

On the Path to Social Change: Dickens and Victorian Conflict

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Abstract

This article aims to provide an insight to one of the major social conflicts in the history of the world in relation with its reflections in some of Charles Dickens' major works. The approach is multidisciplinary in that the main principles of social conflict theory are analyzed in terms of their occurrence and function both in real world and the world of fiction. Victorian conflict, along with the role of Dickens as the voice of change and reform during the period, is examined in detail as one of the major cases demonstrating the interrelationship between social conflict and social change.

Keywords: *Social conflict theory, Charles Dickens, Victorian era, Social Change*

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1. Introduction: Social Conflict Theory

The roots of conflict theory stretch back to the writings of classical theorists of order and conflict such as “Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes” (Kriesberg 146). However, modern conflict theory, which appeared in the 1950s and 1960s as a rival of functionalism, generally bases its arguments on the views and writings of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Marx’s approach is primarily founded on class conflict. He believed that, in the struggle for power on the one hand and for survival on the other, there are two groups; capitalists and the working class (Communist Manifesto 15; ch.1). History proved Marx right in his presupposition that the accumulating internal tensions and unfair practices would give rise to social conflict (Andersen and Taylor 420; ch. 16). However, his belief that the capitalist system with all its components would ultimately

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destroy itself (Communist Manifesto 21; ch.1) and be replaced by socialism turned out to be wrong. In time, it has also become evident that social conflict has a multi-faceted nature. Weber elaborated social conflict theory, arguing that the social groups involved in conflict are more varied, and their motives rest on a number of differing concerns such as politics, gender, ethnicity and religion as well as economics (Bendix 85). Like Weber, Dahrendorf emphasized the multi-dimensional nature of conflict and formulated his own class conflict theory which, he believed, would be a better instrument to analyze and resolve class conflict in post capitalist societies (41). Depending on the school of thought or theoretical orientation, approaches to understanding and resolving conflict have taken many forms throughout time. Thus, many different types of conflict theories have been propounded in an effort to make up the right framework that would help reveal the inner dynamics of conflict relevant to the context in which it escalates. The difficulty in the categorization of conflict theories lies in its multi-dimensional nature which inevitably extends the scope of interest. Conflict theory is a collection of multiple theories from different fields of study, including sociology, psychology, and economics, thereby covering a wide range of topics, which makes it almost impossible to provide a single formulation or definition. Bartos and Wehr notes that multiple definitions are natural outcomes of differing approaches, which manifests itself as “adversaries’ inner states” in a psychological analysis while in sociology it appears as “observable behavior” (13). One of the most straightforward definitions of conflict belongs to Park and Burgess, who viewed it as struggle for status, a definition which was later extended by Mack and Snyder, who argued that the struggle is not only for status but also for scarce resources and social change (Himes 12). On the other hand, C. Wright Mills, a student of Weber and the founder of modern conflict theory, viewed conflict as a struggle between the powerful and the powerless, emphasizing the exploitation and manipulation of the disadvantaged by the elites in American society (276).

Despite the variations in the typology of conflict theories and the diversity of conflict definitions, social conflict theory, regardless of its derivatives, stands as an overall model applicable to many cases involving the interrelation between social conflict and social change. Coser defines social conflict as a process during which the conflicting poles, either individuals or groups, struggle to attain status and power over scarce resources with the aim of not only realizing the desired values but also neutralizing or eliminating their rivals

