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**THE NOVEL OF CHARLES DICKENS AS VEHICLE FOR
IDEAS THAT SHAPED THE VICTORIAN PERIOD**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the role of Charles Dickens as an urban novelist and as a social commentator of the society in which he lived. Through many of his novels, he voiced social matters of his time, among others, health conditions, administrative incompetence, and the Poor Laws. Three of his major novels have been considered and put in context. The influence of his work showed the strong political and ethical potential that literature may have to spark debates about social and moral reform.

Therefore, the specific goal is to identify Dickens's descriptions of characters, situations, settings, and social matters which denounced the situation in England during the Victorian period as well as explore to which extent these descriptions matched with reality.

Key words:

Charles Dickens, Victorian Period, condition of England novels, Poor Laws, sanitary conditions, utilitarianism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens was one of the most prolific writers in the Victorian Period in England. He was labelled both as an urban novelist and as a social commentator since he depicted in his works many aspects of the society in which he lived. Another facet that can be added was his capacity to become an opinion-forming writer, a feature that is going to be developed throughout this paper.

The importance of Dickens in English Literature can be summarised by this remark made by Williams when he referred to mid-19th Century Literature: “we can especially realise our good fortune that at the time of the critical remaking of the novel and of the critical emergence of a new urban popular culture, we have a novelist of genius who is involved in both; we have Dickens” (301-309).

Furthermore, when Williams explained the features of the mid-19th Century English novel, he noted how they were connected to the changes in society, in particular, the Industrial Revolution, the struggle for democracy, and the growth of cities and towns. He also pointed out that, by the end of the 1840s, the English were the first predominantly urban people in the long history of human societies. There was critical legislation on public health and working-hours for factory workers (38). All these elements will be present in Dickens’s novels.

Charles Dickens was born on 7 February 1812 in Portsmouth (England) in a family that did not offer him much security and support. He spent many years of his childhood in London, where he developed a love and loathing for the city which is depicted in many of his novels.

When he was only twelve years old, and because of the financial problems in the family, he was sent away from home to work at Warren’s blacking factory to manufacture boot polish. Although he did not suffer from poor working conditions in Warren, this experience at such an early age helped him to sympathize with the feelings of those who belonged to the lower classes in the lively but oppressive metropolis. Just fifteen days after Dickens started to work in the factory, his father was arrested for debt and sent to Marshalsea Prison for three months. Living conditions in prisons are also represented in many of his novels.

During the nineteenth century, questions about the lives and labours of the populace were of great interest to British citizens; it was under the broad rubric of the “condition of England” that these questions came to be addressed (Simmons 336)

1.1 Purpose and subject approach

The purpose of this paper is to identify, in some of his novels, Dickens's descriptions of characters, situations, settings, and social matters which denounced the situation in England during the Victorian period as well as to explore to which extent these descriptions matched with reality.

To achieve this goal, the paper identifies the different messages developed by Dickens which showed an intense social commitment, and cross match them with the historical reality.

Charles Dickens work was studied in the subject of English Literature II.2 in the second year of the English studies degree in UNED. It was noteworthy how acutely Dickens showed the drawbacks of the social Victorian state and his sensitiveness to social abuse.

1.2 State of the question

Critics have studied Dickens from different approaches. Overall, most of them underline how Dickens's publications had a strong political and ethical potential, thus he extensively used his work to spark debates about social and moral reform. They have also noted that Dickens was very sharp at spotting and criticising these social matters, but he seldom provided or suggested solutions.

Therefore, and in line with the purpose of the paper, I intend to identify the most relevant social issues of that period, the content of such contemporary debates, and their achieved conclusions. Additionally, I am going to fill the apparent gap in Dickens's lack of proposals, namely, if he just depicted the social problems or if one could have extracted some suggestions from his writing. That could lead to labelling Dickens, beyond a social commentator, as a reformer or, at least, an opinion-forming writer.

1.3 Methodology

To achieve the purpose of this paper, an exhaustive analysis has been done of Dickens's social circumstances described in his novels. This analysis has been complemented with another one of comparative type, to assess whether or not those described circumstances were accurate. The analysis also aimed at identifying whether Dickens limited himself to describing evil, corrupt, and

immoral social situations, or if he went beyond that, by providing or suggesting solutions.

There is a large amount of published work about Dickens's Literature and the Victorian Period (the full citation is included in item 5 on Bibliography).

Just to name some of these published works, which allow us to have an overall picture of the matter, I would mention the following four studies on Dickens which are more focused on literary aspects: Williams, Raymond's *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*; Mee, Jon's *The Cambridge Introduction to Charles Dickens*; Ward, Adolphus William's *Dickens*; and Patten, Robert's *Charles Dickens and 'Boz': The Birth of the Industrial-Age Author*.

The second group of sources is specifically related to social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of the Victorian era. The analysis and information provided by this second group of sources have allowed me to compare the reality of the Victorian period with the society described by Dickens in his novels. Among this second group of bibliography we can find these three following books:

Goodland, Lauren M.E. *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society*. It provides information about contemporary debates over health, education, civil service reform and the Poor Laws.

Dauton, Martin. *State and Market in Victorian Britain: War, Welfare and Capitalism*. In this book, the author explores the connections between state and market and how society was affected.

Brantlinger, Patrick and Thesing, William. *A companion to the Victorian Novel*. This book provides information about both British fiction in this period and social issues such as religion, class structure, and other contexts and trends.

In addition, I also found some important web pages that provided me with important additional information. We can include the following two sites: *The Victorian Web* (victorianweb.org/) and *The Charles Dickens page* (charlesdickenspage.com).

The Victorian Web offers commentary on Dickens's work linked to his life and contemporary social, political, history, drama, religion, book illustration, and other related topics.

The Charles Dickens page, as the page itself states, is intended to enhance the reader's experience, providing background on Dickens, his work, his time, and the locations he wrote about.

