved of scientific categorization of Bitzer. She expresses circus imagination and right-brained design rather than Mr. Gradgrind’s narrow rationality and she represents the heart throughout *Hard Times*. David Copperfield gets past the suffocating religion of the Murdstones. He encounters
experience in Yarmouth and at Salem House. He experiences disillusionment over Steerforth, who had been his hero. He meets the comic, ne’er do well Micawber—he of many financial difficulties, and he has a relationship with Dora. Perhaps he will turn out to be the hero of his own life after all.

However, for many Victorian children, to become heroes of their lives they first had to face adverse conditions. Dickens’s own experience of work in a blacking factory increased his sensitivity to the plight of children at work in factories and in the mines. Industrialization was powered by little hands, as well as by water wheels and steam engines. In the mines, children worked as “putters,” pushing bins of coal along mine tunnels. They worked alongside “trappers,” who opened and shut a series of wooden doors to let air into the tunnels. Children sat for long hours in noisy factories, breathing dust and oil. The 1833 Factory Act attempted to regulate working hours for children. By 1842, children under the age of ten were stopped from working underground. In 1844, Parliamentary law was passed to require that children working in factories be given six half-days of schooling each week in the so-called “Ragged Schools.” By 1850, young people ages 13-18 were to work only during daylight hours of 6 A.M. to 6 P.M..

During these decades Charles Dickens’s most powerful works of fiction emerged. Reflecting a quest for identity and wholeness, Dickens presents so many displaced children who do not know of their true origins:

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, the orphaned and abused Smike faces the life-denying Yorkshire school of Squeer and then discovers the imaginative theatre of Vincent Crummles. Smike’s hopeless love for Kate seems tragic, as does the final revelation upon his death that he was the stingy Ralph Nickleby’s son.
In *Bleak House*, Esther Summerson is shamed by an aunt who says ‘it would be better had you never been born.’ She endures to live and tell her own incredible story and to learn of her origins, as Lady Dedlock’s daughter. The operatic overture of the first chapter gives no clue that Esther soon will become a key character and an important voice in this novel. Rather, an omniscient narrator begins. This narrator sets up motifs of death in Chancery fog, legally obscured language, and suggests a kind of devolution, or primeval dilemma, in the image of a megalosaurus tramping through London. Only then does Esther’s voice suddenly appear, as a narrator, in the third chapter. Perhaps she seems a bit naïve, too deferential, but she is a gem of service to others and she does have voice. Even despite her self-abnegation, she may be seen to grow.

In *Great Expectations*, Pip is accosted by the escaped prisoner Magwich. He is nurtured by the simple Joe Gargery and is puzzled by Mrs. Havisham, who is forever stuck in time. Pip is ruthlessly teased by Estella and has to learn manners from Herbert, with whom he once fought as a child. Experience calls Pip past the emptiness of his self-centered approach to being a ‘gentleman’ and he at last sees the quality and care of Joe and discovers the criminal identity of his benefactor. Martin Chuzzlewit, likewise, needs to outgrow his selfishness (and his naivete in the would-be ‘Eden’ in America), as does Scrooge who is educated by three ghosts and by his own ‘inner child.’

Sadly, Little Nell, who displays great fidelity to her grandfather, dies, and Jo the crossing sweeper, sadly unable to read the signs around him, is swallowed up by disease. Tiny Tim, crippled, weighed down by industrial iron legs, comes near to such a fate. We meet the neglected Jellyby children, one similarly trapped with his head in the staircase
railing. Each is a comment on Victorian industrial society. Dickens’s child characters grow but not always unscathed or untroubled.

Humphrey House once insisted that Dickens had never produced an actual effect in the world of reform. However, this is not so. Likely, House was referring to enactments of legislation, like reform of the Poor Laws, against which Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*. It is true that, perhaps, Dickens’s writing resulted in no direct legislative changes. However, the influence of Dickens extended in other ways. The diaries, notebooks, and letters of legislators, abolitionists, educators, ministers, and other prominent workers for justice show that Dickens did indeed have an impact upon their thinking. Dickens’s writing led to change on behalf of children. For example, one may correlate reading Charles Dickens with practical effects that emerged in his contemporaries’ lives. We can see several Dickens readers in the United States, in the state of New York, through whom Dickens may have had practical impact on institutions. For example, George Pearce, a noted philanthropist, was a patron of the New York Society Library who read *Oliver Twist*. The library’s ledgers show that, in 1851, Pearce checked the book out twice. He later started two orphanages, one for girls and one for boys, in upstate New York.

