

# Charles Dickens: a Reformist or a Compromiser

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## Abstract

Charles Dickens's fame as a reformer of his society has been discussed by a lot of his critics. However, his novels and letters as well as his own words point out that he tries to strengthen the dominant ideologies of his age and to be in the mainstream of the ruling middle class. Through Althusser's notion of Ideological State Apparatuses, this paper concludes that Dickens can be considered a compromiser and a real Subject of his society who transforms the individuals of his society to docile subjects. As such, he cannot be considered a reformer of his age.

[**Keywords:** Dickens, reformer, compromise, Althusser, ideology]

## Introduction

Dickens was undoubtedly a novelist who penetrated into the hearts of most of people of his age. A writer capable of finding a place in the hearts of people is either a reformer who is familiar with the demanding issues of his age and the ways of tackling those issues, or he is a compromiser who knows how to deal with the society's individuals in equal terms. The aim of the present study is to suggest that Dickens is better to be considered a compromiser – a subject in Althusserian view, who follows the demands of his society, one who has internalized the dominant ideologies of his age and tries to establish those ideas in his society – rather than a reformer. To come to such a view, an overall view of his novels in respect to the characters he creates, as well as his letters seem necessary.

## Discussion

Dickens was familiar with the social problems and issues of his age because of his active participation in social activities and his involvement with different social institutions. It is his familiarity with social issues that lead many critics to consider him a reformer. According to Cunningham, "both in his lifetime and afterwards, Dickens had a reputation as a reformer. Many have credited him with creating the climate of opinion that facilitated the reforms in education, public health, and criminal law that helped to make Britain a safer and less strife-ridden society" (158). These kinds of reforms attributed to him can be considered the new ideas and ideologies that the society seeks

to replace the previous ones as the age is in transition. Every era of transformation brings forward new questions with itself. Therefore, what Dickens does is what the transitory society and the ruling class demands. Literature, especially novel, is a means in the hands of the society. It is actually one of its apparatus, according to Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", which establishes the dominant ideologies. Dickens is exactly in accordance with the dominant ideologies of his age, and his novels try to establish and strengthen them. According to Althusser, novel has the quality of attracting all the subjects of a society. Through its appealing quality, any members of the societies become subjects, even good ones; that is, they become persons "who submit to a higher authority, and are therefore stripped of all" initiatives, one who is docile and obedient (Althusser 701). In its traditional sense, a reformer is a hindrance in the way of the governing class. However, what Dickens achieves in his novels is what the dominant class demands of its society to observe. Because of the transitory nature of the period, social, moral, cultural, religious, educational and economic changes seem necessary. The important point is that, in those aspects that Dickens seems to be a reformer, he only highlights these necessities. That is, even if he seems to appear as a reformer in some cases, on the whole he leads the circumstances in the direction of the dominant class observations and the public good.

Besides, his observation of dominant ideologies leads Dickens to treat equally with most of the individuals of his society. Paroissien believes that "corresponding with people from every quarter of society on equal terms represents one of the defining features of Dickens's correspondence" (39). Actually, he deals in equal terms with everybody in order to penetrate into their hearts. His familiarity with their demands assists him to correspond with them all and to make real subjects out of them. To do this, he shows a kind of empathy with everybody in an optimistic way. If anything happens to people whom he is acquainted with, he feels his own responsibility both to show his concern as well as his advice. There are a lot of such cases in his letters; to give an example, it is worth mentioning that on November 3, 1858, a mill owner was bankrupt; he wrote a letter to him, saying that "pray do not let it cast you down too much. What has happened to you, has happened to many thousands of good and honorable men, and will happen again in like manner, to the end of all things" (quoted by Paroissien 40). Levine claims that "Dickens was the great mythmaker of the new urban middle class, finding in the minutiae of the lives of the shabby genteel, the civil servants, the 'ignobly decent', . . ., great comic patterns of love and community" (160). Dickens never forgets his desire of moralizing. Not only in his letters, but also in his novels, he reveals himself as a moralist, and a moralist can be viewed as a real Subject – an authority who leads the individuals to their subjective roles – and not a reformer.

It is his moralizing quality that makes him deal with culture, especially popular culture, in order to be taken seriously. Dickens's view of novel as a genre which

represents culture is discussed by John. According to her, Dickens "insists that novels, and the popular entertainments they foreground, be taken seriously" (142). To Dickens, popular culture, the kind of dramatic novels he writes for the people who work in factories and industry, provides these people with an imaginary world which leads them back to humanity, as they are mostly dealing with non-human tools and machines. Actually, novels work with moral, educational, as well as entertaining functions. According to John, Dickens's

Ideal of popular 'culture' was of a culture that included high and low alike; rather than a culture that give voice to exclusively working-class concerns. He desired a culture of many rather than a counter-culture of the proletariat, and was careful to avoid supporting aggressively working-class movements like Chartism. He explains the rationale and 'main object' behind *Household Words* as a wish ;to be the comrade and friend of many thousands of people' irrespective of sex, age, or condition, and to bring 'the greater and the lesser in degree' together, prompting 'a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding' between them. (145)

