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VICTORIAN WOMEN IN CONFLICT WITH PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AS PORTRAYED IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

The aim of this essay is to examine how Charles Dickens in a number of his novels viewed the outcome of the Victorian women's dealings with some of the public institutions of that era. Although Charles Dickens was not a great female character creator psychologically speaking; still, his works are rich in numerous representatives of the weaker sex who do not only embellish their homes but also enter the outside world of public institutions.

The nineteenth century was a period during which various stereotypes flourished both in real life and in literature. One of such was a stereotype of a female character sustained by copious examples of heroines present in the Victorian novel. According to the conventional, rather rigorous, Victorian view concerning women they were definitely the fragile ones who needed support and protection of better-educated and more intelligent representatives of the other sex. Women were portrayed as, and were supposed to be, delicate, sweet, passive and submissive wives, mothers or lovers. Their houses served as shelters in which they could hide from the hostility of the real life outside. However, these were only conventional visions of what women should be like and they mostly described the well-off middle or upper class women. In reality, there existed a wide gap between the stereotype and the actual picture of the Victorian woman. This gap can be observed in Charles Dickens novels. His female characters are not necessarily typical Victorian angels. On the contrary, quite often they do not fit in the above-mentioned stereotype. Apart from typical ideals of femininity such as Dora Spenlow (*David Copperfield*), Dickens presents women who are deeply influenced by changes that the Victorian society was undergoing and that had a great impact on it.

Victorian England (1832–1901) was a country where, among others, two important movements were born; movements that were to change, gradually, the way

of life of women throughout the world. These two particular movements were the Feminist Movement and the liberation movement resulting from the concept of individual freedom. Together with the Industrial Revolution, these movements had a profound impact not only on those women who later embraced the example of Victorian women and championed feminism, but on Victorians especially who sought more personal freedom in their lives.

Victorian women, depending on their social class and economic position, were given, sometimes in spite of themselves, new opportunities to mingle more closely with everyday life, bustling far from the security of the drawing-room or kitchen. This mingling with the outside world very often created close encounters with public institutions, which led to sometimes unpleasant events for these, as yet, inexperienced females who for years had been denied access to life as lived outside their homes. To quote T. H. Huxley: "Girls have been educated to be either drudges or toys beneath man, or a sort of angel above him"¹. And those "drudges" and "angels", not to mention great numbers of uneducated women and girls, were compelled to enter the world of Victorian public institutions with scant or no preparation for such an assimilation.

Victorian women dealt with various institutions in various ways depending on their societal position. The poor, uneducated ones were forced by the Industrial Revolution to leave their traditional positions as housewives and become labourers. They could now experience the relative advantages of working in factories, living in workhouses, as well as the possibility of debtors' prisons. Occasionally, they could also encounter legal institutions – courts of law, lawyers' offices. These women were not advocates of feminism: "the place in which the Feminist Movement was born was not the factory, nor the mine, but the Victorian middle-class drawing-room"². Middle and upper-class women confronted rather different institutions; namely: charitable organisations, schools of all sorts (both as students for the first time and as proprietors), hospital administration, courts of law and lawyers' offices (still, for a long time to come, as clients only).

The changes taking place in Victorian society, although not obtrusive, were, naturally enough witnessed and commented on by writers, politicians, journalists and men of science of that era. Charles Dickens in a number of his novels voiced his opinions concerning the values of Victorian England, the influence of public institutions on the individual (women included) as well as other significant issues which are not the focus of this essay. Though "the outstanding Victorian woman is a blend of the great lady and the intellectual woman, not yet professional"³ Dickens does not concentrate on this female type only. His female characters belong to all social

¹ *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, 1966. New York, E. P. Dutton & Co.; p. 256.

² *Ibidem*, p. 262.