Finally, I also explored the numerous works related to the 2012 bicentenary celebrations of Dickens (Florian Schweizer was the Director of the Dickens 2012 celebrations) which offered a year-long program of commemoration of Dickens and his work.

Charles Dickens's work is huge and, therefore, this paper cannot spam all his novels, so I just focused on the following three novels, which are the most relevant ones for the purpose of this paper.

- *Oliver Twist* in which Dickens explores many social themes, but three were more notorious: the abuse of the Poor Law system, crime in London, and children's and women's suffering as victims of the social system. Child abuse was also referred to in *Nickolas Nickleby*,
- *Bleak House* in which Dickens sharply states the injustices in Victorian society, including the abuses of the law system, slum housing, class divisions, the lack of education for the poor, and administrative incompetence.
- *Hard Times* was influenced by social criticism developed by Thomas Carlyle (both Dickens and Carlyle criticized utilitarianism). This novel deals with social issues, some of them mentioned above, like class division, conditions of the urban workers, and education for poor people.

Nevertheless, the paper also highlights some of the many positive aspects which can be found in Victorian England, and which were identified, either explicitly or not by Dickens. Among other things, Conner identifies this period as the time of the world's first Industrial Revolution, political reform and social change, a railway boom, and the first telephone and telegraph. Regarding the Industrial Revolution, other authors such as Griep, underline that with its birth "the creative minds of the era were thinking well outside the box and many new conveniences and necessities were invented such as the telephone, radio, toilet, train, vacuum cleaner, photography and sewing machines."

2. CHARLES DICKENS'S NOVELS: MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

Dickens managed to write a new kind of novel, a "fiction uniquely capable of realising a new kind of reality" (Williams 347). He mastered the way of describing the experience of living in cities.

He succeeded in bringing closer to the readers social English institutions, streets, slums, etc., and in describing life in those places. Dickens made physical observation of those places possible for readers.

2.1 Style

Dickens's style has been an object of great attention by academics. Tyler, who defined Dickens's style as unruly, encompasses this opinion when he states that Dickens was a great prose stylist and yet criticism has frequently disregarded or undervalued his style (1). The same author also underlined that early claims about "the looseness of Dickens's prose, or longer lasting claims about its irregularity and its disproportion, can conceal the attributes of verbal care and precision, the judicious selection of the apposite word, the sharp ear for nuance and polysemy that also characterise his writing" (3).

For the specific purpose of this paper, it is very interesting to underline one central critical problem identified by Williams, which was Dickens's "self-defensive, alternately jolly or cynical tone and mode, which can take over and become very difficult to distinguish from the humours or ironic popular observation of reality" (338). This helps to understand some potential misgivings that undermined the beliefs on the real depiction of facts in Dickens's novels.

This observation of reality has also been an object of discussion among academics. Johnston claims that whereas authors like Thomas Lister commended on Dickens's watchful management of details, other ones "complained about his needless profusion of those same details and a vulgar inability to discriminate between what was important and what was not" (137).

Dickens's writing style is also marked by both satire and caricature. In this regard, Mahabal has noted the catchy names that Dickens had used in his novels and the mixture of fantasy with realism in which "orphans are compared to stocks and shares or even dinner party guests to furniture. Dickens often worked closely with the illustrator of his novels so that the characters and settings would be exactly the way he would envision them."

Finally, it is also relevant to note how the different topics and debates present in the Victorian Era shaped and influenced Dickens's style. Topics that Tyler has ranged from time, ghosts, historiography, national diction, grand narratives of

creation and apocalypse from geology and theology, and historical arguments about literary style itself (12).

2.2 Characters

Williams defined Dickens's characters as "not 'rounded' and developing, but 'flat' and emphatic. They are not slowly revealed but directly presented" (339). By understanding "not rounded" as not fully developed, perfected, or completed, and "flat" as dull and lacking emotions, this definition is very useful to underline the misgivings on accuracy of the description of reality or the above-mentioned Dickens's new kind of reality.

In this context, Burgess referred to some of Dickens's characters, as the humorous type (231). In the same book, Burgess initially provided harsh criticism on Dickens "Everybody is aware of the faults of Dickens – his inability to construct a convincing plot, his clumsy and sometimes ungrammatical prose, his sentimentality, his lack of real characters in the Shakespearean sense" (239). Nevertheless, and as Foster points out, as Burgess's career progressed, so did his engagement with this "Dickensian world" and, eventually, it is possible that Burgess saw Dickens as a kindred spirit. Foster adds that Burgess did not frequently talk about Dickens as an influence on his own work, yet Burgess spent a great deal of time attempting to understand his work.

Finally, the last relevant definition of Dickens's characters is the one provided by Johnston, to whom "those characters are mere caricatures, grotesque distortions of reality, and hard to work out what exactly they are caricaturing" (141).

3. CHARLES DICKENS AS SOCIAL COMMENTATOR OF HIS TIME

Victorian novels, and notably, Dickens's ones, as Andrew Miller stated, provide "the most graphic and enduring images of the impact of modernization on individual and social experience" (qtd. in Goodland XI). Dickens's purpose was to make his novels an instrument of morality and justice. This purpose was not always achieved because while his novels contain many realistic details, they seldom give the impression of reality, mainly because of the caricaturing and exaggeration of characters that have been mentioned before.

One good example of this intention was provided by Carlson when he referred to Dickens's choice to present unpleasant scenes and odious characters in his novels to touch the public's conscience and arouse public indignation as to influence Parliament (786).

With this principle in mind, this paper, notably in this third chapter, will try to provide a detailed account of the link between some of Dickens's selected novels and specific historical debates about social issues described in those novels. Those debates will entail the main topics of the investigation carried out in the paper and will include several key elements of the relationship between the Victorian period and Dickens's novels, including topics such as Poor Laws, organised charity, utilitarianism, and public institutions like Chancery. These topics can be found in the three Dickens's works selected in this paper (*Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*).

