CHAPTER SIX

THE CHILD AND THE ADULT WORLD

Before we take up Dickens's portrayal of children in relation to the Victorian family or school or law, it is good to examine the conditions in which the children themselves lived. In other words, the reasons why Dickens indicts parents, for example, and their culpable neglect of children are best understood in the Victorian context. David Grylls examines many sociologically interesting documents to analyse the changing attitudes to the parent-child relationship roughly from the beginning to the end of the Victorian times.¹ With the spread

¹.Talking of Marie Corelli's Boy, David Grylls observes: "By 1900, it seems, the country's best-selling novelist could count on a large and eager audience for a book which attributes a young man's misadventures almost entirely to the neglect of his parents, to their culpable laxity in bringing him up." See Guardians & Angels, p.15. The situation, however, had not been the same a hundred years earlier. Grylls cites De Mause's finding that in the eighteenth century children received a better treatment and received greater parental affection (p.19).
of education, the breakdown of the traditional system of apprenticeship and the segregation of children from the adult world in the Victorian scene, children were certainly given an indulgent treatment. A certain amount of severity returned with the Evangelical revival. It will be a sweeping generalization, however, to say that the Victorian adults invariably were indifferent to children. As Grylls points out, "it was in this period that a regard for the young bit deeply into Western culture" (p.22). And he draws our attention to "the curious paradox," "the chief distinguishing characteristic, of Victorian

2. Dickens's contempt for the Victorian society, for the conditions it imposed on children, and his concern are borne out by his letters and speeches. For example, in a letter to Forster, he writes: "...I never go into what is called 'society'...I am aweary of it, despise it, hate it, and reject it." See *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter (Bloomsbury: The Nonesuch Press, 1938), Vol.I, pp.588-89, to Forster, March 1844. Again, in one of his speeches, he raises the question"...If these innocent creatures cannot move you for themselves how can I possibly hope to move you in their name?". See *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. K.J. Fielding (London: Clarendon Press, 1960), p.252.
parent-child relations: that within one society—sometimes within one particular person—tenderness and even cloying affection could co-exist with fierce discipline and a brooding suspicion of sin" (p.23). Harshness existed combined with curiosity and love.

Biographical studies have brought to light Dickens's own unhappy childhood, the indifferent treatment he received from his parents. 3 That may

3. In childhood, Dickens had a number of bitter experiences—his father's imprisonment for debt, himself having to work at six shillings a week in the blacking warehouse as a child, and the problems of his relationship with his father. Biographical studies by Forster, Jack Lindsay and Edgar Johnson have put our knowledge on solid ground regarding the facts of Dickens's life and its relation to his work. See John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens (London: Dent, 1969), in 2 vols; Jack Lindsay, Charles Dickens: A Biographical and Critical Study (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950); Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1953), in 2 vols. Also see Steven Marcus, Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey, p.346.
be one reason why Dickens took keen interest in the figure of the child. Angus Wilson feels that Dickens's 'social views' were strongly influenced by his 'autobiographical obsessions' in his depiction of impossible parent-adults in his fiction. His identification with children, however, is not so readily perceived.

4. Dickens's interest in the child-figure has received a good deal of critical attention. Angus Wilson claims that Dickens is a 'pioneer' in the portrayal of children. See Angus Wilson, "Dickens on Children and Childhood," in Dickens 1970, p. 201; Peter Coveney observes, "the child was at the heart of his interest; at the centre of the Dickens world." See his The Image of Childhood, p. 111. No more eloquent testimony of Dickens's eminence in dealing with child characters is needed than the views of F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, particularly the revised views of the former. F.R. Leavis, who in the forties would not admit Dickens into 'The Great Tradition,' in his later years came not only to recognize Dickens's intrinsic interest in the child and to admire him as a mature and more significant writer about childhood, but also to love him. Also see F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Preface to Dickens the Novelist, pp. 11 and 12.

nor is it uniformly presented in his fiction. The early novels tend to express this concern in a spirit of a sheer whipped-up gaiety. However, the veneer of amusement concealed a deeper gloom and sense of injury which are utterly lacking in a writer like Jane Austen.

The big shift in emphasis with regard to parents and children can be noted by contrasting Jane Austen's presentation of children with that of Dickens. Children are not intimately realized in Austen's fiction. Their presence is perfunctory and merely functional. Whereas in Dickens, observes Grylls, "children are a source of emotional enrichment" (p.115). Jane Austen, of course, gives a great deal of thought to the education and training of children but her basic position seems to be that by nature children are anarchic and depraved and have to be "socialised" (p.117). She upholds "filial duty and parental authority" (p.130). Dickens has a less stern view of the child. Parental care is sought for, but his early novels seldom demonstrate the presence of it in their families. Eventually, he comes to concentrate on parental irresponsibility. Dickens describes one such
irresponsible parent in David Copperfield. When the young, beautiful, widowed Clara married Murdstone, the child David expressed his resentment and displeasure because he was deprived of his mother's affection. The deprivation becomes a felt reality and does not remain an abstraction. It is concrete.