(8; ch.1). Coined by Marx and later refined by Weber, Social Conflict Theory attempts to explain and identify the underlying causes of enmity between the groups in a society. Basically, the emergence of conflict itself is the main agent in the formation of opposing groups whose competition over resources fuels the power struggle. Each social group tends to use the resources in the pursuit of its own interests. This eventually leads to the emanation of dominant and subordinate social groups. The seeds of exploitation and oppression spread and force the weaker side down on the social pyramid. All through this process, the desire for material wealth reinforced by the system appears to be the main mechanism. The most recent example where the dynamics of social conflict theory can be traced is the Arab Spring. The underlying motive that triggered the wave of demonstrations and protests against the dictatorships and monarchs of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa is extreme poverty and unfair distribution of resources. In most of these places, with the resistance and harsh reaction of the status quo to protect itself, unrest turned into armed conflict. Initially, there seemed to be two clashing poles in each of the revolting countries: the government and the protestors. However, in the course of their struggle, the groups seeking justice and emancipation have started to be subdivided into other smaller fractions as they were already diverse in their political, ethnic and religious motivations. The Arab Spring encompasses all four basic assumptions of modern conflict theory, namely competition, structural inequality, revolution and war (Christie 511). They appear on the scene one after another, illustrating the complex nature of social conflict. Looking into one of the major social conflicts of world history, the French Revolution, one would find strikingly similar motives and aspirations. Poverty, oppression and inequality, merged with political, religious and philosophical tendencies of the period, and sparked the uprisings which resulted in a transformation and marked the birth of remarkable social reforms. On the bases of social conflict, there lies a violent demand for change. Depending on the determination and courage of its proponents along with several other factors, social conflict usually brings about either reform or war. Victorian Conflict, as I would like to call it throughout this article, involves one of the most important social as well as political and economic transformations that have set the grounds for many other conflicts in our modern world.

Among the leading voices of Victorian Conflict, Dickens stands out as the most remarkable figure who boldly attacked the social ills created mainly by the

industrial revolution in the Victorian era. He is regarded as not only the greatest novelist of the period but also as a social critic and activist who campaigned intensively for a number of social reforms (Black 311). Karl Marx was a contemporary of Dickens in London for 20 years, and both were the witnesses of the impact of the industrial revolution. Marx was inspired by the industrial revolution in formulating his theories about the nature of society. He was surely not short of raw material as he was right at the heart of one of the major social conflicts of world history. During the same period, Dickens dealt with the social problems created by industrialization and commercialization in his fiction from a similar perspective but apparently with no specific ideological motivation. Victorian England sets a perfect model that the majority of the components of social conflict theory apply while Dickens' fiction appears to be a powerful means of expression calling for change and reform. The elements of social conflict in the Victorian era are skillfully embedded in his Condition-of-England novels. This article will look into the fictional representation of conflict in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House* and *Hard Times* in the light of the factual breeding grounds.

2. Dickens and Victorian Conflict

Victorian Conflict, like most other major conflicts in the history of the world, was basically a product of competition for resources. Poverty, greed, discrimination, deprivation and oppression were the driving forces. It was shaped by the great scientific and technological discoveries, which inevitably shook the foundations of cultural norms and traditions of the period. The unfair distribution of the newly acquired wealth, deep rooted inequalities and corrupted political tendencies contributed to its growth. Factories, slums and streets infected by poverty, crime and prostitution were the breeding grounds. The struggle for reform covered a wide range of areas, seeking to eradicate social, economic, religious, political and gender based problems. The diverse and complex nature of the newly emerged social conflicts made their resolution a difficult task. The multiplicity of social ills brought about the involvement of several parties in the dispute ranging from politicians and factory owners to workers and novelists. Dickens is generally regarded as the leading figure among those who raised their voices for change and reform and a significant portion of his fiction appears to be a guideline in the understanding of Victorian Conflict.

It is possible to trace the elements of Victorian Conflict in virtually every work of Dickens. Although his later novels in particular provided a darker and more pessimistic insight into Victorian Conflict, most of his fiction, starting with his second novel *Oliver Twist* up to *Our Mutual Friend*, deals with the critical social issues of the Victorian era either implicitly or explicitly. He contributed a great deal to the emergence of the collective consciousness about the social problems by exploring the effects of commercialism and the market economy on human relationships in his novels. The impact of capitalist ideology on human behavior was one of his primary concerns. Humphry House notes that money "is a main theme of nearly every book that Dickens wrote: getting, keeping, spending, owing, bequeathing provide the intricacies of his plots; character after character is constructed round an attitude to money. Social status without it is subordinate" (58). Even though Dickens dealt with almost all existing conflicts in Victorian society, his social criticism centered on the dehumanizing effect of the capitalist system. His novels sympathized with the hardships endured by the victims of the new order, and accentuated the "rapidity of change and the terrible effects of industrial transformation upon the living standards of the masses" (Hudson 12).

