The Life And Works Of Charles Dickens Essay, Research Paper

The Works and Life of Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was a very well known and loved author for his time. Though his stories contained complex language and include many adult points and key ideas. Most of his works assume the view of a young person growing up. His novels contain many key insights which can only be fully appreciated by those who have already grown up, or those who are in the process of growth. “In his enormous body of works, Dickens combined masterly storytelling, humor, pathos, and irony with sharp social criticism and an acute observation of people and places, both real and imagined” (Sundell). Most of Dickens? works have the main character as a young boy facing the hardships of growing up in a poor family or having the life of a pauper in a big city. In these tales, though at times fictional, Dickens seems to portray his life as a child through his books. The time period about which Dickens? books were written is the mid nineteenth century. They were written as if through the eyes of a child no more than twelve years old. The response that the reader may have to this situation is that of a warm and understanding feeling. The joy and bliss of the main character is rarely showed; the main attitude is the overwhelming complexity of situations that a boy of that age must face. The reader?s reaction to this may be to feel depressed because Dickens? has not showed more blissful times in the lives of his main characters. In the ending, however, Dickens? always seems to leave the reader with a warm feeling since the last scenes are usually happy. The personal life that Dickens had when growing up must have been tough due to the harsh tone used in describing the growing up of his characters.

Dickens? life was that of a well respected author and novelist. Growing up with a childhood of poverty, Dickens became one of the most famous and best loved authors of his time. Dickens was born on February 7, 1812 in Portsmouth, yet spent most of his childhood in London and Kent. He started school at the age of nine, but his education was soon halted when his father was incarcerated for debt in 1824. Feeling utterly humiliated, Dickens was forced to support himself working in a shoe-polish factory. Later, Charles described his youth in the novel David Copperfield with little change from what had occurred in his own life. Between the years of 1824 and 1826, Dickens again attended school, though he was for the most part self-educated. In the year of 1827, Dickens took a job as a legal clerk. Soon, learning short-hand, Dickens began to interview the courts of parliament where he adapted the technique of quickly describing situations in great detail which lead to his creative writing later in his life. In December of 1833, Dickens published the first of many sketches of daily life in London called the Sketches by Boz. Later, in 1836, Dickens would go on to publish his first comic narrative The Pickwick Papers. The success of his first novel made Dickens famous. Subsequently, Dickens maintained his fame with a constant stream of novels. Composing traveling books, editing weekly periodicals, administering charitable organizations, and social reforms, Dickens became very well known. In 1842, he lectured in the United States in favor of an international opposition to slavery soon to be followed by the publication of A Christmas Carol, an ever-popular children?s story. Well known throughout America and England, Dickens life was shadowed by domestic unhappiness. He later divorced his wife in 1858. In spite of this, Dickens went on to help in a major stage production performed for Queen Victoria in 1851. Dickens continued to write until his death on June 9, 1870, leaving behind ten children. He was buried in the Westminster Abbey five days later where his grave remains today. (Sundell)

As an international favorite, Dickens has been praised and critiqued many times regarding his works. During the later nineteenth century near the height of Dickens? popularity as an author, his novels were often critiqued regarding his unusual views. Dickens was also criticized for the complexity and publishing errors in his works, but was complemented on the creativity of his plots. Ochojski stated that “Dickens often portrays to the reader too many scenes of darkness and at times, despair” (Ochojski). Sir Walter Scott wrote

No character, no matter how minor, appears on the scene without being fully described, not only as to physical appearance, but as to the clothing he wears. Dickens also excels in the short but evocative description of places; in Hard Times note the portrayal of the murky streets and factories of Coketown and of its blighted wasteland-like countryside. (qtd. in Ochojski)

In spite of the controversy, one thing was always said: “Dickens works are fantastic” (Sundell). Dickens? main flaw throughout most of his novels is that he rarely shows signs of light and bliss. Rather, “[he] creates more than half of his scenes in darkness and misty weather in unlit streets or graveyards” as critiqued later by Scott (Ochojski). It seems that most critiques seem to focus of Dickens? novel Hard Times which may be the dreariest of his works. In Dickens? works, especially Hard Times, Dickens seems to make many structural errors. In commenting on these errors, John Butts and Kathleen Tillotison remark:

This technique brought on a loose, episodic treatment with a vast, intricate plot, numerous characters and much repetition to jog the reader’s memory. Instead of the whole novel slowly building to a real climax, each part had to have a little climax of its own. (Ochojski)

In this critique, it is stated that the reader?s memory is jogged, meaning that at times during his novels, Dickens creates confusing pictures and very confusing plots and therefore reminds his readers of the details in order to follow the plot. As time passed and more novels were written, a reader would notice that Dickens grew increasingly bitter with each novel. “His criticism of society became more radical, his satire more biting and less sweetened by humor” (Ochojski). This may have been the cause of his eminent divorce from his wife, and the constant questioning of his bitter childhood by the media. (Sundell) As Dickens neared his death, he seemed even more sad and bitter in his writings. Of course, the more bitter and less humorous he became, the more he was critiqued by his readers. When comparing his first writings and his last writings, Paul Ochojski states that “In his early novels, society itself is not evil; it is only some people who are bad?” (Ochojski). Ochojski is showing the difference between Dickens? first novels where society was not evil, and later when society was portrayed as evil and corrupting. Every reader?s opinion is different based on individual interpretation which will cause supporting or criticizing Dickens? works. (Ochojski)