...there was my mother, looking even unusually pretty, I thought, and with her a gentleman with beautiful black hair and whiskers, who had walked home with us from church last Sunday.

As my mother stooped down on the threshold to take me in her arms and kiss me, the gentleman said I was a more highly privileged little fellow than a monarch - or something like that... 'What does that mean?' I asked him, over her shoulder.

He patted me on the head; but somehow, I didn't like him or his deep voice, and I was jealous that his hand should touch my mother's in touching me - which it did. I put it away as roughly as I could.

'Oh Davy!' remonstrated my mother. 'Dear boy!' said the gentleman. 'I cannot wonder at his devotion!' (DC. pp.14-15).

Most of the children lived more or less like orphans in the family. For instance, the position of Dombey in the family was as follows:
Not an orphan in the wide world can be so deserted as the child who is an outcast from a living parent's love (DS, p. 323).

Paul Dombey had his father but not his love. He was an alien in his own family. Such an unfortunate situation obtained in most Victorian families. Even in depicting Oliver, the orphan, Dickens lays the blame on the old for the prevailing state of affairs. He unequivocally disapproves of the failure to show tenderness even while dealing with recalcitrant children. The plight of the innocent but hapless young people like Nell is deeply resented. The dying child is an indictment of the adult world. Some of the children are represented as ministering to their parents, which is an ironic reversal of the duty enjoined on the latter. His virtuous young girls such as Florence, Nell and Little Dorrit, are presented as embodying the spirit of filial obedience. Otherwise, the young become perverts and Dickens does not spare perversity either in parents or in children.
Philip Collins says that Dickens's more prominent child-characters, whether or not they die, are denied the stability of a loving home, and sometimes have no home at all; they are maltreated, bludgeoned by the sarcasm, bad-temper, or repressive convictions of their parents and guardians. Sometimes they are subjected to physical force, whippings and solitary confinement. They are starved or undernourished, rendered unsound of body and mind. They are forced into a conformity which ignores their individual tastes and capacities,...or into an academic diet of sowthistles. If they receive a religious upbringing, it is of the grimmest and most arid kind. No one child, of course, is afflicted by all these horrors, but Dickens reverts to them all several times, and endows every child with an ample selection of them.

This passage vividly reveals that Dickens's depiction of children in his fiction is a miniature reflection of the Victorian child world in conflict with the adult world./Moreover, parents, schoolmasters and lawyers, at least most of them, were self-righteous, occasionally self-centred even, if not selfish, and uniformly harsh in their attitude to children. This was a view Dickens shared with one of his own creations Charles Cheeryble in Nicholas Nickleby:

Parents who never showed their love complain of want of natural affection in their children; children who never showed their duty complain of want of natural feeling in their parents; law-makers who find both so miserable that their affections have never had enough of life's sun to develop them, are loud in their moralisings over parents and children too, and cry that the very ties of nature are disregarded. Natural affections and instincts, my dear sir, are the most beautiful of the Almighty's works, but like other beautiful works of His, they must be reared and fostered, or it is as natural that they should be wholly obscured, and that new feelings should usurp their place, as it is that the sweetest productions of the earth, left untended, should be choked with weeds and briars (NN, p.605).

This shows that there was no rapport between the adult world and the child world. It was impossible that it should be there in the absence of affection and care. The lot of the child was really unhappy.

Moving from the domestic scene to the wider social spectrum, Dickens tends to relate parental failure with institutional failures. As Grylls remarks:
Increasingly, then, in his indictment of erring parents, Dickens has some larger evil more directly in mind. He attacks Calvinism, Benthamism and commercial inhumanity, and the parent-child relationship provides a useful container for putting the abuse on display (p.139).

In *Hard Times*, for example, the relentless attack Dickens mounts is not so much on Gradgrind the man as on the system 'Gradgrindery' which inflicts psychic cruelty upon the children. The father 'sows', 'reaps' and 'garners' and in the process witnesses the disintegration of his own children, which evokes pity in us. The heart-breaking pragmatism of his own best student Bitzer is itself an indictment of the system. The failure of the parent is finely fused with the failure of the system. Parents, on the whole, in Dickens's fiction, seem to fare badly. Dickens believes that the children have much to offer for the grown-ups to learn. A proper interaction with their children might have saved the parents from disaster and depravity.

Dickens's interest in the child-figure, however, went beyond the confines of the family. It extended
to the education of the child especially to the kind given in Victorian educational institutions. Just as there was no rapport between the parent and the child in the family, there was also no proper understanding between the schoolmaster and the student in the school. In fact, nothing was done to educate the child. The child was not permitted to have any feelings of affection or belongingness to either of these two worlds. He was thereby being pushed from an initial sense of exclusion to a total isolation. He was to tend himself, fend for himself, against all odds.