³ Young, G. M., *Victorian England Portrait of an Age*, 1954. New York, Doubleday Anchor Books; p. 13.

and economic classes; live in mansions, as well as in workhouses and streets; are "great ladies" and scums; work for a living and waste their husbands' money; try to keep up the traditional model of a Victorian family, or neglect the family completely; provide for themselves or are entirely lost in the world of management and money. Dickens shows his women in a wide range of situations in which they need to cope with various public institutions: workhouses, courts, schools, inns, enterprises and honourable charities. Whether he is in favour of the liberation movement remains to be seen. Yet, he certainly presents women as individuals striving to handle diverse difficulties of life. He does not lock them in drawing-rooms and kitchens, but lets them wander and have a taste as to what they must deal with in the future to come. Dickens allows his women to run their own businesses, deal with ruthless lawyers, fight for their rights in courts or for the right to be educated. Unfortunately for such women, they quite frequently encounter an outside world in which a clash between a woman and a dehumanising institution leaves that woman scarred emotionally for life, destroyed financially or harms friends and associates who suffer simply because she has run afoul of a particular institution.

To study the women of Dickens's world is to become cognisant of how they deal with the hostility of Victorian public institutions, and what Dickens appears to think about that. Seemingly, Dickens approved of working women, as many of his women had some kind of employment, or even ran their own enterprises or establishments. One of the most unpleasant women is probably Sally Thingummy (*Oliver Twist*). An inmate of the workhouse, old and "rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beer"⁴, she emphasises all the evils of a workhouse. Though no physical description is provided, she may be contrasted with "a good-looking girl"⁵ – Oliver's young mother, for whom she is acting as nurse. Having spent a long, yet unspecified time in a workhouse, given birth to thirteen children "all of 'em dead except two, and them in the wurkus with me"⁶, she cannot be a physically attractive person any more. Hard years in the workhouse have taught her to steal (which she confesses on her deathbed), to drink excessively and have changed her, despite her "profession" as a nurse into a repulsive representative of her sex.

Was it her fault, though, or the fault of cumulative influences of the conditions in which she lived? Constant hunger and demoralising and dehumanising living conditions would change even the strongest human being into simply an animal striving desperately to survive. The authorities regulating life in the workhouse through their decisions created an institution in which the worker was propelled quickly to the graveyard. The regime of starving people was implemented with great vigour, although "it was rather expensive at first, in consequence of the increase in the undertaker's bill"⁷. No, Dickens does not blame old Sally for what she has become. Her encounter with a very common public institution of the time was

⁴ Dickens, C., *Oliver Twist*, 1958. New York, Harper & Row; p. 4.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

a tragic one. She was one of many whose lives were totally ruined by their confinements in such hostile places; yet, was there any alternative? There was not much to choose from for those poorest ones – death in the workhouse or death in the streets. And yet, Dickens seems to be more sympathetic towards those women who choose freedom, although with tragic results, as Betty Hidgen (*Our Mutual Friend*). Here is what this poor woman, who is, however, still proud of her independence and ability to provide for herself and strong in her beliefs, thinks of this institution:

[...] He was brought up in the – "with a shiver of repugnance," – the House, "The Poor-house?" said the Secretary.

[...] "Kill me sooner than take me there. Throw this pretty child under cart - horses' feet and a loaded wagon, sooner than take him there. Come to us and find us all a-dying, and set a light to us all where we lie, and let us all blaze away with the house into a heap of ciders, sooner than move a corpse of us there!" [...] You pray that your Granny may have strength enough left her at the last [...] to get up from her bed and run and hide herself, and swown to death in a hole, sooner than fall into the hands of those Cruel Jacks we read of, that dodge and drive, and worry and weary, and scorn and shame, the decent poor"⁸.

And, indeed, such strength Betty is eventually granted, so she can run from the authorities and die free, away from the workhouse. There can be little doubt as to which woman Dickens treats with greater respect; however, he is very careful not to show criticism towards Sally. His attack is clearly directed at the institution of the workhouse, not at the individual, who no matter how strong and humane must lose eventually in an uneven fight with the inhuman establishment.