Dickens’s readers like George Pearce were concerned about crime among children. They could see around them children like Oliver Twist, who, in Fagin’s den of pickpockets, was clearly in trouble with the law. Victorians began to wonder how children could be reformed and they had begun to make distinctions between adult and child criminals. With the Juvenile Offenses Act of 1847, it was proposed that children under the age of fourteen should go to a juvenile court rather than to an adult court. By
1854, reformatory schools were established for juvenile offenders, under the age of sixteen. Children assigned to these schools would remain in them for many years.

Reformers concerned with these issues cited Dickens’s novels. These included educational reformers, social workers, and social scientists. Junius Henry Browne, a popular magazine writer, looked at the poor children of New York City in 1870 and wrote:

Not a few are pale and haggard, and sad-eyed, reminding you of Smike, Oliver Twist, Little Nell, with the promise of better things in them. With education and training they would be intelligent and worthy men and women. Their eyes look appealingly at you… Each one was furnished with a little bowl and spoon, and it was interesting to see how quickly the bowl emptied in most cases, and like Oliver Twist, they called aloud for more. (194)

A New York City social worker, Ignatz Leo Nascher, wrote in 1909:

The term Fagin, after Dickens’s notorious character in Oliver Twist is now generally applied to one who induces of children to become pickpockets and shoplifters. (49)

These examples suggest that the works of Charles Dickens did indeed have a practical effect upon peoples’ lives and public discourse. He stirred people to sympathy. The ethical texture of Dickens’s work was frequently remarked upon by ministers and educators, who turned to his fiction for examples of virtue and charity. For example, Henry Copee, the first president of Lehigh University wrote of “the good work” Dickens had done “in expanding individual and public charity”:

His tenderness is touching, and his pathos at once excites our sympathy. He does not tell us to feel or to weep, but he shows us scenes like those in the life of Smike, and in the sufferings and death of Little Nell, which so simply appeal to the heart that we are for the first time forgetful of the world which conjures them before us… Dickens is bold in the advocacy of truth and in denouncing error; he is the champion of honest poverty; he is the foe of class pretension and oppression; he is the friend of friendless children; the reformer of those for whom society has made vagrants. (455-57)
Copee was attuned to how Dickens criticized the educational frameworks that children labored within. He recognized that provincial schools, orphanages, and ragged schools were not all as abusive as the one in which we find Smike. However, like Henry Barnard and John Swett, the superintendent of the California school system, Copee often cited the opening of Dickens’s *Hard Times*, in which children were required to learn nothing but the “facts.” He advocated broad public education in America and noted that public education was not readily available to most British children until after the Forster’s Education Act of 1870.

These readers of Dickens were raised in a social milieu in which human sympathy was regarded as a virtue. Social historians have observed that during the 1840’s sympathy became a principle of social relations in America and in Britain (Bushman, 1992, 81-83, 91-92, Haltunnen, 1982, 35). Children were at the center of Dickens’s sympathetic appeal and his portrayals of children drew much sympathy from his contemporary readers. From Oliver Twist to Smike, and from Little Nell to the Gradgrind children, the loss of childhood innocence seems, to many readers, unpardonable and immoral. Within Dickens’s lyricism, we hear the voices of people of all classes that are, as John Bowen observes, “suddenly and overwhelmingly blown back toward us in the form of an ethico-political responsibility.” This call to ethics is emphasized by Martha Nussbaum, who examines Dickens’s *Hard Times* for its ethical imperative and call to sympathy. Nussbaum rejects “the economists’ habit of reducing everything to calculation” and seeing only “abstract features of people and situations” (44). As Fraser’s Magazine in 1840 said: “he has always espoused the cause of the humble, the persecuted, the oppressed.” With *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickelby*, he criticized institutions
responsible for the plight of poor children. With *Bleak House*, he examined the legal system. With *Hard Times*, he assessed the educational and personal losses of imagination to utility and fact. In each of these indictments of social and institutional structures, we see a stifling of the imaginative potential of children.