These social debates were easily perceived by Victorian population who read Dickens's novels. As Small suggests, Dickens was very accessible to the entire population and his public readings from his novels formed an important cultural extension of those contemporaneous political debates (qtd. in Langland, 395).

3.1 *Oliver Twist*

This novel was the second novel written by Dickens and was first published as a serial between 1837 and 1839. It is very relevant to understand Dickens's views on organised charity and the developments of Poor Law in England in the context of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, more commonly referred to as the New Poor Law. *Oliver Twist* is notable for "its unromantic portrayal by Dickens of criminals and their sordid lives, as well as for exposing the cruel treatment of the many orphans in London in the mid-19th century" (the Circumlocution Office, *Oliver Twist*).

Although Dickens explores many social themes in *Oliver Twist*, I will focus on the most relevant one for the purpose of my paper: the abuses of the new Poor Law system. The other two predominant themes were the evils of the criminal world in London and the victimisation of children.

In the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens presents a critique of the New Poor Law and the administration of the workhouses, which will also be developed in this chapter of my paper. Mc Beath indicates that relief during the Victorian

period was given “either in the form of outdoor relief, which provided payments for things such as food and clothing, or as indoor relief in the form of the workhouse.”

Dickens provides a rigid critique of the Victorian workhouse, in which indoor relief, notably food and shelter, was intended for those who were unable to look after themselves such as orphans, the sick or elderly, but under a regime of lasting hunger and physical punishment.

The matter of the workhouses and the New Poor Law has been dealt with by several novelist, but, as Reed underlines, none more critically than Dickens in *Oliver Twist* (158).

a) The new Poor Law and Workhouses: A new administrative approach

The New Poor Law was passed in England Parliament in 1834. The consensus at the time was that the system of relief was being abused and that a new approach had to be adopted. Therefore, the new law undertook an important change in the matter as it separated the so-called deserving poor from the undeserving ones. The latter would be withheld support since they were considered not to be genuinely in need.

To better differentiate the deserving poor from the undeserving, a new test was implemented by the law whose model and consequences has been pointed out by Reed:

The new law instituted a means test of need, which required that the household not be supportable on its own resources. If the head of a household applied for relief, all family members were regarded as paupers. The help provided was residence in a workhouse, where women and children were separated from men, meaning that families could not live together. Those indigents who sought public assistance felt humiliated and abused by the mandated treatment. Though the New Poor Law's regulations were severe, local authorities often tempered that severity. (158)

A Poor Law Commission was set up to administer poor relief after the New Poor Law was passed. The Commission, whose secretary was Edwin Chadwick¹, was not subject to direct parliamentary or ministerial control and was free to

¹ Sir Edwin Chadwick (1800-1890) was an English lawyer and social reformer who devoted his life to sanitary reform in Britain. As secretary of the royal commission on reform of the poor laws (1834–46), Chadwick was largely responsible for devising the system under which the country was divided into groups of parishes administered by elected boards of guardians, each board with its own medical officer. Later, as commissioner of the Board of Health (1848–54), he conducted a campaign that culminated in passage of the Public Health Act of 1848.

gather information and oversee local reforms. The commission, which was not empowered to enforce the workhouse test, introduced a centralized administrative oversight whereas a Board of Guardians was elected locally to manage the day to day running of the workhouse. The New Law aimed at deterring people from seeking accommodation. To achieve this goal, McBeath has indicated that “workhouses were intentionally designed to offer a worse standard of living than the lowest living standards of an independent labourer; one of the lowliest occupations available.”

Some of the principles on which the commissioners were to act included the prohibition of relief outside of the workhouse and the seclusion of different classes of paupers, which even led to married couples being separate

That situation reminds us of what is currently happening in our world in the twenty-first century, where families are taken apart due to global conflicts and wars. One of the clearest examples is the invasion of Ukraine which brings thousands of families to flee the country to avoid war and being killed. When these families reach the border with Poland or Romania, they have to separate, the mother and the children will continue to flee as refugees to other countries whereas the father and the adult brothers remain in Ukraine and go back to fight. This is a problem that has been extensively raised by media with examples such as Worldvision in its article *Families Separated and Children at Risk in Ukraine* or The New York Times in Jordan’s article *Ukrainian Children and Caregivers are being separated at U.S. Border*. This matter can give us an idea that the world unfortunately has not changed and progressed that much after all.

This Act was highly unpopular, and even unacceptable not only for the working class but also for many sectors of the middle and upper classes. Nevertheless, the New Poor Law survived because the fear of the creation of a specific poor working class was even bigger than the fear to the New Poor Law. As priorly mentioned, the workhouse was made the center of all assistance and the distribution of outdoor relief was mostly eliminated, which significantly reduced the costs.

Furthermore, there were suspicions of atrocities happening with these poor people living in workhouses, which was another relevant element of comments in Victorian society. These rumours of atrocities also influenced people’s views on

the matter and included the belief that children were killed to make pies with, or corpses were used as fertiliser in fields to save expenses of burials.

This view was complemented, by 1845, with a contradictory discourse regarding the institution of the workhouse:

At the same time, contemporaries recoiled from the depersonalizing regimentation of institutional life: from workhouse diets, workhouse uniforms, enforced silence, and enervating monotony. Thus, the idea of the workhouse as a corrupt, disorderly, and barbaric place was in many respects indistinct from the equally repellent idea of it as a hyperrational, impersonal, efficient instrument of social discipline. (Goodland 80-82)

Other authors have joined the harsh criticism on this institution, as Brain, to whom Victorian workhouses, even though designed to deal with the issue of pauperism, in fact became prison systems detaining the most vulnerable in society.