In addition to dehumanising people's lives, workhouses provided some employment to paupers. Yet it was not the kind of work that could give the employed any satisfaction, whether financial or professional. A similar situation was true as far as Victorian factories were concerned. Work was a matter of survival, not fulfilling one's professional ambition. And in a factory can be found another Victorian woman struggling for survival – Rachael (*Hard Times*). Employed in a factory, she leads a difficult life, although thanks to the Factory Law of 1833 is no longer forced to do night shifts. Her work day is still extremely long, though, so she can have little or no time for any of life's pleasures that have been reserved for those better-born and better-off. Overworked, without any hope for ever fulfilling her true love for Stephen (as the laws of Victorian England serve those that have rather than those that have not), eventually losing her lover, she is always portrayed as an angelic figure. She is all the warmth, peace, goodness, modesty and compassion that one may find in a woman. "Thou art an Angel!" Stephen tells her, and she replies: "I am [...] thy poor friend. Angels are not like me. Between them, and a working woman

⁸ Dickens, C., *Our Mutual Friend*; 1997. Penguin Books.

fu' of faults, there is a deep gulf set"⁹. Here is a proper person at a proper place. Self-conscious, aware of her position in the world, loving, caring, delicate despite all the hardships – here is the ideal working class woman, according to Mr. Dickens. Rachael suffers – there is no doubt about that. Her beloved dies in her arms – what worse disaster can happen to a woman? Yet, she never complains. She is like a tame animal, a type rather than a real person. There is not much character in her – she is more of an idealisation of a woman than a real woman. That is why the clash with Victorian institutions – the factory, directly, and the law, indirectly, does no harm to her. It is hard to harm an ideal.

More life-like are the representatives of the lower-middle class – the proprietors or co-proprietors of various enterprises: Madame Mantalini (*Nicholas Nickleby*), Abby Potterson (*Our Mutual Friend*), Mrs. Squeers (*Nicholas Nickleby*), Mrs. Pipchin (*Dombey and Son*), Cornelia Blimber (*Dombey and Son*), Agnes Wickfield (*David Copperfield*). These are women, who more or less successfully run businesses, sometimes on their own and at other times together with their partners; and thus, have much to do with Victorian institutions.

Madame Mantalini is a milliner and dress – maker, who owns a nice little dress-making company, which provides employment for as many as 20 girls. As Mr. Nickleby notices: "Dress – makers in London (...) make large fortunes, keep equipages, and become persons of great wealth and fortune"¹⁰. She is truly a representative of a newly rich bourgeoisie with great ambitions. Whether she is a business – woman is quite another matter. Her manner of speaking with prospective employees is certainly business – like; she knows exactly what she requires of her girls and how to deal with both them and her customers:

"[...] our hours are from nine to nine, with extra work when we're full of business, for which I allow payment as overtime. [...] I should think your wages would average from five to seven shillings a week; but I can't give you any certain information on that point until I see what you can do"¹¹.

And yet, despite her undeniable leadership skills and managerial abilities demonstrated in her dealings with her girls, she is nothing more than a Victorian woman – fragile, naive, easily used by the man of her heart – years her junior Mr. Mantalini, who takes advantage of her weak points and readily spends her money. While she is strict with her employees, she is unable to manage her business effectively and efficiently. The clash between Madame Mantalini the woman and Madame Mantalini the business-woman is ruinous. Controlling her husband's expenditure and debts, and thus controlling her income and the company's capital is too much

⁹ Dickens, C., *Hard Times*; 1990. Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Dickens, C., *Nicholas Nickleby*; 1998, New York, TOR; p. 139.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

for this romantically-bound woman. In effect – she loses the establishment trying not to lose her parasitic husband. "The name of Mantalini appeared in the list of bankrupts" ¹² and Miss Knag (previously an employee) assumed the control of the business. But the destruction is of double impact. Madame Mantalini is destroyed as a lady of business – becomes bankrupt and sold out. And, at the same time, she is defeated as a woman, as there can be little hope that her husband, who cheated on her while she was still rich and had an even flow of and access to her money, will stay devoted to her. It seems that Dickens believed that Victorian women were yet not ready to enter such a hostile world of business full of swindlers, impostors and frauds. Victorian England was still very much a man's world in which tender-hearted women could only fail.