At the root of Victorian Conflict, class divisions seem to be the most devastating. However, restricting the elements that characterize Victorian Conflict to the boundaries of class would provide an incomplete picture of such a paradoxical period. The influx of the industrial revolution triggered a huge mass of conflicts penetrating into deep recesses of Victorian social structure. Eric Hobsbawm described the industrial age in the Victorian era as "the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world" (1818). Social Conflict during the period encompassed a broad range of social phenomena. Political, economic, religious, sexual and communal conflicts with ranging intensities surrounded Victorian society. The breeding grounds of these conflicts were extreme poverty and unfavorable living conditions. In the early phases, rapid economic and scientific progress was not accompanied by social reforms. Thus, material values replaced moral ones. The once sacred and undisputable norms of Victorian society were rocked to their foundations. After the Reform Bill of 1832, the aristocrats lost their political power into the hands of the middle-class industrial capitalists, and soon the industrial revolution sped up. From railways to steamships, from spinning looms to printing machines, scientific discoveries and technological inventions dramatically changed the

face of the country, and England became the workshop of the world (Samuel 197). English goods gradually dominated foreign trade markets and her large colonies contributed to the accumulation of huge amounts of profit. However, beneath the great prosperity and wealth lied poverty and oppression. The already existing gap between the rich and the poor significantly widened. The new market economy replaced the old rural agricultural ways, leading to large scale migrations to the cities in search of employment in factories. Neither the authorities nor society was ready for such a great outburst of change. Sprawling cities could not cope with the huge masses. The result was slums and shantytowns where crime, disease, death and hunger lurked. Early Victorian slum life was described by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* through the eyes of Oliver when he goes with Sowerberry to fetch the body of a woman who died of starvation:

Some houses which had become insecure from age and decay, were prevented from falling into the street, by huge beams of wood reared against the walls, and firmly planted in the road; but even these crazy dens seemed to have been selected as the nightly haunts of some houseless wretches, for many of the rough boards which supplied the place of door and window, were wrenched from their position, to afford an aperture wide enough for the passage of a human body. The kennel was stagnant and filthy. The very rats, which here and there lay putrefying in its rottenness, were hideous with famine (44; ch. 5).

As the wealth of the country grew on an unprecedented scale, the machines of progress started to swallow the weaker ones. Children, in particular, were victimized. Child Labor was one of the most horrible problems of Victorian England. Friedrich Engels, in his book called *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, explains the extent of the problem by referring to the report produced by the parliamentary Factories' Inquiry Commission of 1833: "The report of the Central Commission relates that the manufacturers began to employ children rarely of five years, often of six, very often of seven, usually of eight to nine years; that the working-day often lasted fourteen to sixteen hours, exclusive of meals and intervals" (446). Dickens was also deeply concerned about the exploitation of children, which he himself experienced during his boot blacking factory employment at the age of 12. In *Oliver Twist*, along with his criticism directed towards the new Poor Law System and the evils of crime in London, he draws attention to the victimization of children. Through Oliver, he portrayed the plight of unwanted and orphan Victorian children. He also

criticized the workhouses for serving no useful purpose for the condition of the poor.

Women's conditions were no better. The rapid transformation couldn't alter their perceived lower status in Victorian society. Rape and prostitution were commonplace. Like Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, Dickens was fully aware of the victimization of women in Victorian society. He portrayed the condition of women in Victorian England by creating Nancy, the fallen woman of *Oliver Twist*, who was another victim of Victorian Conflict, trying to survive through prostitution like thousands of others. Her symbolic significance is explained by John Bayley:

Nancy's living is the living of England, a nightmare society in which drudgery is endless and stupefying, in which the natural affections are warped, and the dignity of man appears only in resolution and violence. It is a more disquieting picture than the carefully and methodically symbolized social panoramas of *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Our Mutual Friend* (61).

With the spread of factories, women were also exploited as a cheap source of labour. Gender inequalities and political injustices pushed working class women into despair. The death rate among women and children was alarmingly high during the period. Statistics show that "Even at the end of the Victorian period, infant mortality was about 10 times as high as it is today in industrialized countries" (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 198). Malnutrition, poor sanitation and heavy labour were among the major problems from which children and women equally suffered. They were aggrieved in the harsh competition for resources. Their plight was due mainly to their disadvantaged status and constituted one of the most controversial challenges of Victorian Conflict.

