

Orphanhood in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*

التيتم في رواية "ديفيد كوبرفيلد" للكاتب "تشارلز ديكنز"

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ملخص الدراسة:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل وشرح التيتيم في رواية الكاتب "تشارلز ديكنز" ، "ديفيد كوبرفيلد" ، والتي تعتبر من أهم أعماله شرحا موجزا. يعتبر "تشارلز ديكنز" من أفضل الكتاب في تاريخ الأدب الإنجليزي عموما و أفضل الكتاب اللذين استعملوا التيتيم كفكرة أدبية على الإطلاق. تعتبر "ديفيد كوبرفيلد" من أفضل الروايات لهذا الكاتب و المفضلة له شخصيا. تعطى هذه الرواية أمثلة عظيمة في استخدام التيتيم في الأدب الروائي الإنجليزي. تحتوى الدراسة على مقدمة فيها عرض مبسط عن الدراسة بصفة عامة، المنهجية المتبعة خلالها، بالإضافة الى عرض لبعض الدراسات السابقة التي اهتمت باستعمال التيتيم كفكرة أدبية في روايات "تشارلز ديكنز" بصفة عامة، استعمالها في رواية "ديفيد كوبرفيلد" بشكل خاص. تحتوى الدراسة أيضا على شرح موجز للتيتيم مع بعض النقاط المتعلقة به، تحليلا موجزا للتيتيم في رواية "ديفيد كوبرفيلد" مرفقا ببعض الأمثلة، وتنتهى الدراسة أخيرا باستنتاجات لهذه الدراسة. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** " تشارلز ديكنز" ، التيتيم، رواية "ديفيد كوبرفيلد"، المجتمع الإنجليزي، العصر الفيكتوري.

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Abstract

This study analyzes and illustrates orphanhood in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* which is one of the best known novels.

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Dickens is one of the greatest writers in the nineteenth century. He was an orphan. Orphanhood is embodied in most of his literary works. His novels are also the reflection of his life experience as an orphan.

The study contains an introduction, and a short representation of what it is about. It offers also the methodology of the study. The literature review sheds light on the previous studies which dealt with the use of the idea of 'orphanhood' in Dickens' novels in general, and its use of it in *David Copperfield* in particular. The study ends with a conclusion of it.

Key Words: Charles Dickens, orphanhood, *David Copperfield*, the English society, Victorian age.

Introduction

This study deals with orphanhood in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* which is considered as one of this novelist's best works. Orphanhood is a social phenomenon and a fate which affects people sometimes at an early age. Dickens is the most writer who used this idea in most of his works. He used it in *David Copperfield* depicting the character of David. Dickens succeeded in that to a wide extent using his best images. Charles Dickens is one of the greatest writers in English literature. The use of the idea of 'orphanhood' is a dominant feature in his works. Dickens exposed the negative aspects of middle class in the English society of Victorian age towards orphanhood.

David Copperfield is one of the best novels of Dickens and his favorite. As quoted in Bush (1958: 1), Thackeray declares that "*David Copperfield* the Dickens novel in which readers would take the most satisfaction. The novel never lost its popular status both as a novel read for pleasure and studied academically, and in multiple theatrical and screen versions." In this novel, Dickens introduces an orphan poor boy who suffers a lot from poverty; being isolated from his mother; and being oppressed by his stepfather; before he becomes rich and happy. He also uses some personal details of his own experience in life to describe this orphan boy. All these points have been analyzed in details in this study.

Aim of the Study

Based on many books and articles that deal with 'orphanhood, analyzing,

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investigating, and illustrating the use of this phenomenon in Dickens' *David Copperfield* is the aim of this study.

Methodology

Studying, explicating, investigating, and analyzing the use of the image of 'orphanhood' in Dickens' *David Copperfield*, highlighting his way of using it in this novel, is the method employed in this study.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it tries to reveal that Orphanhood is a very important negative phenomenon deserves to be discussed, and to find solutions for, and is closely tied to human beings. The study reveals also that Charles Dickens is one of the most prominent Victorian novelists, and *David Copperfield* is rich in examples of using the idea of 'orphanhood'.

Limitation of the Study

The study is limited to dealing with Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*. The reason for this is that this novel gives good examples of the use of the idea of 'orphanhood' in this great novelist's novels.

Literature Review

Dickens' *David Copperfield* has been analyzed and interpreted by a number of writers and critics. They present specific details and general qualities of Dickens' novels in support of orphanhood.

Singh (2013) has this to say:

During holidays David could not stay in the school because all the boys were afraid of Mr. Creakle. Nobody could be friendly with David so, it was true that David made them uncomfortable there as a result he stayed at home. But as soon as the holidays were over, he once again moved to school. One day he was given the sad news of the death of his mother. The news was unbearable for David because still he felt the love of his mother. He knew that she was helpless. It was the first time

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when David felt everything as an orphan into the wide world(168). She (ibid: 169) adds that "working under such unhealthy and suffocating circumstances is the worst part of David's childhood. From dawn to dusk he had to take up the job of washing bottles in the firm of Murdstone and Grinsby".

