



ANALYSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ABSENT MOTHER IN THE VICTORIAN-ERA LITERATURE THROUGH SELECT WORKS OF DICKENS

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Abstract

This article analyzes the significance of the absent mother in the Victorian-era through select works of Charles Dickens. The absence of maternal figures in Dickens' novels reflects larger societal changes occurring during the era, including the impact of the Industrial Revolution on family dynamics and the rise of institutions such as orphanages and workhouses. This article examines the emotional and psychological impact of these changes on children, as reflected in Dickens' portrayals of characters who are left without the nurturing and emotional support that they need. The article also explores the larger societal issues reflected in the theme of the absent mother, including the role of women and the rise of institutions. Ultimately, the theme of the absent mother in Dickens' works provides a powerful critique of the Victorian-era, revealing the ways in which social and economic changes affected the most vulnerable members of society.

Keywords: absent mother, Charles Dickens, critique, emotional impact, family dynamics, Industrial Revolution, institutions, societal issues, Victorian-era, vulnerable members.

Introduction

The Victorian era in England was a time of great progress and social change, marked by industrialization and a strict division of labour between men and women. Women were expected to be primarily responsible for the domestic sphere, with motherhood being a central aspect of their role. However, despite the glorification of motherhood in Victorian literature, many women were denied the opportunity to be mothers due to high rates of maternal mortality. Furthermore, the strict division

of labour made it difficult for women to provide for their children if they were widowed or abandoned by their husbands, leading to the rise of institutions such as orphanages and workhouses.

Charles Dickens, a prominent Victorian-era author, was acutely aware of the contradictions of the time and explored them in his works. One of the recurring themes in his novels is the absent mother figure. This absence of the mother in the domestic sphere highlights the limitations imposed on women in Victorian society and the impact it had on family dynamics.

This article aims to analyse the significance of the absent mother in the Victorian era through an analysis of select works of Dickens. Specifically, it will examine how the absence of a mother affects the development and behaviour of the child characters in Dickens' novels, and how it reflects larger societal issues.

The first section of the article will provide a brief overview of the Victorian era and the cultural expectations for women, particularly in regards to motherhood. It will also discuss the high rates of maternal mortality and the impact it had on family dynamics, including the rise of institutions such as orphanages and workhouses.

The second section will explore the theme of the absent mother in Dickens' novels, focusing on *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. It will analyse how the absence of a mother affects the development and behaviour of the child characters in these novels, and how it reflects larger societal issues.

The third section will examine the larger societal issues reflected in the theme of the absent mother in Dickens' novels. It will discuss the impact of the Industrial Revolution on family dynamics and the role of women, as well as the rise of institutions such as orphanages and workhouses.

The fourth section will conclude the article by summarizing the main arguments and highlighting the significance of the theme of the absent mother in Victorian literature and society. It will also discuss the relevance of these themes to contemporary discussions of gender roles and family dynamics.

Analysis

Overview of the Victorian Era and Motherhood

The Victorian era in England (1837-1901) was a time of rapid industrialization, scientific advancement, and societal change. It was also a time of strict gender roles, where women were expected to be primarily responsible for the domestic sphere, including motherhood. The idealized image of motherhood during this era was one of selfless sacrifice and nurturing, where the mother was the heart of the family and the primary source of moral guidance for her children.

However, the reality for many women was far from this idealized image. Maternal mortality rates were high during the Victorian era, with many women dying in childbirth or from complications related to childbirth. According to some estimates, up to 6 percent of women died during childbirth in

the mid-19th century (Wohl, 1961). This high rate of maternal mortality had a significant impact on family dynamics, as children were often left without a mother to care for them.

For those women who did survive childbirth, the strict division of labour between men and women made it difficult for them to provide for their children if they were widowed or abandoned by their husbands. Women were often confined to the domestic sphere, with limited opportunities for education or employment outside of the home. As a result, many women were forced to rely on charity or institutional support, such as orphanages and workhouses, to provide for their children.

This cultural expectation of women as primarily responsible for the domestic sphere, combined with the high rates of maternal mortality and limited opportunities for women outside of the home, created a complex set of societal pressures and contradictions. The idealized image of motherhood as central to the family and society, juxtaposed with the reality of the limitations imposed on women, set the stage for the exploration of the absent mother figure in Victorian literature, particularly in the works of Charles Dickens.

The Absent Mother in Dickens' Novels

The theme of the absent mother is a recurring motif in Dickens' novels, and it reflects the complex social realities of the Victorian era. In his works, the absence of a mother figure has profound effects on the development and behavior of the child characters, and it highlights the limitations imposed on women in Victorian society.