The impact of transformation came with its side effects deeply penetrating into the lives of everyone struggling to survive and willing to have more material possessions than ever before. The glowing light of progress turned millions into slaves of production. In *Bleak House*, along with the critique of the Chancery courts, Dickens also criticizes political corruption, slum housing, class divisions, and neglect of the educational needs of the poor. *Bleak House* opens with the description of London in fog, which stands as the symbol of the dark and desperate atmosphere surrounding the lives and souls of people

exposed to the side effects of materialistic transition. This description is a metaphor for the condition of England at the time:

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds (3).

Within this dark panorama of Victorian England Dickens presents a number of torturous social problems surrounding the society. Dickens' perspective on degeneration of the society as outlined by Terry Eagleton indicates the severity of the problem: "Dickens sees his society as rotting, unraveling, so freighted with meaningless matter that it is sinking back gradually into some primeval slime" (40). Although the primary concern of *Bleak House* is the crooked and inefficient legal system which victimizes the innocent and protects the privileged and the wealthy, Mr. Jarndyce's bleak house hosts many other conflicts indicative of the condition of England. The defective nature of the English judiciary system runs hand in hand with political corruption. Politicians' greed for power is represented by their desire to win elections through bribery. Sir Leicester's financial contribution in the name of the expenses of electoral campaign is actually the money that will be used for bribery: "Sir Leicester feels it incumbent on him to observe a crushing aspect towards Volumnia because it is whispered abroad that these necessary expenses will, in some two hundred election petitions, be unpleasantly connected with the word bribery" (566). As Burn points out, with the reform act of 1832, electoral process in Victorian England became more important than ever before, yet because of insufficient redistribution there remained a large number of small "briable boroughs of between 500-1000 electors" (437). By the 1850s, it was clear that the first Reform Act had failed to eliminate electoral bribery. Purchasing of legislative power was a common practice during politicians'

corrupt competition for self-interest. In *Bleak House*, the corruption of chancery and the political decay which nurture each other are parts of the same conflict and also involve the oppression of dominant groups over subordinate victims. The long-running Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, which lasts over 60 years in England's Court of Chancery, consumes the lives of many people during its course with no benefits for anyone at the end. Miss Flite, Gridley and Richard are the representatives of "the human waste and suffering generated by the Court" (Smith 131). On the other hand, Jo is the victim of urban poverty. He suffers and eventually dies under deplorable conditions in the slum district known as Tom-All-Along's. While chancery stands as a metaphor for moral corruption of the upper-classes and politicians, Tom-All-Along is a metaphor for societal degradation and decay of the lower classes. As is stated by Louis Crompton, *Bleak House* is a powerful manifestation of the elements of Victorian Conflict:

Decaying slums with their filthy tenants, a sedately proud but hopelessly outmoded aristocracy, lawyers and clients lost in a fog of legal obfuscation, a confused and silly parliament engaged in a perpetual game of musical chairs; the magnitude of these symptoms of social distress is impressive, and equaled only by the completeness of the failure of those in power to deal with them (284).

Of all Dickens' Condition-of-England novels, *Hard Times*, influenced by Carlyle's social criticism, comprises the most explicit and direct portrayal of the social consequences of industrialization and urbanization. *Hard Times* presents a bleak picture of Victorian England, where the already existing class divisions changed shape with the onset of industrial revolution and the rise of laissez-faire capitalism. While the aristocracy of the pre-industrial period transformed into the bourgeoisie, servants and landed gentry made up the working class. The spread of factories and constant need for labour resulted in the formation of a massive working class at the bottom of the social pyramid. *Hard Times* is an account of the social conflict between the materialistic and rationalistic obsession imposed by the new system and the humanistic values such as emotion, affection and imagination. The novel was set in Coketown, taking its name from the "Coke," or treated coal, fueling the factories and darkening the skies of the town invaded by the forces of industry. Coketown is the fictional representation of Manchester, one of the notorious industrial cities of the period.