Caruth (2017) explains that:

Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*, long considered Dickens's fictionalized account of his own passage from traumatic early childhood to a master of English letters. This is the story of an orphan, named David Copperfield, who overcomes his traumatic past and eventually comes to write the story of his autobiography, the book *David Copperfield* (22).

She(ibid) adds that:

The story of the orphan is ,also, of course, the story of an *uprooted* self at the origins of an autobiography. On the one hand, by representing David Copperfield in his own orphaned childhood, and by showing how he comes to write the autobiography that is this very text, Dickens's novel can be seen as representing, and overcoming, a childhood trauma through the linguistic mastery of the adult (23).

Reynolds(2012:1) declares that "though many critics concentrate their analysis upon orphaned streets children, arguing that authors used these figures to elicit sympathy for various social and political causes, the majority of orphans in nineteenth-century novels are members of the middle-class".

Brodowicz(2024:2) states that "the concept of the sanctity of the family was one of Dickens' favorite notions, and he used his books to explore the different approaches to the family and its impact on people. ... His concern for the family is prominent in his portrayal of the orphans, who frequently featured in his novels".

Murshed(2020) claims that :

Actually, the Victorian Literature is over-populated with orphans, whose narratives in children's literary

forms are complex and rich, and they generally saturated pages of children's stories, so the orphan stories are well known books among readers and have spotted the scene of children writing since it appeared(1).

From the above citations, one can see that *David Copperfield* deals with orphanhood represented in the character of David and depicts the conditions of orphans in the English society in the nineteenth century. The world of the novel is very closed to the reader who is familiar with actions of the novel; they are reflections of the lives of these orphans.

Definition of Orphanhood

Orphanhood is a bad social phenomenon. The word 'orphan' refers to the child who has lost his /her father before reaching puberty. However, in other context, it refers to the child who has lost one or both of his/her parents before reaching the age of 18. Although the former definition is the most usual global definition of 'orphan', it is not universal. In fact, there are many other definitions of it. For example, as quoted in Abebe (2009:3), Unaid has defined an 'orphan' as "a child under the age of 15 years who has lost its mother to HIV/AIDS".

Children have a great percentage of the world's population. Most of them are orphans according to statistics by the UN. The number of orphans is increasing. Therefore, unfortunately, most of people in the world today are orphans.

There are many reasons for orphanhood. Some of these reasons are: wars, natural disasters, economic problems, etc. In a study, Kutluglu (2019:1) claims that "the United Nations' s data shows that the increasingly rampant global events such as wars, natural disasters, plagues, social chaos, economic problems and unlawful intercourses have led to the number of the world's orphans to surpassed 140 million in 2015".

There is another type of orphanhood called 'social orphanhood'. It refers to the children whose both parents are alive but they are like orphans. These children are considered orphans because they lack their parents' protection. The number of social orphaned children is equal to the number of traditional orphans. Kutluglu (ibid) adds that:

The number of children who suffer from social orphanhood is almost parallel with the number of children who are victims of wars and natural disasters. According to the UN, the number of children living in orphanages reached 2.7 million, and social orphans from the number has not been confirmed. However, there are estimations regarding this matter(3).

There are many reasons for 'social orphanhood'. Some of these reasons are: substance abuse, parents being far from their children, neglect, bad treatment by parents, parents suffering from mental or physical problems, some children being illegitimate, etc.

"Social orphan children", therefore, are deprived from their parents' care, love, and affection, and live far from them. This causes mental and physical problems for these orphans and leads to bad effects on their education, health, and development. It is also very important to mention that "social orphanhood" is more dangerous, and has more negative effects than the traditional type of orphanhood.

Orphanhood in Charles Dickens

Dickens used the theme of children lacking one or both parents frequently in his novels. In fact, this was not surprising in the Victorian era because orphanhood was not rare and it was the fate of most of people. Dickens was good with children and treated them very well. He even helped his seven sons in deciding and making their futures since they were in their teens. Dickens used children as a symbol of the sins of man. At that time, there were many homeless children staying in the streets of London. In a study, Gorra (2012) points out that:

He was good with babies and his children were never afraid to interrupt him; Thomas Mann's offspring, in contrast, trembled before the inviolable door of his study. Dickens grew distant once they reached adolescence, though, and insisted on settling the futures of his seven sons while they were still in their teens (3).

Dickens had a very hard childhood. His father was a rich clerk who went to prison for debt. Therefore, Dickens was taken from school to do hard

manual tasks in a factory where he worked for a long time.