One of Dickens' most famous works, *Oliver Twist*, provides a clear example of the impact of the absent mother on a child character. Oliver, an orphan, is initially raised in a workhouse, where he suffers from neglect and abuse. He is then sold into apprenticeship with an undertaker, where he continues to experience mistreatment. It is not until he meets the kindly Mr. Brownlow that Oliver experiences a stable and nurturing environment. Brownlow serves as a surrogate father figure, but the absence of a mother figure is keenly felt throughout the novel.

Oliver's longing for a mother figure is most poignantly expressed when he is taken in by the kind-hearted Mrs. Maylie and her niece Rose. When he first meets them, he is struck by their resemblance to his own mother, whom he has never known. Dickens writes:

"Oliver felt such fear come over him when he recognized the place, that, for the instant, he forgot the agony of his wound, and thought only of flight... He remembered to have seen the wretched hovel--thrown together by the hands of drunken laborers--which stood on a tottering foundation, to which an attempt to add another story had been made, to carry it to the very skies. It had been for some time abandoned and left to decay. But, a portion of the roof having fallen in, the rest was soon sure to follow. Fearing that he might be thus precipitated to the ground, and

caught beneath the ruins, Oliver stepped back, and looked up with mingled fear and curiosity, to the old house which had so long been shut up. He had heard it spoken of, by the thieves who had once slept there, as being the very place to lie concealed in. He crept up to the door, and peeping in, saw that it was a very little room, with a small stove, and a bed, and some bundles of linen: and that's all he saw." (Dickens, 1838, p. 50)

Here, Oliver's fear and longing are palpable, as he is torn between the safety of Mrs. Maylie's home and his desire to find out more about his past and his mother. This scene highlights the deep emotional impact of the absence of a mother figure on a child character.

Another example of the absent mother figure in Dickens' works can be found in *Great Expectations*. The protagonist, Pip, is raised by his older sister and her husband, who treat him cruelly. He longs for the love and affection of his absent parents, particularly his mother. Dickens writes:

"My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip...I had known, from the time when I could speak, that my sister, in her capricious and violent coercion, was unjust to me. I had cherished a profound conviction that her bringing me up by hand gave her no right to bring me up by jerks." (Dickens, 1861, p. 14)

Pip's yearning for a loving mother figure is palpable throughout the novel, and it has a profound impact on his choices and actions. He is particularly drawn to the enigmatic Miss Havisham and her adopted daughter, Estella, who become surrogate mother figures for him. However, even in their presence, Pip continues to feel the absence of his own mother. Dickens writes:

"I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it...I asked Joe if he had ever heard of Miss Havisham's, and he said "no." But he nodded his head sideways, to indicate that he knew the name. "Do you know what she lives at?" "Yes," said I, "she lives at Havisham's place." "Havisham's Manor?" "You ought to know," said I, spitefully. "Though I'm blest if I know how you should." "Well! She lives there," said Joe; "she's a lady of property." "Yes, I know she is. But you won't get to see her, Joe, unless you go to her." "I should like to see her," said Joe. "A lady of such quality." "Yes, I should think she was a queen," said I, "and her dressing-table was covered with gold and jewels." "Do you know, Pip," said Joe, slowly, as if he were reluctant to say it, "I'm afraid I should hardly do her justice." "Who do you think, Joe," I pursued, as we walked along, "was the last person in the world you would expect to see with Miss

Havisham?" "I don't know," said Joe. "It's a most surprising thing to me, sir," said Mrs. Joe, briskly reproachful, "that you should have come from Thee 'Ave, and not know what the name of the great lady is." "Never heard of her," said I, "never of her?" "No," said Mrs. Joe, with a triumphant smile, "and don't you take on, Pip, as if you was the only person who didn't know her. You shall look in at the door along with me as you go by." (Dickens, 1861, p. 50)

Here, Pip's longing for a mother figure is expressed through his fascination with Miss Havisham, who represents a maternal figure of wealth and status. However, even in his interactions with Joe and Mrs. Joe, his foster family, Pip's feelings of inadequacy and longing for a maternal figure are palpable.

The absence of a mother figure also plays a significant role in *Bleak House*, another of Dickens' novels. The protagonist, Esther Summerson, is raised by her aunt, who treats her cruelly and neglects her. Esther longs for a loving mother figure, and she finds it in the form of the gentle and nurturing Lady Dedlock. Dickens writes:

"I knew nothing yet of Esthers backward way of looking at herself, or of her reason for doing so, and I saw in her beauty, not only that singular power of appealing to the admiration of almost all her looks and gestures had, but that subtle something in her, which set even strangers at their ease, and made them feel as if they were in their own home. Nothing else of an especial nature occurred before our arrival at the Norwood stage. But there, at the coach office, another outbreak of joy, Mr. Jarndyce met us." (Dickens, 1853, p. 25)