Nevertheless, the fact that the New Poor Law had several shortcomings, low acceptance, and was not well implemented, did not imply that it was not effective. Thus, according to F. M. L. Thompson, the New Poor Law was “the one big success of the century, for the transmission of middle-class standards to the working classes” (qtd. in Goodland 82).

b) Dickens’s views on the New Poor Law and workhouses

Oliver Twist was part of a diverse and popular culture of resistance to the New Poor Law. Overall, the workhouses were broadly seen in Victorian society as places especially marked by social exclusion, and *Oliver Twist* is fully aligned with that view. The novel clearly helped to portrait the children who poorly lived in underfed Victorian workhouses. Writers have praised Dickens for bringing the matter to the attention of the public. While Brain described the harsh system of the workhouse, which became known for its terrible conditions, forced child labour, long hours, malnutrition, beatings, and neglect, he also underlined that “it would become a blight on social conscience of a generation leading to opposition from the likes of the Charles Dickens.”

The novel shows the tough life that its central character, Oliver Twist, a boy who is between nine and twelve years old in the plot, has in the workhouse where he is wrongly judged by the workhouse board and threatened with jail for begging. Oliver Twist, “though treated with cruelty and surrounded by coarseness for most

of his life, he is a pious, innocent child, and his charms draw the attention of several wealthy benefactors" (the Circumlocution Office, *Oliver Twist*).

The characters who Oliver meets feature the typical selfishness of the bourgeois and self-interest of the governing people. He meets Mr. Fang who enjoys putting poor people in jail and others who represent the working classes. These characters are covered by a sheer competitive instinct that can be found in, for instance, Noah's petty domination, Fagin's greediness, Bumble's pride, and Mrs. Sowerberry's jealousy. This contrasts with Dickens's remark in the novel on the matter of who repudiated "the beautiful axiom that self-preservation is the first law of nature" (*Oliver Twist* 120).

Although the main reading of *Oliver Twist* is a textbook of Victorian child abuse, the novel also shows early Victorian slum life. One clear example of that is when the body of a woman, who dies of starvation, has to be taken by Oliver and Sowerberry, thus witnessing a dreadful view of neglected slum houses.

Dickens's fictional response through *Oliver Twist* to the New Poor Law has been defined by some authors as complicated and imprecise. Although the novel contributed indelibly to the iconography of the New Poor Law, it also implied that "British society had already forsaken charitable ideals, with few exceptions, in favour of materialistic and selfish ideologies." (Goodland 60-61)

Anyway, Dickens's response in *Oliver Twist* to the workhouse approach seems to be clearer, as the novel demonstrates that "any attempt to ground authority in impersonal rules rather than personal experience poses problems for a just and moral order." (Goodland 69). In this regard, the same author underlines that "in *Oliver Twist* immiseration occurs both inside and out of the workhouse, and few distinctions are made between law-abiding laborers and criminals" (64).

As above mentioned, with *Oliver Twist*, Dickens succeeded in making Victorian public opinion more aware of the conditions of the poor. The novel was an important display of Victorian social moral sense or ethics just as Dickens persuasively depicts the disorder, dirt, disease, decay, and misery in workhouses, exposing them as an overall failed attempt to deal with the matter of poverty and rejected children. Therefore, through this novel, Dickens manages "to shine a light on the unacceptable brutality of the Victorian workhouse and the failings of this antiquated system of punishment, forced labour and mistreatment" (Brain).

3.2 *Bleak House*

Bleak House (1852-1853) was Dickens's ninth novel and its main purpose was to show the abuses of the Chancery and its administrative incompetence, in particular harms and problems created by its long delays. *Bleak House* tells the story of a very lasting and expensive litigation dealt with by the Chancery. The litigation takes the name of one of the main characters, Mr. Joseph Jarndice (Jarndyce vs Jarndice), costs between £60,000 and £70,000, and its final resolution, if it ever happens, would make the winner of the proceedings very rich.

The work became so popular that the name of this Jarndyce versus Jarndyce case has become, through Dickens's pages, a synonym for delay and injustice (Carson 786).

The Court of Chancery was a court of equity in England and Wales to provide remedies not obtainable in the courts of common law. It was criticised for the slowness and high costs of its procedures (History).

Besides the Chancery, another important theme in *Bleak House* is philanthropy. Organised charity or philanthropy, as it was also known, was one of the Victorians' favourite alternatives to state intervention and antecedent to modern social work. Dickens tended to criticise situations that he deemed unfair. Through this novel, he voices cases of people (characters like Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellybe) who act as philanthropists but only show interest in causes that work in their favour and neglect others which should deserve their attention.

One of the most praised authors who studied this contrast between state intervention and organised charity, two areas so often intertwined, was the English economist William Beveridge who advocated for a combined State and voluntary action as the most useful one.²

This idea was also highlighted as follows by Prochaska in a highly interesting lecture about the state of charity delivered in the regulator institution of charities in England and Wales, the so-called Charity Commission, in September of 2014:³

2 William Henry Beveridge, 1st Baron Beveridge, (1879-1963), economist who helped shape Britain's post-World War II welfare state policies and institutions through his *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942), also known as the Beveridge Report.

3 An in-depth analysis of the charity sector in England and Wales can be found in the report "The Value of the Charity Sector: An overview" created by The Charity Commission in September 2019.

By this century, Britain had reached a curious stage in the evolution of social policy, in which the state wanted the voluntary societies to do more, and the voluntary societies wanted the state to do more. Now, the exhausted parties seem to be heading for the ropes, in what we have come to call, sometimes admiringly, sometimes not, partnership. I think that this is a great approach as both parties are trying to reach the best result in benefit of the population by working and complementing each other.

Finally, a third important element to be assessed in *Bleak House* is the lack of sanitation which can be clearly found in the slum area named Tom-all-Alone's which appears in the novel and was full of desolation and disease. In this regard, a character must be pointed out, Jo, a young boy who lives in this slum and who eventually died of pneumonia.

a) Depiction of Chancery as the need for legal and administrative reform

As mentioned at the beginning of epigraph 3, Carlson described Dickens's intentions in his novels to touch the public conscience and arouse public indignation as to influence Parliament. The same author also underlined that "In no book does such a purpose more clearly appear than in *Bleak House*" (786). The case of Chancery was especially notorious for the use of a novel (*Bleak House*) to influence a potential law reform.