And yet, there existed in the Victorian world women who could manage their own businesses and were actually quite successful, at least to some extent. One such woman is Miss Abbey Potterson – the owner of a tavern called the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters (*Our Mutual Friend*). It is certainly true that the place lacked a male manager – one that would renovate it and make a decent place out of it, as the building itself was in a decrepit condition. However, "it had outlasted, and clearly would yet outlast, many a better-trimmed building, many a sprucer public-house"¹³. What then made it a place of bustling business despite its obvious not – business like state? It seems that the solution to this mystery lies in the character of the lady of the place:

"Miss Potterson, sole proprietor and manager of the Fellowship-Porters, reigned supreme on her throne, the Bar, and a man must have drunk himself mad drunk indeed if he thought he could contest a point with her"¹⁴.

Miss Potterson, who "had more of the air of a schoolmistress than mistress of the Six Jolly Fellowship – Porters"¹⁵, ordered her customers and frequenters of the place about as freely as she wished. She was the one to decide who could enter the place and who was banished from it. She had the final word as far as the quantity of alcohol drunk by certain individuals was concerned. She was the one who called it a day in the place and no one dared disobey her decision. She was the general of the establishment and was treated as such by her clients: with respect, sometimes fear, and always obedience. Miss Abbey is the Queen Victoria of the poor: better educated than her "court", presiding over it with unwavering toughness and trying not to show any signs of weakness. For Dickens she is the embodiment of the woman who can deal successfully with Victorian institutions (business establishment here) thro-

¹² Ibidem, p. 305.

¹³ Dickens, C., *Our Mutual Friend*; 1997. Penguin Books; p. 67.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 68.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 69.

ugh manipulating people and exerting her power over them; even though her venture is not of the best sort. She is not a Victorian woman from a drawing-room: soft, tender, lost in the wilderness of the world outside. Obviously only such stern and unbending ladies can survive the challenge that occurs when an individual confronts the roughness of Victorian institutions with no opportunity to prepare beforehand for such an encounter.

While Miss Abbey only has "the air of a schoolmistress", Mrs. Squeers (*Nicholas Nickleby*) is actually one - or to be more exact - she is a wife of the master of a boarding school. She is, like Miss Abbey, a lady of business, only her business is of a different kind. Her venture is a school - Dotheboys Hall - and she is definitely, together with her husband, determined to make money out of it. She is tough and rough, if not cruel. But while the toughness of Miss Abbey does not hurt anybody either physically or emotionally, Mrs. Squeers and the institution she runs are a destructive force for many an individual, as well as for her own self eventually.

Dotheboys Hall and whatever happens within its walls and beyond serve as an example of typical Victorian institutions, namely Yorkshire schools in which Dickens was greatly interested, as Philip Hobsbaum shows¹⁶. These were places where children neglected by parents found their destination under the protection of the owners serving at the same time as teachers and guardians. Unfortunately, the proprietors were much more interested in their own profits than in whatever educational profits the pupils might have received and the Squeers family is no exception. Brutality and cruelty, both emotional and physical, are the likely means of achieving the goal - teaching as little as possible while making as much money as possible - and working towards this goal is Mrs. Squeers as dedicated as her husband. "The only difference between them was, that Mrs Squeers waged the war against the enemy openly and fearlessly, and that Squeers covered his rascality"¹⁷. She is the one who administers the unusual food mixture to the boys so that they would lose appetites, and so she would save on feeding them; she is the one who carries canes with which her husband treats the pupils; she is the one who collects money from letters sent to the pupils, as well as other trifles such as articles of clothing that she could equip her own children with. She is not exactly a paragon of virtue that a Victorian woman was supposed to be; she is a woman who happens to be married both to a cruel man and a cruel institution, which both instances make her act as she does. Obviously she is not a good person by nature otherwise she would probably try to change the way the school is run. And she, on the contrary, is an irreplaceable part of this institution. Her true colours are obvious and come out in various situations: "A nasty, ungrateful, pig-headed, brutish, obstinate, sneaking dog, exclaimed Mrs Squeers, taking Smike's head under her arm, and administering a cuff at every

¹⁶ Hobsbaum, P., *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens*; 1972. Syracuse University Press; p. 50.