Dickens? works seem to be very complex and difficult to understand as well. The complex vocabulary in itself creates a huge burden on the reader if they are not familiar with Old-English vocabulary. Phrases like “?but as the Artful drew forth the five-pound note at that instant, it is doubtful whether the sally? awakened his merriment” (Dickens, Oliver Twist 163) were common in reading his works. Furthermore, Dickens? works are very sophisticated with difficult plots. The plot in Dickens? Great Expectations, for example, was difficult to understand because of the differing locations and the multiple interactions of the characters throughout the work. As seen in Oliver Twist, Dickens? works may be difficult to follow, but are also easy to relate to, since they come from the view point of someone growing up. The hardships and troubles that his main characters portray are at times identifiable with those problems faced by today?s youth. Other times though, the problems are so outdated that someone of our time would not comprehend these troubles. For example, in Dickens? Oliver Twist, Oliver was forced to grow up in a “poor house” where today there are no such institutions. Dickens? novels are not works that can be read with ease. By contrast, Dickens? works all end with a moral which is very apparent by the time the reader has reached the end if following closely. As with Oliver Twist, for example, the moral of always telling the truth becomes an obvious theme.

Dickens? works allow an individual to find significance in the modern world by expressing morals that will never become outdated. The morals of the two stories Oliver Twist and Great Expectations would express the need to be always truthful and, to never give up on your dreams. These two themes are obviously applicable to today?s society. In Oliver Twist, Oliver is a pauper who is faced with many difficult situations. Growing up in a “poor house,” Oliver is sold as a servant after begging for food. Once sold, Oliver finds himself working in a funeral home where he is faced with the difficulty of distrust and lack of faith in him by his boss. Forced to make a decision, Oliver eventually divulges the truth about the robbery only later to be rewarded with adoption to a loving family. The reward for being truthful becomes very apparent in this work as shown when the narrator said “How Mr. Brownlow went on, from day to day, filling the mind of his adopted child with stores of knowledge, and becoming attached to him more and more?” (Dickens, Oliver Twist 479). This quotation shows the love and attachment that Mr. Brownlow, his adopted father, has toward Oliver. If Oliver hadn?t told the truth about the robbery, Sikes (the robber) would have never been caught and Oliver would have never had the chance to be adopted. He would most likely have ended up back in the poor house or a pauper for the rest of his life without an education. A stylistic element that often appears in Oliver Twist is the need to make moral choices such as whether it is correct to tell the truth, or better to keep quiet. Oliver made his choice by telling people the truth about the robbery.

Pip, the main character in Great Expectations states the following theme to the reader: one should never give up on their dreams. Pip, like Oliver Twist, grows up in poverty from a poor family and is raised by his sister and her husband. Growing up in London, Pip lives with constant guilt, justified or not, for every occurrence in his life. He later meets a lady by the name of Estella, and never gives up loving her in spite of her recalcitrance, finally wining her love in the end. Plagued by the constant feeling of guilt from his and other?s actions, Pip is not very self-confident. With the help of many friends, Pip learns to impress Estella and she is finally won over. Great Expectations is a significant title to the novel because Pip always carried great expectations, and he rarely gave up on them quickly. The moral of never giving up hope is valid even today. Though we often lose hope in our dreams, we should always try to keep from giving up on them. This theme of the novel is apparent when Pip?s dreams with Estella come true. Pip says: “I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place? I saw no shadow of another parting from her” (Dickens, Great Expectations 493). This theme is apparent here for a few reasons. The first being that the reoccurring element, the shadows of guilt are gone. Secondly, Pip is now walking away with his hope that became a reality. This is a very important moral to be learned because the reader should realize that their hopes can always become realities if they “hang onto them.” A stylistic element that occurs throughout the novel is that of self-doubt. This element helps portray to the reader the personal feelings of Pip as a character. The reader better understands the dilemmas which Pip must face when his feelings are expressed. The reason for so much guilt and self-doubt might be to show how Pip feels a sense of responsibility for everything that happens in his life. Dickens? themes apply to today?s society on a personal level, or for society as a whole.

Though Dickens attempts to make these themes obvious and critical to the end, he also disguises it so that it may not be bluntly stated. After this Author project is over, I would like to pursue other novels by Charles Dickens, but not on an academic level. Charles Dickens? novels are not meant to be read with speed, they are meant to be read slowly with special attention to detail. They are very difficult, and for that reason I would like to read Charles Dickens? novels as a personal goal. I would, however, read then when I have some free time and can pay special attention to detail. I would strongly recommend Charles Dickens to an adult, but it would be not easy for those without academic achievements and a high vocabulary. I would recommend these novels to a teacher in hopes that they could find joy out of the lessons learned throughout. Dickens should not be added to the curriculum due to the fact that his writings are very complex and would be troublesome to some readers. These works became classics because they express important morals and describe excellent details of life in those times. I would not recommend Charles Dickens to next year?s author project students because his works are very complex.