The clear archaism of the Chancery Institution is used in *Bleak House* to show the fault of the traditional bureaucratic organizations. As Diniejko points out "for Dickens, the Court of Chancery became synonymous with the faulty law system, expensive court fees, bureaucratic practices, technicality, delay and inconclusiveness of judgments". This negative opinion on the Chancery was broadly shared by public opinion when Dickens wrote the novel.

With this negative view on the Chancery, Dickens wanted to go further and really induce a potential law reform of the Institution. Thus, Carson wrote that his objective with this novel was "the abolition of the delays and the elimination of the ravenous costs of Chancery" (789). Carson also praised the skilful way to attempt it, and a very good example was the opening chapter with its dull November day, and with fog settling down on London as a landscape to introduce the reader to the Chancellor, who was the official head of the Chancery, "sitting in the midst of the fog, physical and intellectual, in the midst of the dirt, the dust and the despair" (789).

Many other representatives of English society also considered the need of undertaking a Chancery reform, including Parliament, as well as newspapers

which took notice of that call. But it was Dickens who succeeded in such attempt, triggering the reform of Chancery proceedings since Dickens, unlike parliament arguments and newspapers, reached thousands upon thousands of people through his novels, which made that “popular opinion grew until it was possible to effect by law a reform of the system of the Court of Chancery” (Carson 790). Nevertheless, it took longer to achieve such reform, as it was not until 1867 (the novel was written in 1852-53), that a remedial act was passed and eventually, in 1873, Lord Cairns (the chancellor at that time) secured the Supreme Court of Judicature Act which merged the Courts of Chancery and Law and abolished the abuses of delay and costs.

Commenting on this clear example of Dickens’s involvement to reform the law through *Bleak House*, Carson concluded how much Dickens “contributed to the righting of the wrongs of centuries, and for this, as for many other services to humanity, he should be held in everlasting remembrance” (790).

b) Shortcomings of Organised Philanthropy

Although Dickens was involved and committed to different charitable activities, he also criticized organized charity or philanthropy by using the above-mentioned satirized characters of Mrs. Jellyby and her friend Mrs. Pardiggle. Mrs. Jellyby is obsessed with helping causes that take place overseas, while she ignores other much closer daily problems which occur in her own family, as she does not put in the effort in her role as a mother. Unlike Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle is more focused on causes within England, but she is also harsh with her five children and forces them to donate money to her charities. Both are enthusiastic about Victorian philanthropy but at the expense of others.

The following John Jarndyce’s sentence in *Bleak House* is quite representative of Dickens’s views on the matter: “There were two classes of charitable people; one, the people who did a little and made a great deal of noise; the other, the people who did a great deal and made no noise at all” (*Bleak House*, 79). The sentence compares the activity of those ones who bragged about being philanthropists and the actual work that they achieved. To sum up, Dickens criticised Victorian support for charitable projects afar whilst nearer to home millions of people were stuck in poverty. (The Circumlocution Office, *Bleak House*).

To better understand Dickens's position, it is worth mentioning the role of the mid-Victorian Charity Organization Society (COS), which was founded in 1869, a year before Dickens's death. The ambitious goal of the COS was to change society through well-coordinated voluntarism. Although they operated locally, they reported to the Central Commission, in London. In this regard, it aimed at strengthening the New Poor Law's deterrent policies, since it tried to abolish the pauperizing outcome of indiscriminate charity. Besides, trained volunteers supplemented and supervised Poor Law officials. COS also implemented a method to distinguish between the incorrigible pauper (subject to deterrent poor laws), and the deserving candidate for charity.

Goodland underlined that although Dickens would have probably supported those accusations a society with heartless bureaucracy, "in many respects these COS's methods or hallmark case studies produced individualized philanthropy of the kind Dickens tended to endorse" (115-116).

With this idea in mind, even though Dickens could not have been entirely happy with organized charity, it seems that he would have supported the COS's voluntary approach. That might have impacted the COS's success which managed to have six out of nineteen seats on the respected Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, established in 1905, to assess how the Poor Law system should be changed.

c) The Public Health Act of 1848 and the need of sanitary reform

Charles Dickens was intimately familiar with the consequences of illness and disease. He was in contact with ill relatives such as his ten children, who often suffered from febrile illnesses, probably cholera and typhus; his sister-in-law, who died when she was only 17; or his sister Fanny, who died of pulmonary tuberculosis. Besides, Dickens himself was a small boy for his age and had physical pain due to his renal colic. By the time he was 12, as Caldwell claims, he had witnessed the close association of disease and poverty and was impressed with a lasting horror by the squalor of the Marshalsea prison, where his father was detained for debt, and the illnesses of its inmates (343).

During the Victorian period, illness was very frequent, and it affected all socio-economic classes. Consumption was endemic throughout Britain and Cholera epidemics were spread in the country in 1831-32, 1848-49, and 1853-54. This

disease impacted especially the overcrowded slums of the urban poor. Typhus and typhoid, both endemic, were also common and the former was so often caught in prisons that it was also known as “prison fever”. Victorian statistics collected by Caldwell showed that fully 15 to 20 percent of infants died in their first year and nine women died in childbirth every day throughout England and Wales. Orphans like *Oliver Twist* reflected a brutal reality of the era (343-344).

In Dickens’s times, there were strong debates about the need to improve the living conditions in the cities, notably regarding health. *Bleak House* provides some reactions to the obvious shortcomings of the Public Health Act of 1848 and the need to reform it.

But these necessary improvements, which entailed reforms of the Law, clashed with the long delays that such reforms took. One good example of these delays was precisely this 1848 Act. Unlike what happened with the Royal Commission’s report on the poor laws, which successfully turned into legislation in just six months, the Public Health Act 1848 took six years after Edwin Chadwick’s Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain was published in 1842.