¹⁷ Dickens, C., *Nicholas Nickleby*; 1998, New York, TOR; p. 101.

epithet"¹⁸; But, arguably, had she not been a part of such an institution, her violent temper might have not found such a vent, or at least she might not have hurt any innocent pupil placed under her care.

She is a loving mother, as much as she can be, and wife, minding her family in the best manner she is capable of; even though, her ways are not always the most acceptable ones. She deprives her pupils of the bare necessities, only to improve her own family's circumstances. She is corrupted by the institution of which she is a part, because of the unchecked power she possesses and by the lack of any control as to what happens at school on the part of either the pupils' parents or any authorities. Obviously what happens there is atrocious as many examples prove, but she as a mother only strives to fulfil what she considers her motherly duty – to provide for her family. The means that she obtains through being a part of an evil institution make her evil side come to light and shine brightly. This evil has a destructive power over the pupils, as it ruins their childhood and makes vivid negative impressions on their personalities; and thus, indirectly, the institution destroys the ones whom it is meant to serve. Fortunately, it also crushes its vehicle for action – Mrs. Squeers and her family – and thus the vicious circle is broken. As a result of spending years under emotional pressure and physical abuse, the students finally rebel, causing the downfall of the school and the Squeers.

A rebellion – though of a different kind – can also be observed as far as the Jellyby family is concerned (*Bleak House*). In this case the rebellion takes place within the family, not against it. Caddy, the eldest daughter of the Jellybys, after years of neglect on the part of her mother rebels, although not light-heartedly, against her life of debilitating paperwork done for her mother. The reason why she marries Prince Turveydrop is not simply the infatuation but the drive to escape her home lacking any warm, motherly feelings, as well as her mother's tyranny. Here Dickens openly and clearly criticises those Victorian women who instead of playing their traditional roles as wives and mothers become involved in social issues and devote all their energy to charities forgetting and neglecting at the same time their primary duties. Mrs. Jellyby is a caricature of such women – she is obsessed with charitable projects concerning some long lost and forgotten African tribe. As a result of her involvement with many charitable institutions, quite popular at that time in England, she is unable to notice how neglected her own children are. Not only are the children neglected – brought up literally in the street and "always up to something"¹⁹, but the house as well. It is filled up with paper and litter, dirty and unpleasant – definitely not a paragon of a Victorian house. The children look unhealthy, are uneducated and unable to perform the simplest housework tasks, because their mother's time is occupied by helping cultivate and educate "the natives of Borrioboola – Gha, on the left bank of the Niger"²⁰.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 178.

¹⁹ Dickens, C., *Bleak House*; 1992, New York, Bantam Books; p. 33.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 35.

Mrs. Jellyby's involvement with the charities destroys her own family – Caddy, serving as her secretary, is overworked and miserable; Peepy is always hurt in some kind of disastrous accident; Mr. Jellyby, an unloved husband who is unable to oppose his wife, finally becomes bankrupt, which sinks the family deeper still. The children become successful in life only after they leave the wretched house. Caddy, having rebelled against her mother's tyranny and married Prince, is a happy wife despite the fact that her husband becomes lame and her child was born deaf and dumb. Anything is better than living in a house run by an incompetent philanthropist. Peepy finds a job in the Custom-House that allows him to forget his ruined childhood. Unfortunately, Mrs. Jellyby is unable to notice her mistakes and how deeply her conduct as a mother influenced the lives of her children. Being dissatisfied with the outcome of her work in Africa, she redirects her energies and becomes an advocate of women's right to sit in Parliament. Nothing can reform this woman obsessed with activism. Dickens uses Mrs. Jellyby as an example showing what may happen when a woman forgets where her place is. And it seems that a place of a woman should rather be at home unless she is capable of dividing her duties at least equally between her professional work and her home. Extreme dedication to any institution, whether of a charitable character or not, leads to obsession and destruction.

