

## **Disunity in Diversity: Dickens as a guide to today's social contrasts**

Sad as it is to say, Queen Victoria and Charles Dickens are dead. The steam engine of their era has given way to the automobile, the workhouse to the soup kitchen, and the great colonial empires to the internet. However times may have changed, though, the same great contrasts between social strata, and the problems they produce, have remained. The character examples and contrasts expressed by Dickens in his novels, most of which were taken from his own experience of Victorian society, can still be applied to people in today's world, and thus used as an eye-opener to the baser troubles still visible in society.

One of the greatest of these social disparities, and a curse on humanity through the ages, is the contrast between rich and poor. In such works as Oliver Twist (and on a milder scale Great Expectations), Dickens expresses the great disdain the rich of England have for those of lower rank. High society at this time believed that the poor were merely lazy and, given a rough shove into the workhouse or debtor's prison (under outdated legislation not yet corrected in Parliament) would soon mend their ways.

As is demonstrated by the bare desires of Dickens' characters Pip and Magwitch, the disdain with which the "lower" classes are treated has ingrained in them a desire for something "more" and "better". An example of this is the shame of poverty that Estella engenders in Pip that drives him to deify her and Miss Havisham (his first available examples of rich people) to the point that he sees them (and the wealth they represent) mirrored in all he perceives as beautiful. This mental agitation leads to his frivolous

spending when he comes into money, and his feelings of shame when he is with lower-class Joe, his first and greatest friend.

In today's welfare and homeless shelter systems we still see situations like these. I saw Pip's dread of being perceived by Estella as "common" plainly mirrored when, while volunteering at a homeless shelter, I was told to fill a plate of food for a teenaged girl who, hearing another adolescent was serving, refused to enter the dining room, lest I should treat her with the disrespect she had come to expect from her wealthier peers.

However, not everything about the rich and the poor is so different as most would like to believe. To put a fine point on it: dysfunctional families. These are the great equalizers, found in all strata of society. One of nature's greatest ironies (found both in Dickens' fiction and the world today) is the tendency of the individual to take his troubles out on loved ones. The greatest difference between each separate family's problem is whether the troublemaker does this consciously or not. A lack of good parental examples and a hard life, for instance, is behind Mrs. Joe Gargery's untrained technique of bringing up Pip and Joe "by hand", while Mrs. Pocket ignores her children and is too busy reading to be taught how to raise a family safely. Though these poorly-prepared mother figures contrast with the way Miss Havisham pits her relatives against each other and turns her adopted daughter into sociopath, they each lack a key ability to truly put their families' good before their own.

Sadly, the life of the family has not changed as much as it could have since the time of Dickens. Mothers and fathers can still be openly abusive or negligent. The future, however, is not completely dark. Though Dickens relegated the "ideal" happy family to the background of his novels (much as unhappy ones have always been

pushed to the back of society's consciousness), the intervening years have seen the rise of institutions, less harsh than the workhouse, for the care of the needy and abused, most particularly of children.

Dickens was far ahead of his time in that he saw and expressed the helplessness of children in his era, where others ignored or exploited them. The steam-powered industry of the relatively recent "revolution" left them in the dust, as more advanced medical care, a stronger economy, and (technically) improved living conditions for the common man made life for adults easier. Keeping babies alive was less of a hardship and contraception was not available, therefore the homes of the poor filled with children, who were sent to work under the terrible factory conditions that Dickens himself experienced as a boy, or turned to worse trades, to pay for their sibling's bread.

In this day and age, however, parenthood is often planned, and as a result, children are in many cases more highly valued. Parents who shirk their duties often have (in richer countries, at least) Child Protective Services to be wary of, and child labor laws in many countries have done away with the long hours of toil that often killed young factory workers in the 1800's.

The passion with which such child characters as Oliver Twist and Pip long for families and money is only one example of Dickens' expression of the desires of the wronged. The most infamous of man's great longings, set down in prose by Dickens, are those for absolution and revenge. His most notable character driven by the latter force is Miss Havisham, jilted on her wedding day and thereby prepared to completely destroy an innocent girl's ability to love, training her to be a heartless machine of vengeance against the hearts of all men. Conversely, the convict Magwitch, though he

denies it, is so haunted by the ghosts of his past wrongs that he, after sinking as low as he can, attempts to bring some grace back on himself by creating a gentleman (higher than any other) out of the very boy he terrified. Magwitch's haunted criminal mind sees (perhaps for the first time), just how horribly he had wronged the world, and how he would have to atone for it.

The public readings Dickens became famous for and the vibrant language and looks of his characters were, I am sure, shocking to people so used to hiding all emotion and individuality behind the Victorian mask and a stiff upper lip. Ironically enough, it is these same shameful, unclothed expressions of violence and feeling in his novels, and the earthy, often chilling descriptions of their settings that bring them most to life for the modern audience.

It was also through this melodrama and parody that Dickens expressed and thereby freed himself from the troubles of his young life and the suffering he saw around him as he grew. It is this great power of his to melodramatize and at the same time, write from his own experiences of pain and humor, that so frees his writing from the constrained air of the society in which he lived, and makes the issues he portrays understandable in such a different age.

Dickens' writings are a warning and reminder of how society once, and still occasionally does, treat people who are not moderately wealthy. Yes, the Dickensian writing style might be exaggerated, but in a world growing smaller by the day, we are forced to deal more all the time with those people we fear, pity, and disdain. Television tells us that the underdog can win, so when we see him sleeping in the gutter, we, like our ancestors, think him nothing but a lazy and unkempt wrinkle in our better

expectations of the world. Today, just as in the past, politicians debate the rights of people whom they barely understand. Similarly, the individuals of the world at large know and care little about those outside their own family units. It is for this reason that we must constantly remind ourselves of history's mistakes, and the changes that still need to be made to rectify those mistakes. Pip's unhappiness could teach us all a thing or two about spending money wisely, and the ravings of Miss Havisham can caution any who read that the mad are still, and always will be, in need of help. If children in the street are not enough to remind suburbia that the poor still need caring for, then perhaps the colorful words of Charles Dickens will. If melodrama is what it takes to open people's eyes to what painful divisions plague individuals and society, then it's a good thing that today's high-schoolers still find Dickens on their assigned reading lists.