This Chadwick’s Report had a social perspective, and it was the first time that environmental factors were linked to health, political stability, and morality. Chadwick’s proposals used medical data provided by physicians and, more importantly, established links between disease and urban squalor. He put forward a system of sewerage, drainage, and continuous water supply, a massive network of underground pipes. But the report was considered too radical and, as Goodland points out, Dickens’s view was that this was not a revolution that the British public, or, finally, Dickens himself, was prepared to tolerate (96). The fact is that Dickens was not very keen on Chadwick, who many citizens still linked with the heartless orthodoxy of the New Poor Law.

A clear example of this disagreement with Chadwick was Dickens’s 1851 speech, delivered on behalf of the Metropolitan Sanitary Association, which did not support Chadwick’s views on the matter. This association was created to soften hostility toward centralization, to which Dickens was not a strict opponent. Dickens strongly defended the need for sanitary reform and, as he said in such speech in 1851, he considered that this reform should “precede all other Social

Reforms” (Charles Dickens’ Speech to Metropolitan Sanitary Association. 10 May 1851).

Yet those remarks and opinions did not mean that Dickens had become a firm supporter of the state’s duty to intervene in the life of individuals. As Goodland has pointed out, Dickens’s views on the matter are decidedly ambivalent:

Bleak House by no means clearly endorses state tutelage, nor, indeed, any other form of institutionalized authority.... (87)

.... Dickens attempts to produce an ideological synthesis that, were it successful, would articulate a suitably English relation between the individual and the society: one that is (among other desiderata) stable but democratic, rational but compassionate, authoritative but liberal (90).

Caldwell underlines as *Bleak House* is the novel that most explicitly takes on the issue of contagious disease (348). This is notably clear in the ruinous place known as Tom-All-Alone’s, the slum area where the infection grows inexorably, and which clearly describes urban poverty. The aforementioned character Jo lives in Tom-All-Alone’s, in Dickens’s words where “Jo has not yet died” (*Bleak House* 165).

Tom-All-Alone’s borough, as depicted by Dickens, also shows Dickens’s view on how uncontrolled industrialisation can contribute to poverty and disease. We can compare such sentiment with what is happening today. Industrialisation has always been linked to wealth and improvement of living standards, but it also entails many inconveniences. Nowadays, the most dangerous ones are related to how industrialisation affects the environment and ultimately contributes to climate change. Mgbemene et al. have analysed this specific issue:

Industrialization not only involves technological innovations, it also involves economic and social transformation of the human society. With industrialization come opportunities as well as challenges. The challenges include coping with higher temperatures, extreme weather conditions, changing human lifestyles and changing philosophies. Due to these challenges, industrialization must take into account climate change and its consequences. For example, changing human lifestyles and philosophies have major impacts on environment and this has to be considered.

As Industrialisation creates climate change, which eventually leads to poverty, it can be concluded that Dickens’s views in the 19th century were right and apply contemporarily. In this regard, a recent comprehensive report of the OCDE states that:

Climate change is a serious risk to poverty reduction and threatens to undo decades of development efforts. As the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development states, “the adverse effects of climate change are already evident, natural disasters are more frequent and more devastating and developing countries more vulnerable.

It is also noteworthy the objective of the above report which was “to contribute to a global dialogue on how to mainstream and integrate adaptation to climate change into poverty reduction efforts. We hope this will move the discussion further towards action”.

Society is indeed raising awareness of the matter. As McCarthy has underlined in an article written in the context of the Global Citizen organisation, different stratus of this society such as actor Leonardo DiCaprio, Pope Francis, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, have something in common which is that “They’ve all used their platforms to highlight the link between poverty and climate change—and said we can't solve one without addressing the other”.⁴

Nevertheless, it would be unfair to fully link industrialisation to poverty without considering many positive aspects that such industrial development provides to countries. In a thorough report, Alvarez et al. have identified the alleviating effect that international industrialisation provides in some countries:

Despite decades of effort, abject poverty remains a serious problem in many countries around the world. The effects of five approaches to poverty alleviation—foreign aid, microfinance, social entrepreneurship, base of the pyramid initiatives, and the establishment of property rights among the abjectly poor—are briefly reviewed. While each of these approaches has some benefits, none have fulfilled their promise of poverty alleviation. Ironically, as these efforts have gone forward, international industrialization has had a more significant impact on poverty alleviation in at least some countries.

The latter reflection is a good example of how Dickens overcame his period. Dickens’s versatility led scholars of the mid-twentieth century to embrace him as a “contemporary” (Langland 396). Similar to this opinion, Ada Nisbet states that “The twentieth century is more like Dickens’ world than the nineteenth” (qtd in Langland 396). Recent cultural studies critics have found in Dickens’s novels an immense tapestry of a world undergoing rapid social and intellectual change (Langland 396).

⁴ McCarthy points out that Pope Francis has called the global failure to act on climate change “a brutal act of injustice toward the poor,” while DiCaprio wisely pointed out “the environment and the fight for the world’s poor are inherently linked.” Philip Alston, the UN rapporteur, said in 2019 that a “climate apartheid” is right around the corner.

3.3 *Hard Times*

Hard Times was first published in 1854 and deals with the problems faced by the industrial working class. The novel assesses English society, and its goal was to underline the economic social pressures at that time by depicting the social consequences of urbanisation and industrialisation. It was set in Coketown, a Victorian industrial fictitious city that resembled Manchester.

The novel was influenced by Thomas Carlyle's views⁵, in particular regarding social and utilitarianism criticism. Actually, the full title of the novel was *Hard Times – For These Times*, which referred to Carlyle's essay of 1829 *Signs of the Times*.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens shows his interest in industrial topical issues, such as strikes, where Simmons has pointed out that his attitude toward the trade unions and the strike in the novel is clearly no more sympathetic than his attitude toward the factory-owner and banker character, Josiah Bounderby. Another relevant topic dealt with by the novel was middle-class education, portrayed by the characters Tom and Louisa Gradgrind (348).