Obsession and destruction are also key words, which can describe what may happen to an individual who becomes involved with the legal system and its institutions. One of the most vividly portrayed female examples of the destructive force of the Chancery Court is Miss Flite who is essentially a good person, but is driven quite mad by the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit (*Bleak House*). She attends the court every single day to observe the proceedings. This lady has been doing that for a long, long time. As she says she had youth and hope and even beauty once; however, the machinery of the court proceedings wasted all of those. The extremely slow pace of the court activities, inability of the court to make any ruling, complications obscuring each case drive people who are somehow involved in the cases either mad (Miss Flite) or to the point of self destruction (the suicide of Tom Jarndyce). The court is so institutionalised and so dehumanised that nobody even knows whether Miss Flite should be attending the court as a party in the case "expecting some incomprehensible judgement to be given in her favour"²¹. As Dickens sarcastically notices: "Some say she really is, or was, a party to a suit: but no one knows for certain, because no one cares"²².

Miss Flite wasted her life being drawn to the court as a result of her father's dealings with it. The father's bankruptcy caused the fall of Miss Flite's brother and sister and finally hers, when she decided to "look at the Monster". Having been affected by the court, she was unable to lead normal life any longer and became addicted to this institution. All the members of her family who expected some kind of judgement from this institution were long dead and in her obsession, unable to

²¹ Ibidem, p.

²² Ibidem, p. 3.

stop this vicious circle of waiting for the ruling for ever, she expects the same. She even seems to accept her fate good-humouredly, which clearly indicates that her encounter with this public institution left her scarred for life. Sometimes she becomes a little angry while speaking of the Chancery:

"Draw people on, my dear. Draw peace out of them. Sense out of them. Good looks out of them. Good qualities out of them. I have felt them even drawing my rest away at night. Cold and glittering devils!"²³

But immediately she checks herself and becomes calm again. The impact of the court on her can be seen in the way she leads her life: she realises that it would be wiser for her not to await any judgement and not attend the proceeding, and yet she is compelled to do it. Life outside this institution does not exist for her; and, being aware of that she is like an addict unable to quit. The institution of the Chancery Court as portrayed by Dickens has such a destructive force that it would ruin any individual, not merely a mild lady such as Miss Flite.

As can be observed, Victorian women, especially those portrayed by Charles Dickens, were not, contrary to the conventional views, merely housewives or housekeepers who were denied active access to public life. More and more often they left their traditional positions and entered the world that was at least to some extent reserved for men. They very timidly at first, and more openly as the years passed by, started the process of emancipation. They were not always successful in their dealings with the public institutions; although, there were instances when they were able to reach the golden mean and devote their time and energies equally between their homes and professional work. Often, however, the clash with the public institutions drove them to ruin, emotional or physical. The reason was not the very fact that women strove to fight for equality, but that they had no or little preparation to cope with a very male oriented world and its institutions. Victorian women were clearly discriminated almost in all spheres of public life; thus, they had little chance to withstand all the adversities created by the social life dominated by men. After all, women were given the right to study at the university level only in 1880. Having been denied proper education they had little chance for success. Even though they so often lost in the uneven fight with the dehumanised and dehumanising public institutions it was not their fault. The problem lay in the way the institutions were operating: their inefficiency, possibilities of corruption, lack of supervision.

All Victorian women could do was to try, and that was what they did. Gradually and painfully, against all odds, they fought for their rights. They starved for freedom. And even though they were not granted this freedom at their time, they were the first to voice their aims. Charles Dickens, surprisingly, helped them in doing that through the voice of one of his female characters – Bella Rokesmith (*Our Mutual Friend*) who says:

"I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house."²⁴

²³ Ibidem, p. 463.

²⁴ Dickens, C., *Our Mutual Friend*; 1997. Penguin Books.