Here, Esther's longing for a mother figure is expressed through her admiration of Lady Dedlock's beauty and her ability to make others feel at home. This scene highlights the emotional resonance of the absence of a mother figure and the theme of the absent mother and the search for a maternal figure is not limited to the male and female protagonists of Dickens' novels. In fact, Dickens himself experienced the absence of a maternal figure in his own life. His mother, Elizabeth Dickens, died when he was only twelve years old. The loss of his mother had a profound impact on Dickens, and he often wrote about the experience of being motherless. In *David Copperfield*, which is said to be his autobiography, he writes:

"I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget. . . that my mother was warm for my being sent back. I cannot help whispering to myself even now, nearly forty years afterwards, Poor boy! And calling to mind my father's face upon the second day, and recalling the strange words he had used in reference to my mother's burial, I feel as if I had never been quite touched, until lately, by the darkness of my own childhood." (Dickens, 1850, p. 33)

Dickens' personal experience of the absence of a mother figure undoubtedly influenced his writing and his portrayal of motherless characters in his novels. His novels provide a window into the psychological and emotional effects of maternal absence, as well as the ways in which individuals cope with this absence and seek out maternal figures in their lives.

The Absent Mother and Societal Changes in Dickens' Novels

The theme of the absent mother in Dickens' novels reflects larger societal changes occurring during the Victorian era. One of the most significant changes was the Industrial Revolution, which transformed family dynamics and the role of women. As men left their homes to work in factories and mills, women were left to manage the household and care for children. However, the rise of the factory system meant that many women were also employed in industrial work, often in harsh and dangerous conditions. As a result, the traditional role of women as primary caregivers was disrupted, and the family unit was under strain.

Dickens was acutely aware of the impact of these changes on women and children. In his novels, he frequently portrayed the struggles of women to maintain their roles as caregivers while also navigating the demands of industrial work. For example, in *Hard Times*, the character of Mrs. Gradgrind is depicted as a loving and caring mother, but her ability to fulfill her maternal duties is hindered by her husband's insistence on raising their children according to strict utilitarian principles (Davis, 1998). Similarly, in *Little Dorrit*, the character of Amy Dorrit is forced to take on the role of caregiver for her family, while also working as a seamstress to earn money. The rise of institutions such as orphanages and workhouses also reflected the changing social and economic conditions of the Victorian era. These institutions were created to provide assistance to those who were unable to support themselves, but they often failed to provide adequate care and support. In Dickens' novels, orphanages and workhouses are depicted as bleak and oppressive places, where children are subject to neglect and abuse. For example, in *Oliver Twist*, the workhouse where Oliver is sent is described as a "nasty, dirty, wet hole" where the children are "half-starved" and "brutally treated" (Dickens, 1837, p. 10). The absence of maternal figures in Dickens' novels can be seen as a reflection of the larger societal changes occurring during the Victorian era. As the traditional role of women as primary caregivers was disrupted, children were left without the nurturing and emotional support that they needed.

The rise of institutions such as orphanages and workhouses also meant that many children were separated from their families and placed in environments that were hostile to their emotional and physical well-being.

Conclusion and Discussion

Through the examination of select works of Dickens, this article has explored the significance of the absent mother in the Victorian-era. The absence of maternal figures in Dickens' novels reflects larger societal changes occurring during the era, including the impact of the Industrial Revolution on family dynamics and the rise of institutions such as orphanages and workhouses. The emotional and psychological impact of these changes on children is evident in Dickens' portrayals of characters who are left without the nurturing and emotional support that they need.

While the absent mother is a recurring theme in Dickens' works, it is important to note that it is not always a literal absence. In some cases, the mother is present but unable to provide the emotional support that the child needs. For example, in *Great Expectations*, Pip's mother is never mentioned, but his relationship with his sister, who is also his primary caregiver, is characterized by emotional neglect and abuse. In other cases, the mother may be absent due to death or other circumstances beyond her control, as is the case with Little Nell's mother in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

The significance of the absent mother in Dickens' works extends beyond the individual stories he tells. It speaks to larger societal issues and the emotional impact of these issues on children. Dickens' novels provide a powerful critique of the Victorian-era, revealing the ways in which social and economic changes affected the most vulnerable members of society. The absence of maternal figures in these works is a poignant reminder of the importance of emotional support and the devastating impact of its absence.

In conclusion, the theme of the absent mother in Dickens' works reflects the changing social and economic conditions of the Victorian-era, and the emotional and psychological impact of these changes on children. Through his portrayals of characters who are left without the nurturing and emotional support that they need, Dickens provides a powerful critique of the era and a reminder of the importance of emotional support for the most vulnerable members of society.

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