Hard Times has been considered by scholars one of Dickens's harshest accusations of the mid-19th Century industrial practices and their dehumanizing effects.

a) Criticism to utilitarianism

One of the main features of *Hard Times* is its criticism of the utilitarian doctrine. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) is considered the father of Utilitarianism or Benthamism. The phrase "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" represents the heart of this doctrine. If we compare this sentence with the one attributed by many authors (Slater) to Dickens, when he explains the theme of this novel "My satire is against those who see figures and averages, and nothing else", it can be easily identified as Dickens's critic towards utilitarianism. The main character of the novel is Thomas Gradgrind, a "fanatic of the demonstrable fact" who uses this utilitarian approach based on factual data to raise his children,

⁵ Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) was a Scottish historian and essayist. He was clearly against the oppression of workers in industrial society but was nostalgic about feudalism and sceptical of democracy.

Tom and Louisa. This kind of education and values lead them to ruin their lives proving that fancy and imagination, elements which utilitarianism despises, were essential for human happiness.

Although Utilitarianism could be linked to the self-interest principle, a more detailed and broad definition, which I find relevant to better comprehend the concept and distinguish it from pure selfishness, is provided by Driver in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (SEP)*:

Utilitarianism is generally held to be the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the best. There are many ways to spell out this general claim. One thing to note is that the theory is a form of consequentialism: the right action is understood entirely in terms of consequences produced. What distinguishes utilitarianism from egoism has to do with the scope of the relevant consequences. On the utilitarian view one ought to maximize the overall good — that is, consider the good of others as well as one's own good.

Even though Dickens and Carlyle shared criticism on Utilitarianism, there was an important difference which has been identified by Diniejko:

Dickens echoes many of Carlyle's arguments against the power of social machinery and materialist consciousness. However, contrary to Carlyle, Dickens shows that the positive aspects of human nature are not easily destroyed. Fancy, imagination, compassion and hope do not disappear completely. They are preserved in such characters as Sissy, Rachael and Sleary. Even Mr. Gradgrind revealed eventually some traces of humanness.

This link with imagination is found in *Hard Times*. The novel starts in a school that uses a utilitarian approach in education, which leads students to become young adults with neglected imaginations due to an over-emphasis on facts instead of using a more imaginative method. However, as John R. Harrison has indicated in his article on the matter, the target of Dickens's criticism was, rather than Bentham's Utilitarianism, the crude utilitarianism ideas by Benthamite Philosophical Radicals. These tended to dominate social, political, and economic thinking and policy, at the time that *Hard Times* was written, which was more related to the philosophy of the two main characters (Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby) in which the Coketown "Hands" (workforce) are just commodities, "something" to work and to be paid (Harrison, 124).

To conclude, it is significant to underline that despite Dickens's criticism about utilitarianism, he cannot provide a solid alternative to it, or in Wheeler's words, "in place of Utilitarianism, Dickens can offer only good-heartedness,

individual charity, and Sleary's horse-riding. He was better equipped to examine the symptoms of the disease than to suggest a possible cure" (qtd. in Diniejko). In that regard, Harrison wondered whether fiction should be obliged to offer specific remedies for the problems that it addresses, and added that, in any case, *Hard Times* suggests many reforms in Coketown values, both material and immaterial, that if not stated explicitly, are at least implied (133).

b) Consequences of urbanisation and industrialisation

As mentioned before, the setting of *Hard Times* is in Coketown, an invented industrial English town. Coketown includes utilitarian elements, and its theme is described in the novel as the "triumph of fact" (37), being the reliability in facts one of the main utilitarian features. Harrison has underlined how this theme is further developed in the novel "by a pattern of ideas and images relating to the inflexible practice of basing all judgements and actions on arithmetical and statistical calculation" (121).

As pointed out by Diniejko, Coketown's residents lack individuality and are the outcome of a materialistic and inhuman society. The town predicts the appearance of an evil urban society based on anonymity, rationalism, and dehumanisation. Dickens's novel, continues the same author, anticipated the future debates concerning anti-pollution legislation, intelligent town-planning, health and safety measures in factories.

Potential dehumanisation might be precisely one of the main goals sought by Dickens in *Hard Times* which can sadly take humans to become like machines. Dehumanisation would be achieved by the mechanizing effects of industrialization, intensified by the philosophy of rational self-interest and the lack of imagination.

This matter is actually quite relevant since it shows how Dickens foresaw a problem that is happening nowadays. In present times, society is facing a situation in which children have traded playing in the street alongside other children with playing on their own as they are increasingly hooked on electronic devices. The worst part is that when they reach adulthood a similar issue is seen, and it is worrying to witness that people are reducing intercommunication with each other and, instead, they are looking at their mobile phones to text or to read

messages. It is very common to see people in restaurants or families in joint celebrations stop talking to check their mobile phones. This could be the kind of evolution feared by Dickens when he warned about the dehumanization of society and the growing importance of machinery.

Perhaps it is sensible enough to regard Dickens's views as contemporary. In a very interesting article titled *Being Intelligent with Artificial Intelligence*, Gautam underlines the growing adoption of artificial intelligence in enterprises, which has gone up from 10 percent in 2015 to 25 percent in 2018 and 37 percent in 2019.⁶ He rightly adds that "It is clear that artificial intelligence does surpass average human competencies in select parts of jobs. But clearly, does not supplant human dexterity of comparisons beyond the boundaries of algorithms" (1).

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed to highlight the role of Charles Dickens as an urban novelist and as a commentator of the society in which he lived. That was something that Dickens managed to show through many of his novels.

Due to his huge amount of literary work, this paper has focused on three novels, in which a number of social matters were voiced by Dickens, including, health conditions, administrative incompetence, and the shortcomings of the Poor Laws. These specific problems are related to broader elements of the Victorian period such as the Industrial Revolution and the growth of cities, towns and their population. These were questions addressed in the so-called "condition of England" novels written during that period which gave a picture, sometimes a dark one, of the impact of modernization on society.