The description of the dreadful landscape of this grimy town reflects the mood of the novel:

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next (32; ch.V).

Dickens' images portray the pale, depressing surroundings diseased by the sameness of industrial life. Louisa and Tom are as colorless as their surroundings. Their lives are ruled by the philosophy of fact and figures dictated by their father, Thomas Gradgrind, a "man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over" (14; ch. 2). Gradgrind is the representative of Victorian Utilitarianism, which is an outcome of the rationalism of the French philosophies and the English materialism of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume. On the other hand, Sissy Jupe is the antithesis of the scholars of Gradgrind's school. Sissy, like Rachael, is a morally pure character who stands against the notion of self-serving rationalism. Through the representatives of opposing poles, Dickens presents the conflict between utilitarian principles and humanitarian values.

Utilitarianism theorized by Jeremy Bentham, stressed the significance of resorting to reason rather than moral and cultural values in the resolution of social problems. This philosophy was popularized by John Stuart Mill, and according to Bradley "was one of the first rational and systematic attempts to address the vast social, economic, and cultural problems caused by the impact of the Industrial Revolution on British society" (69). The utilitarian concept of individual happiness overlapped with the notion of laissez-faire economics. This is why it became so popular among the middle-class who benefited most

from the wealth the industrial revolution created. Forming a democratic government designed on the principles proposed by utilitarian logic seemed a reasonable way to protect their wealth for the representatives of middle-class. Hence, utilitarian reasoning entered into the realm of government and was effective in legislation. These philosophical principles formulized by Bentham played a major role in the emergence of many reform acts such as the Factory Act of 1833, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, and the Prison Act of 1835. However, reforms based on utilitarian logic gave rise to new conflicts instead of curing the ills. Opponents of utilitarian thought like Carlyle, Ruskin, and Dickens held its application to legislation responsible for "mechanization of human life" (Mitchell Victorian Britain 829). In *Hard Times*, Dickens depicts the mechanizing effects of industrialization in Thomas Gradgrind's utilitarian philosophy of rational self-interest and the factory owner Josiah Bounderby's greed for money. In his study, "The Rhetoric of *Hard Times*", David Lodge wrote: "On every page *Hard Times* manifests its identity as a polemical work, a critique of mid-Victorian industrial society dominated by materialism, acquisitiveness, and ruthlessly competitive capitalist economics. To Dickens, at the time of writing *Hard Times*, these things were represented most articulately, persuasively, (and therefore dangerously) by the Utilitarians" (86).

Josiah Bounderby, the capitalist factory owner and banker, is a product of the industrial revolution. He is a self-centered and status-obsessed character who treats his workers as faceless, emotionless "Hands" (73; ch.10), one of whom is Stephen Blackpool who lives a life of poverty and drudgery and struggles to keep his integrity and compassion. Bounderby and Blackpool are the representatives of the class conflict whose unrelenting face is illustrated through their relationship in the novel. During the industrial revolution, the struggle between the factory owners and workers accounts for a consequential part of Victorian Conflict. *Hard Times* was in fact partly inspired by one of its events, the labor dispute, known as the Preston Lockout of 1853-1854. It was one of the worldwide famous worker movements during the period, in that it even led Karl Marx to call it the potential starting point of revolution, declaring "our St Petersburg is at Preston" (Dutton and King 122). Trade Unions are the products of conflict between the employers and the workers. Throughout the Victorian era the number of these organizations grew rapidly, which gives an idea as to the extent of the social and economic conflict during the period. The *Daily Telegraph* of 28th January 1867 reported that the number of unions had