Victorian children found themselves in new, rapidly changing industrial world. Dickens’s fiction was an important resource for their families, who responded to the changing world around them: a crowded, diversified environment caught up in the engine of modernity. Dickens and his readers met at this busy intersection of their world and he provided them imaginative relief. Serial fiction was alive in periodical rhythm that has been likened by some to the train and its movement. It held a sense of the suspense and passage of time. Dickens’s readers, including the children who listened to Dickens being read, were living in history and creating a home, as Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund have pointed out. They were young heroes and heroines in danger of being pulled by the speed of the city, as we are pulled today by the rhythm of globalization and technologies. Reading fiction was, in a sense, performed in a space apart from history, or at least in a moment of reflection and respite from the challenges of the commercial world. Dickens’s serialized stories participated in this reflective and often communal moment, before people plunged back into change and the rhythms of their industrial world. For in these moments in the family circle, or the reading group, there was companionship between the book and its readers and between the readers, or listeners, and each other.

Dickens gives to us the gift of sympathy. From his first appearance with *Sketches by Boz* and *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens made his readers laugh. He caught the popular imagination and his characters became topics of discussion. Readers encountered these
sympathetic characters in Dickens’s fiction not only in private but in oral readings among family gatherings and small reading groups. These readers and listeners discussed Dickens and his characters entered their conversations. These people, who read Dickens, interacted on an interpersonal level, and may be said to come close to an ideal of “community.” Dickens was a resource among them for social sympathy. His fiction continues to be this for us today.

The sympathetic appeal of Dickens was apparent to children who read him. Dickens filled the lives of many young readers. Henry James would later criticize the sentimentality in Dickens’s works but as a child he was moved to tears. Other children were just as enthusiastic. Belle Kearney of Vernon, Mississippi tells of how she read to her younger brothers and sisters:

“Well,” I answered, “suppose we make a bargain? If you will cook every time mother gets sick, I will tell you one of Dickens’s stories or one of Walter Scott’s novels as regularly as the nights roll around.” “All right! I’ll do it!” was the ready assent; and the compact was sealed. It was never broken. (25)

Louise Wigfall Wright (1846-1915), a Confederate senator’s daughter, wrote in her autobiography A Southern Girl in ’61:

I recall one night particularly when I had been beguiled into reading until a late hour the charming pages of Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities (114).

Another southern boy, Richard Broome, was diligent in reading Dickens later in the nineteenth century:

One day mother came by as I was intensely reading a copy of the Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens. She smiled and said she was happy because I loved to read books (Broome Federal Writer’s Project 3).

At fourteen, Samuel Andrew Agnew wrote in his diary:
We have the prospect of a wet night. Pa is reading The Message from the Sea tonight. It is a Christmas story by Dickens. (132)

E.S. Nadal recalled:

Bleak House was then coming out in Harper’s Magazine and my father and mother were in the habit of speaking of me as ‘Mr. Guppy,’ because I was thought to look like Mr. Guppy in the illustrations of that novel. I didn’t know who Mr. Guppy was, but I believed him to be the author of Mc Guffrey’s ‘Second Reader.’ (4)

Marion Harland, the author, recalled in her autobiography how her mother was at the center of an apparently inexhaustible supply of periodicals and newspapers. Her father often brought home books.

We had all the new books that he (our father) adjudged to be worth buying and reading, watching eagerly for anything from Dickens, Marryat, and Cooper” (88). […] Martin Chuzzlewit was not written until a score of years later. When it was read aloud in our family circle, there was not a dissenting voice when my mother uttered, in a voice smothered by inward mirth, ‘Mr. Carus!’ as Mr. Pecksniff appeared upon the stage.”

Ms. Harland’s mother had recognized the image of a relative in Dickens’s portrayal of Pecksniff. “The portrait was absurdly striking,” Harland writes. “The Yankee Pecksniff was good-looking after his kind, which was the dark-eyed, well-featured, serenely sanctimonious type” (54).

Perhaps one of the most telling expressions of sentiment was given by a ten year old girl, Kate Wiggins, who Dickens met on a train while returning to Boston on his reading tour early in 1868.