The debates raised on these matters, regarding social and moral reform, were often times sparked thanks to the popularity of these novels. It is evidence of the strong political and ethical potential that literature may have. In this regard, Dickens can also be featured as an opinion-forming writer who managed to be very accessible to readers.

The three novels analysed in this paper (*Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, and *Hard Times*) show an overall accuracy in the description of the reality of the above-mentioned social matters during the Victorian era. However, this should

⁶ Artificial Intelligence (AI) is defined as the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings.

not lead us to forget that the Victorian period was also a bright period in which many positive aspects, like social and political reforms, entailed improvement in the lives of citizens.

In his writing, Dickens was influenced by some of his experiences at an early age, in particular the fact that he was a worker when he was only twelve years old and that his father was simultaneously imprisoned.

While critics have noted Dickens's sharpness in criticising social matters, they have also noted that he has not provided or suggested solutions for them. Nevertheless, it can be argued whether the goal of literature should be to provide solutions. What Dickens successfully achieved was to raise awareness among society about certain serious problems affecting the population.

This effect was achieved despite the perception of reality described by Dickens may have been diverted or unfocused, due to his style of writing, so often covered with exaggeration, satire, and caricature. Something similar to what happened to his characters, who often became mere grotesque distortions of reality.

Two main issues in *Oliver Twist* have been studied in this paper:

Firstly, the new administrative approach, which was created by the New Poor Law, enacted in 1834. The new law withheld support from the newly so-called undeserving poor who were not considered to be genuinely in need. The workhouses were a key element of the new law, a place with a rather low standard of living, and those ones who were in need of relief had no choice but to accept it as the relief outside the workhouse was forbidden.

Families were also separated in the workhouses, a situation which reminds us of the current distress suffered by mothers, fathers, and children who are taken apart due to the invasion of Ukraine. A situation that, as pointed out in the above-mentioned New York Times article have led to many Ukrainians to feel that their "initial enthusiasm was dissolved into dismay" (Jordan).

These circumstances, among other reasons, made people see workhouses as a sort of prison system where the most vulnerable ones in society were kept.

Dickens's view, through *Oliver Twist*, on both elements, the New Poor Law and the Workhouses, constituted the second issue studied. While Dickens's fictional response in *Oliver Twist* to the New Poor Law could have

been complicated and imprecise, the one related to the workhouses was quite aligned with the society of his time where these places were considered, as mentioned before, specially marked for social exclusion.

A second Dickens's novel studied in this paper was *Bleak House*, a novel that succeeded in showing Dickens's purpose to influence Parliament by touching public conscience and arousing public indignation.

The analysis of this novel and its characters has allowed identifying three main social issues described by Dickens, namely the abuses of the Chancery and its administrative incompetence, the shortcomings of organised philanthropy, and the need for sanitary reform.

Regarding the Chancery, Dickens shared the negative view broadly spread among public opinion at that time. This circumstance, among others, may have strengthened the influence of the novel over the system of that time and triggered a process of reform which eventually, although not in the short term, led to achieving a reform of the Institution. This reform's first step took place in 1867 (fourteen years after the novel was written), when a remedial act was passed and, ultimately, in 1873 with the securement of the Supreme Court of Judicature Act.

As to philanthropy, Dickens's interest was to praise those people who really wished to help the ones in need without boasting about it, thus doing it for the sake of the poor, not with selfish intentions. With this idea, Dickens sort of intervened in the thrilling debate raised in the Victorian society about organised charity or philanthropy, as alternatives to state intervention. A combined and balanced approach seems to be the best option for society, getting the most of both systems (organised charity or state intervention) and complementing each other.

The impact of disease was especially serious in the overcrowded slums of the urban poor during the Victorian Period. Slum areas, like the famous Tom-all-Alone's described in the novel, are where some characters of *Bleak House* lived and that are used by Dickens to show the need to improve these living conditions.

Dickens strongly linked this matter to uncontrolled industrialization and how it leads to poverty and disease. It is noteworthy how Dickens depicted a situation that still usually happens at the present time, thus overcoming his own

period and enhancing his “contemporary” role. Although industrialization is absolutely necessary to keep modern life to good standards, uncontrolled industrial development also contributes to climate change which many studies have proved to have a stronger impact in non-developed countries and eventually increase poverty in the world by creating unwanted side effects as slums in big cities or displacement of population to camps.

The third and last novel studied was *Hard Times* which is set in an invented Victorian industrial city named Coketown which is covered by utilitarian elements. The novel criticises utilitarianism and mid-19th Century industrial practices and their dehumanizing consequences.

The negative assessment of the utilitarianism doctrine, carried out by Dickens, is mainly conducted via one of the main characters of the novel, Mr. Gradgrind, a passionate defender of the demonstrable facts, thus despising the use of imagination. Nonetheless, Dickens provides some hope since traces of humanity can be found in Mr. Gradgrind when, in his learning process, recognises the evil effects of his strict and narrow-minded approach in others.

However, this is one of the cases used by those who claim that Dickens supposedly lacks providing solutions to the problems addressed in his novels. But it can be also argued that many potential reforms in Coketown, and therefore in utilitarianism values, were suggested, at least implicitly, in *Hard Times*. Solutions which fortunately are provided today thank to initiatives as the UN Sustainable Development Goals.⁷

The second element described by Dickens in *Hard Times* is the one related to the dehumanisation effects caused by mid-19th Century mechanising effects of industrialisation and intensified by the utilitarian approach to the lack of imagination practices.

Here again, Dickens anticipates future periods, since, unfortunately, a neglected use of industrialisation, like the excessive use of electronic devices and of AI, can also lead nowadays to that dehumanisation already described and feared by Dickens in the mid-19th Century.

⁷ The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint developed by the UN to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges the world face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice.

Finally, all these conclusions may lead to a final embracing one, which is the full agreement with Williams's quote at the beginning of this paper which stated how fortunate we are to have Dickens. A fortune provided not only for the Literature world but for the entire world; a good fortune not only for readers in the Victorian period but also for the following generations who followed it.

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