reached around 2000 by that time (Livermore 4). In search of raw material, Dickens visited Preston and attended a delegate meeting. However, out of his unfilled expectations and disappointment, he later wrote that “I am afraid I shall not be able to get much here” (Dutton and King 198). Although his article “On Strike” published in the *Household Words* praises the workers’ peaceful attitude during the strike, Dickens’ views on trade unions were similar to Carlyle’s. Dickens believed that trade unions would offer no solution to the problems between factory owners and workers. On the contrary, he thought that they would be another source of conflict. In a letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts, Dickens holds the agitators responsible for trade union violence and he describes them as “designing persons who have. . . immeshed the workmen in a system of tyranny and oppression” (Ackroyd 690). Dickens’ union orator, Slackbridge in *Hard Times*, was based on Mortimer Grimshaw or Gruffshaw as Dickens calls him in “On Strike”. Grimshaw inspired Dickens to create Slackbridge when he falls in a fierce argument with the Warrington committee for denying him the right to speak during the delegates meeting in Preston (Dutton and King 122). Although there is no mention of a strike in *Hard Times*, Dickens’ views on trade unions are illustrated in his hostile portrait of Slackbridge. Despite his distanced attitude towards the unions, Dickens vigorously described and empathized with the condition of workers enslaved by the factory system. In *Hard Times*, the landscape of industrial England, portrayed by Dickens with all its dark and grim atmosphere, was the ground where the social mechanisms of capitalism began to rise and alter the environment for all. The elements of Victorian Conflict presented in the novel make up the microcosmic world in which the machine has taken over control of everything. The new form of sharp class divisions with the devastating economic oppression on the country’s lower and working classes made Karl Marx believe that England was the only country ready for a proletarian revolution:

England alone can serve as the lever for a serious economic revolution. It is the only country where there are no longer any peasants and where landed property is concentrated in a few hands. It is the only country where the capitalist form – that is, labor combined on a large scale under capitalist entrepreneurs – has taken over practically the whole of production. It is the only country where the great majority of the population consists of wage laborers. It is the only country where the class struggle and organization of the working

class by the trade unions have attained a certain degree of maturity and universality. It is the only country where, thanks to its domination of the world market, every revolution in economic relationships must directly affect the whole world. While on the one hand landlordism and capitalism have their classic seat in this country, the material conditions for their destruction are on the other hand the most mature here (“Confidential Communication”).

Marx’s point of departure was that the conflict between the capitalists and the working class had reached a level mature enough to trigger an economic revolution. England would have been the perfect proof indicating the validity of his projections as to the fate of capitalist systems. He viewed Victorian Conflict largely on the basis of class stratifications and hoped that the revolution in England would start a chain reaction over the rest of the world. However, the revolution he expected had never been realized. He chose to put the blame on the opposition between English and Irish workers as the chief culprit that prevented the revolt against the capitalist system. Conflicts do not always give way to revolution or war, particularly if they lead to reform. A series of parliamentary reforms like the English Factory Acts during the period improved the conditions of the working class. Even so, reforms cannot be regarded as the sole hindrance on the path to revolution. The social structure of Victorian society, the complex nature of transformation experienced during the period and the fractured composition of the newly emerged working class all together kept the capitalist system alive despite the several disputes and economic depressions.

The clash between science and religion was another aspect of Victorian Conflict which has indeed been inherited by our modern age. With the publication of Charles Darwin’s groundbreaking work entitled *The Origin of Species*, long-held religious beliefs came under fierce discussion. Darwin’s theory, which argued that man actually evolved from a lower species rather than having been created by a higher power, started to create doubts as to the reliability of the account given by the book of genesis (Flynn). A similar theory developed by Alfred Russell concerning natural selection along with discoveries in the field of geology fuelled the debate, and tension between religious men and newly popular scientists grew. The crisis of faith became one of the hotly disputed issues during the period. Sydney Eisen describes the crisis of faith “as an intellectual and emotional upheaval, stemming from challenges to the historicity of the Bible, discoveries in geology and biology, and concerns about

morality, or rather, the apparent lack of it, in nature. Science and religion, more precisely science and theology, were deemed to be 'in conflict', the battle lines clearly drawn" (Helmstadter 1). Religious beliefs started to be challenged as the old way of thinking was replaced by the new scientific approach. In 1865, *A General View of Positivism*, the major work of French thinker Auguste Comte, who developed the doctrine of Positivism in the 1840s, was published in English. The positivist doctrine popularized the notion that scientific observation was the sole means of discovering facts and proposed the idea that facts are only those that could be seen and verified. Victorian belief that the Bible was the only guide to a moral life gradually fell out of favour, giving way to secularization and dechristianization in the urban population towards the end of the century.