“Do you cry when you read out loud too?” I asked curiously. “We all do in our family and we never read about Tiny Tim or about Steerforth when his body is washed on the beach on Saturday nights for fear our eyes will be too swollen to go to Sunday school.” “Yes, I cry when I read about Steerforth,” he answered quietly. (21)
More tears than this, however, were shed for Little Nell. Little Nell, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* in 1840-41, prompted even greater public sympathy from Dickens’s readers. Readers wrote to Dickens to spare Little Nell. Mothers wrote to him to tell him of their own children who had died, writing to him, as Edgar Johnson tells us, about “how good she was, and how, in this or that respect, she resembled Nell.” Early in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens provides his readers with an image of the close bond between Nell and her grandfather. That closeness first appears in their physical resemblance, although age and the cares of the world distinguish the elderly man from the child. The narrator describes her grandfather:

He was a little old man with long gray hair, whose face and figure, as he held the light above his head and looked before him as he approached, I could plainly see. Though altered by age, I fancied I could recognize in his spare and slender form something of that delicate mould which I had noticed in the child. Their bright blue eyes were certainly alike, but his face was so deeply furrowed, and so very full of care, that here all resemblance ceased.

At this point, the door opens and the grandfather sees Nell with the narrator, who, encountering her on the streets, has walked home with her:

“Why, bless thee, child,” said the old man patting her on the head, “how couldst thou miss thy way? What if I had lost thee, Nell?” “I would have found my way back to you grandfather,” said the child boldly, “never fear” (4-5).

For a child like this to find her way back home was significant for the Victorian reader. Clearly this early scene sets the tone for the later separation of Little Nell and her grandfather, which drew so much sympathy and identification from the audience. Dickens establishes sympathy for Little Nell and this special relationship. This prepares the way for a sentimental tale that culminates in the loss of Nell. The innocence of
childhood is something the narrator responds to deeply, as he speaks with Little Nell’s grandfather. It is clear that he frowns upon child-labor:

“It always grieves me,” I observed, roused by what I took to be his selfishness: “it always grieves me to contemplate the initiation of children into the ways of life, when they are scarcely more than infants. It checks their confidence and simplicity—two of the best qualities that Heaven gives them—and demands that they share our sorrows before they are capable of entering into our enjoyments” (6). “It never checks hers,” said the old man looking steadily at me, “the springs are too deep. Besides, the children of the poor know but few pleasures. Even the cheap delights of childhood must be bought and paid for.”

The story that follows is melodramatic. Dick Swiveller and the nefarious Quilp and Dick Swiveller soon appear in their lives. Dickens introduces Daniel Quilp as a distorted, dwarfish man, whose features border on the animalistic:

“The child was closely followed by an elderly man of remarkably hard features and forbidding aspect, and so low in stature as to be quite a dwarf, though his head and face were large enough for the body of a giant. His black eyes were restless, sly, and cunning: his mouth and chin, bristly with the stubble of a coarse hard beard; and his complexion was one of that kind which never looks clean or wholesome. But what added most to the grotesque expression of his face, was a ghastly smile, which, appearing to be the mere result of habit and to have no connection with any mirthful or complacent feeling, constantly revealed the few discolored fangs that were scattered in his mouth, and gave him the aspect of a panting dog (20).”

Dickens similarly employs sentimentality as he develops the child character of Oliver Twist, a child caught in a world of criminals, bureaucrats, and “philosophers.” Readers responded to the famous scene in Chapter Two of the novel, in which Oliver lines up for supper with the other boys:

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook’s uniform, stationed himself at the supper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered to each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbors nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery.
He 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!” is the incredulous reply. Oliver repeats his request:

“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.

The board were sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr. Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair said,

“Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, Sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!”

From the first appearance of *Oliver Twist* in 1837-38, Dickens’s novels drew sympathy from his readers. Signs of sentimental identification with the innocent child are present in some of their responses. Jane T.H. Cross, a writer from the American south, remarks in 1860: “I will read now, I will lose, in the pathetic story of Oliver Twist, a sense of my own miseries. It is one of the few novels I can read; there are some touches of deep feeling in it.” (155).

Such “deep feeling” was in this reader as much as it was in the text. Dickens drew upon her sentiments with the story of his child protagonist, Oliver Twist. The children of Dickens’s fiction engaged the sympathy of thousands of readers, as he devoted attention to the issues that blighted Victorian childhood. Through these fictional children, he drew his readers toward sympathetic response. As Richard Rorty has pointed out, Dickens wrote a kind of book that is “relevant to our relations with others, to helping us to notice the effects of our actions on other people. These are the books which are relevant to liberal hope, and to the question of how to reconcile private irony with such hope” (141). Or as the American philosopher George Santayana has said, Dickens expressed “sympathetic participation in the daily life of mankind” (537). The simultaneous participation in life by children was ever within Dickens’s social panorama.
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