Orphans in the Victorian era suffered a lot. They resorted to live in the streets and workhouses when they could not find places in orphanages. Orphans in that era got food and were given shelter in return of doing some hard works. People went to these bad-conditioned workhouses as a last resort. The children of the poor were a burden on their families. There were no any laws to protect them. They got few rights and were treated badly. Brodowicz (2024:3) explains that "in the mid-19th century in England, the problem of child poverty and child labor was in full force. Many children were orphaned as a result of very low life expectancies and no social structure to take over their nutrition and well-being".

Analysis of Orphanhood in *David Copperfield*

David Copperfield was published between 1849 and 1850 in monthly installments before being published completely in November 1850. In this novel, Dickens depicts the reality of 'orphanhood' and the bad social conditions from which orphans suffered in the English society in Victorian England through the technique of dialogue and events that enhance his way of presenting and revealing this social phenomenon. It is the actual representation of the lives of this category of people of that time that Dickens himself experienced.

David Copperfield could make Dickens be remembered as a famous influential writer in the nineteenth century. It also helped him to be praised for his keen portrait of Victorian era middle class which helped, in turn to, make societal change. Moreover, this novel is full of images that reflect the idea of 'orphanhood'.

Orphanhood is one of the most prominent themes in *David Copperfield*. This theme was represented in the character of David Copperfield, the protagonist of this novel. He was an orphan. His father died six months before his birth. His mother, on the other hand, died when he was 10. David describes himself as a "posthumous child", meaning that he was born after his father's death. He lived a very happy childhood with his nurse, Peggotty, and her brother, Mr. Peggotty. However, his life becomes hard after he was sent to a bottling factory as Dickens himself was sent to a blacking factory. David suffered a lot from

the mistreatment of his stepfather, Mr. Murdstone, who abused him and beat him many times. Mr. Murdstone was really a very cruel and hard-hearted person. David hated him very much and bit him once when he was beating him. After that David was adopted by his relative, Betsy Trotwood. In fact, David's first few years were not tragic. He lived a very happy life with his mother, his kind nurse, Peggotty, her brother, Mr. Peggoty, Traddles, Steerforth, and many other relatives and friends. He felt happy and also enjoyed a good relationship with some members of the workhouse he worked in later. Gdalfonzo(2023:3) declares that "a less obviously bad parent is David's mother, Clara Copperfield. Unlike Murdstone, she loves David and is loved in return, but she's also rather childish and selfish, using him as an emotional football when fighting with Clara Peggotty, the second most important adult in her son's life". David's suffering started when his mother married Mr. Murdstone who humiliated and bullied him violently. Bush(1958:2) states that "raised for his first few years by his widowed mother with the help of his loving nurse, Peggotty, David enjoys a happy childhood". David was an orphan victimized by the Victorian era, which was greedy for him. He had to be sent to workhouses and factories, and was forced to practice bad labor which was a part of the unkind nature of that era towards the poor and the orphan. Singh (2013) has this to say:

David Copperfield throws light on the treatment of childhood and its obligations and various evils of industrial revolution, especially the miserable condition of the children working in workhouses from dawn to dusk for a few coins. Many laws were passed by the government, but they were just for the influential people. The factory owners were free to exploit the tender children for their own selfish motives(1).

Being orphan, David was in a constant and continuous lifelong search for identity. He searched for his identity, true family, and a stable home, pushing him to feel outside of usual and ordinary structures.

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David resorted to work in order to support himself and his aunt. In fact, that reflects the Victorian ideal of being self-made, which was necessary in that era.

David resorted to write his autobiography when he was adult in order to tackle the problems and the bad events which he faced in his childhood. He expressed that through narration and storytelling.

Workhouses and schools (like Salem House) are depicted and described as institutions which focus on profit and gaining rather than caring for compassionate child-rearing as explained also in a similar novel of Dickens, *Oliver Twist*.

Finally, it is concluded that David's change from a helpless, miserable, and poor orphan to a successful, famous adult author is a result of struggle against unkindness. Moreover, it is revealed that personal development and love ultimately overcome the difficulties of being alone in an unkind world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Charles Dickens is the best English critical realism writer. He is admired and loved so much by his great public. Dickens has a very beautiful style in writing. He is an expressive writer full of passions and emotions.

Moreover, he is radical and has a good heart full of passion that pushes him to defend and protect the oppressed characters especially orphans, children, and women in middle classes. Dickens tends to expose the bad and negative phenomena in middle classes in the English society at the time by exploiting his perfect plots.

Dickens is interested very much in orphans. He succeeds in depicting this category of people. He uses various types of orphans in his novels. *David Copperfield* is one of the best novels of Dickens and his favorite one. In this novel, Dickens uses the character of David as an orphan who suffers from the bad treatment of his stepfather and other characters. He succeeds to arouse pity in the hearts of his readers. The character of 'David' is definitely one of the best examples of orphans.

Finally, Dickens contributes to build a harmonious society and a socialist spiritual civilization by his immortal works. He influences all generations

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who still read these works which have made him one of the immortal writers in the history of English literature.

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