These notions mentioned by Dickens himself and brought forward by John clarify the role of a real Subject who tries to internalize the dominant ideologies among all the individuals of a society by interpellation, in Althusserian sense; that is by addressing the individuals of the society in a special way, and installing in them a specific kind of identity as the members of the society. Through these notions it becomes obvious that Dickens is leading the people to their social functions and obligations. It is the society and its demands that are of significance to him, while humanity has its own value in the sense that becomes a means in his hand. His concern over violence is very important. Since violence should be removed from the society, and since the society demands obedient and docile subjects, Dickens tries to describe the circumstances of violence as disgusting ones; it is in these circumstances that he intrudes and talks with his readers. In these long descriptions, he depicts the whole universe in a hellish situation and fire, smoke, ashes and flame cover the whole surrounding. Of course, these sceneries seem redundant to the plots of the novels, but they are there to reveal the author's thoughts. He associates such violent and hellish situation with bad subjects. In fact, the savages and the cynics are associated with the destroyers of violence and gentility; they are associated with violence; these savages and cynics are either punished or converted to good subjects in his novels. The point is that he is aware of the inherent potentiality of culture, whether high or low. Therefore, he utilizes both in his novels. John believes that in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens provides different kinds of popular cultural modes for Fagin and his boys to corrupt Oliver (147). However, Oliver remains intact by them because he possesses a strong nature. Dickens tries to convey to the reader that these cultural modes work in the direction of health creation, not in the direction of corruption. As John believes, Dickens can be considered a novelist whose base of novel is a

melodrama, one which is "an intensely emotional genre in which a passion felt is a passion expressed" (147), and in which the good ends happily and the bad unhappily. This use of melodrama has also its own social function. Dickens employs it to strengthen the pillars of his society. It has its own emotional, moral and populist tendencies, and hence, is useful for Dickens's purpose.

Accordingly, what Dickens portrays and propagandizes is creating earnest young gentlemen such as Nicholas Nickleby, Martin Chuzzlewith, David Copperfield, Tom Sawyer, Oliver Twist and Pip, and angelic young women such as Kate Nickleby, Rose Maylie, Ruth Pinch, Florence Dombey, Agnes Wickfield, Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit. He observes the Victorian culture in respect to family, according to which, "men belonged to the world of work, women to the domestic world, and home was to be a haven for men from the heartless realities of work" (McKnight 187). In this respect, although in very rare cases, it is felt that Dickens blurs gender roles, he obviously observes the dominant gender norms within the social context. Therefore, most of his female characters are portrayed as embodying the passive and selfless traits of the angel in the house, and if they are depicted assertively, they are given monstrous qualities because "assertiveness is a male trait and therefore seems unnatural when adopted by a female who is supposed to be angelic" (McKnight 192). Dickens punishes assertive and monstrous women such as Miss Havisham, Mrs. Joe, Miss Barbary, Mrs. Nickleby and Mrs. Skewton to revenge them for neglecting their own Victorian norms of motherhood and being bad subjects of the society. Besides, Dickens employs other Ideological State Apparatuses in his own novels to internalize dominant ideologies. According to Miller, "embodied in the prison, the workhouse, the factory, the school, discipline became, quite precisely a topic of Dickensian representation" (123). These are Ideological State Apparatuses, the means of transforming individuals into docile subjects. In this respect, Dickens's heroes become those like Oliver Twist who should turn and submit themselves to the demands of the middle-class society. Oliver is promised to "access to the culture represented by the books in his [Mr. Brownlow's] library." It is Mr. Brownlow's books that will create an obedient subject from Oliver by "his absolute submission to the norms, protocols, and regulations of the middle-class family" (Miller 124). It is worth mentioning that education and family, as two of major Ideological State Apparatuses, play important lines in Dickens's novels, and the characters who have access to them are rewarded by Dickens.

## **Conclusion**

Dickens's ability in understanding the Victorian age and its spirit as well as its demands makes him such a great novelist that some critics consider him a reformer of his own age. However, the prevailing trait in his novels is his concern with the individuals' social functions. What he tries to achieve is teaching his readers to be good

civilized people. Therefore, he is much concerned with home, family, close personal ties, honesty, charity, and high standards of morality in his novels. He deals with these themes in order to lead the people to their social obligations. To do this he depicts bad characters as individuals who are isolated, withdrawn, vulnerable and passive, and if they are shown active, their activity is depicted as demonic and victimizing; they are shown friendless as well as identity-less because Dickens wants to make his readers not sympathize with them but hate them. What he desires to absorb his readers is the internalization of the dominant ideologies of the middle class. Along with other mentioned qualities discussed, the middle class tries to internalize the idea of self-help and self-made man as well as competition in the society, and tries to deal with poverty as a sign of sin in people. Although many critics consider Dickens as a reformer because of his dealing with poverty in his novels, this dealing is in complete accordance with the internalization of the idea of self-made man. All his successful characters reveal the point. However, his own words in *Methodist Magazine* in 1863 are most revealing: "If a man does not succeed, it is his own fault" (885). As such, he is better to be considered a compromiser, a real Subject, who compromises with the ruling class and interpellates the individuals of his society to make real subjects out of them.

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