The shift in system of thoughts had its impact on the education system as well. The materialistic and dehumanizing effect of the education system based on facts and figures alone is criticized by Dickens through Grandgrinds' School of facts in *Hard Times*. The McChoakumchild School is a product of the altered perception of life in the Victorian era after the new scientific discoveries. Its entire mission was to develop a purified sense of reason: "Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else" (13; ch. 1). Through the philosophy dominant in McChoakumchild School, Dickens draws attention to the dangers of a purely mechanistic approach to life. In his view, scientific facts alone are not sufficient to educate an individual. Rather, he argued that such an education system would serve the interests of a degenerative economic system. Dickens satirizes the educational system of the era by illustrating the conflict between fact and fancy. The schoolmaster Mr. Choakumchild is the representative of the new education system based on science alone:

He [Mr. Choakumchild] and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs. He had been put through an immense variety of paces, and had answered volumes of head breaking questions. Orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody, biography, astronomy, geography, and general cosmography, the sciences of compound proportion, algebra, land-surveying and leveling, vocal music, and drawing from models, were all at the ends of his ten chilled fingers. He had worked his

stony way into Her Majesty's most Honourable Privy Council's Schedule B (19; ch.2).

"Her Majesty's most Honorable Privy Council's Schedule B" was the newly organized national system of education which designed a syllabus in 1846 and identified the subjects to be mastered by teacher candidates. This educational philosophy was criticized by Dickens for having "taken the bloom off the higher branches of mathematics and physical science, French, German, Latin, and Greek." Choakumchild's "ten chilled fingers" and "stony way" was not only Dickens' view of the teacher but also his criticism of the education system: "If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more!" (19; ch. 2). Dickens' account of Victorian Conflict in education resulting from the impact of newly emerged school of thoughts and the overall materialistic tendencies of the period reflects his denial of progress at the expense of humanistic and moral values.

The core of Victorian Conflict is expressed by George Bernard Shaw in his commentary on *Hard Times*. He suggests that "[*Hard Times*]' is Karl Marx, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, Carpenter rising up against civilization itself as a disease, and declaring that it is not our disorder but our order that is horrible. . . . Here you will find no more villains and heroes, but only oppressors and victims, oppressing and suffering in spite of themselves, driven by a huge machinery which grinds to pieces the people it should nourish and ennoble" (qtd. in Bloom 207). Dickens' fiction encompasses descriptions and criticisms of many more elements of Victorian Conflict, but even the ones presented here in *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House* and *Hard Times* are more than satisfactory to realize how the social conflict in the Victorian era was shaped and how deeply and dramatically it affected the lives and souls of the members of Victorian society. As noted by Edgar J. Johnson, in his essay, 'Critique of Materialism,' the mechanization of all aspects of society depicted by Dickens overlaps with the aspects of the historical reality in mid-Victorian England: "There is no mistaking Dickens's violent hostility to industrial capitalism and its entire scheme of life. Here he is proclaiming a doctrine not of individual but of social sin, unveiling what he now sees as the real state of modern society" (48).

3. Conclusion: Social Conflict and Social Change

Under the suffocating fog of industrial England, Dickens fictionalized the stories of the victims of progress and wealth. The rise of machines penetrated

into the souls and minds of people in such a way that, as Dorothy Van Ghent states, “people were becoming things and things were becoming more important than people” (202). The new industrial society was fuelled by an irresistible desire for material wealth which became the symbol of one’s social standing in the new social pyramid. The dehumanization process was so swift and relentless that it deeply affected everyone being particularly destructive on children and women. Dickens himself experienced and witnessed the destructive impact of the new order and anticipated the scale of incoming corruption. As people suffered more to obtain basic needs such as food and shelter, material culture became increasingly important. This manifested itself as the fundamental factor behind the destructive social consequences of rapid economic progress. Matthew Arnold, in his work *Culture and Anarchy* draws attention to the potential dangers of a purely capitalist outlook, which was the driving force of the escalation of Victorian Conflict: “When I began to speak of culture, I insist on our bondage to machinery, on our proneness to value machinery as an end in itself, without looking beyond it to the end for which alone, in truth, it is valuable” (74). The quest for money and power, the loss of religious and moral values were the grounds through which materialization dominated people’s lives during the Victorian era. As a result of the dramatic shift in tendencies and obsession with material wealth, conflict in Victorian society intensified as did the need for change.

During the period, change which is implicit in the nature of conflict gradually came about with the efforts of those like Dickens, who chose to be more than oblivious spectators. Each conflict challenged by the sufferers and voiced by their representatives acted as social determinants that led to change. The reforms were outcomes of the conflicts escalated prior to demanded change, and then deescalated after the realization of the action intended to eliminate the agents that triggered the dispute and polarization. As has been the case for all substantial social changes throughout history, conflict was the driving force that transformed the Victorian age into the Age of Reform. Constitutional, economic, political and social reforms came one after another and with each step taken, a potential revolution was avoided. Dickens was among those who put emphasis on reform rather than revolution. His call was for the common good and rested on moral and humanistic values rather than ideological patterns. In fact, what makes Dickens a writer of all ages and such a distinguished figure is the universality of his themes woven so skillfully in a

realistic framework without adherence to any particular system of thought. His approach was mainly humane. In his book *Charles Dickens, A Critical Study* published in 1906, G.K. Chesterton maintains "... that he saw that there was a secret thing, called humanity, to which both extreme socialism and extreme individualism were profoundly and inexpressibly indifferent, and that this permanent and presiding humanity was the thing he happened to understand" (90). One doesn't need to be a socialist to condemn social evils. Dickens is the perfect example. His anti-capitalist voice never relied upon ideological concerns nor was it an effort for propaganda in favour of a particular philosophy or school of thought. Dickens' social commitment to and insistence on moral and social reforms were based more on empathy rather than political motives. Dickens described and castigated the degradation prevalent at all levels of society including the institutions. However, unlike Marx, Dickens favoured adaptation rather than the destruction of institutions. Though they differ significantly as regards to their proposed solutions, the remarkable similarity between Dickens as a social activist and reformist and Karl Marx as a political philosopher was that they both emphasized the hazards involved in adopting a system based on capitalism without a conscience. As Steven Garber suggests in his essay "Capitalism with a Conscience":

Both Dickens and Marx observed the aches and pains, the groaning and suffering of an industrializing Europe-of the dissonance between the Scrooges and the Tiny Tims of this world. Both could see that capitalism without a conscience was a cultural dead-end that would lead the masses into alienation from each other and the world around."

Although Karl Marx never concealed his admiration for Dickens, praising him in the *New York Daily Tribune* on August 1, 1854 as "a painter who had drawn an accurate picture of the affected, ignorant and tyrannical bourgeoisie" (143), Dickens, in his article "On Strike," which appeared in *Household Words* prior to the publication of *Hard Times* declared that he was not a socialist in the conventional sense of the term. However, both Marx and Dickens, along with a number of writers, philosophers and political activists, had a common concern regarding Victorian Conflict, which was to become a global epidemic, infecting mainly those who are socially disadvantaged. The predisposition that progress without social reform and moral integrity would bring about a superficial prosperity crippled by the pain and grief of those buried under its rising towers

of ivory, was central to the social commentary and criticism that emphasized the need for reform.

Despite the severity and wide scale impact of Victorian Conflict, the Victorian era did not witness a revolution which was regarded as the only path to resolution by many. Instead, there occurred a gradual conflict transformation that can be described as "... actions and processes which seek to alter the various characteristics and manifestations of conflict by addressing the root causes of a particular conflict over the long term. It aims to transform negative destructive conflict into positive constructive conflict and deals with structural, behavioral and attitudinal aspects of conflict. The term refers to both the process and the completion of the process" (Austin et al. 464). As the underlying causes and consequences of Victorian Conflict were revealed and challenged, social change was initiated and change appeared in the form of reforms. However, it is difficult to assert that the components that made up Victorian Conflict were completely transformed. Although reforms prevented a violent and destructive outcome, the breeding grounds remained. In fact, our modern world inherited several aspects of Victorian Conflict still waiting to be resolved, and the victims are in need of voices as strong as Dickens' that would help eliminate the ongoing injustices, discrimination of all sorts and oppression all around the world.

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