There were, in Dickens's day, schools called 'the Yorkshire Schools' and 'the Ragged Schools' which were specially meant for the poor, neglected boys and girls. Dickens reviewed the workings of the 'Ragged School Movement'. He even supported a few of the Ragged Schools though he knew that most of them were not functioning well. In the Ragged Schools, there was emphasis on industrial and utilitarian education but never on real education. There
was no place for growth nor was there scope for maturity in life. This was largely because the school authorities were more interested in making money than in the progress of the children. Norris Pope explains that the boys were taught to make shoes and the girls to sew.7 There was an extraordinary multiplication of schools. The consequence was that the children were segregated from the adult world.

As Philip Collins pointed out, some of the Yorkshire Schools were really very bad.8 In fact, the


8. Philip Collins gives a brilliant account of the Yorkshire Schools in his *Dickens and Education*, pp. 98-123. A reference to this has already been made in Ch.6. Perhaps the best documentation on the subject of Victorian education (apart from books on Social History) is to be had in his book. Dickens as a lover of children never believed in moral or religious instruction for children. He knew that this kind of religion at that stage produced only either self-righteous puritans lacking in charity or hypocritical Uriah Heeps. Even with the best it would not work. Arthur Clennam is an example. He had almost the same opinion about the so-called intellectuals. He would prefer Barnaby's idiocy to the sophistication of Estella. His association of Christian charity with innocence was almost religious.
Yorkshire School was the one that came in for the harshest criticism in Dickens. The controversy that raged for years about Squeers's Dotheboys Hall and a particular headmaster called William Shaw shows that Dickens was not willing to spare any of these schools. It is not a mere desire to attack or satirise as an expression of righteous indignation felt by his heart. The point here is whether adults were not really as culpable as Dickens had shown them to be. The adults lacked charity. Further, they showed no concern for child welfare. Jarndyce asks (in Bleak House), when Jo is ill, "if this wretched creature were a convicted prisoner his hospital would be wide open to him.' 'Why isn't he a prisoner then?' replies Harold Skimpole. It is this utter neglect, sometimes followed by the tortures and starvation of children in school that made Dickens relentless in his condemnation of the educational system that prevailed then. Most of the charity schools were inefficient. The children were humiliated and disgraced. Corporal punishment was common. Dotheboys Hall in Nicholas Nickleby and
the Gradgrind school in *Hard Times* offer themselves for our consideration. There is a sharp distinction between the two schools. In *Hard Times* the attempt is to show the absurdity of the Benthamite ideology, whereas in *Nicholas Nickleby* the endeavour is to satirize, repudiate and thereby deprecate the attempt of the people like Squeers exploiting the poor and making money out of the school. Dotheboys Hall has no ideology. It is run by knaves for the helpless orphans or disowned children like Smike. Gradgrind's school, however, is based on an ideology which totally undermined the values of child life. The children admitted to these schools became liars and knaves like Tom, the son of Gradgrind.

All this, however, does not mean that there were no good schools or good schoolmasters in Dickens's days. The best schools remained expensive and far beyond the reach of the common man. We see a portrait of a good school in *David Copperfield* where Dr. Strong lives and works for children. Dr. Strong's approach was honest and good. Yet as he did not take into account the whole being of man, the school failed miserably.
Apart from the school, Dickens took interest in the treatment of children in legal institutions. He had his interest primarily in that part of the law which dealt with children. Dickens could not brook the sight of untaught children hunted, flogged, imprisoned.

No study of Dickens's attitude to Victorian legal system is complete without a reference to and an acknowledgement of our indebtedness to the most valuable documentation available in Philip Collins's *Dickens and Crime*. 9

9. Philip Collins refers to the changes in Dickens's earlier and later attitudes to the Bench. See his *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 174-95. Sometimes, of course, his references to punishment, death, crime become melodramatic, as in his description of the murder of Nancy and the death of Smike, as also in his description of Ralph Nickleby, not to mention the earlier sufferings of Smike caused by Ralph. But one would like to attribute it to righteous indignation rather than to a love of sadism or melodrama (pp. 255-89).
The present study, however, concentrates on Dickensian children and so the emphasis is on those aspects of the law which come in for severe condemnation at the hands of the author such as the harshness of the magistrates towards children, ordinary working men and the have-nots. Besides noticing the unjust punishments inflicted on children, Dickens saw the rank ignorance of the Victorian magistrates, lawyers and educationists who thought that the ordinary human being was always a 'drunken beast' unless transformed, disciplined and conditioned by a system. Dickens was also alive to the class bias in the administration of justice which made some magistrates show special consideration for gentleman-accused. As for the lawyers, Dickens could observe that they fomented litigation for personal gains instead of helping the courts by minimising disputes. They took pleasure in probing into the secret of others as is seen in the case of Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*. All these made Dickens savagely attack the very legal system that obtained in the Victorian world.
On the subject of the nature and nurture of children under the law, Dickens had clear-cut views. He always felt that children and men who lived close to nature untainted by sophistication were innocent and they were, therefore, nobler than the educated. For this, we have numerous examples in the characters of Esther Summerson, Little Dorrit, John Jarndyce, etc. The issue will be discussed at length in chapter nine, 'The Child and the Law'.

There were social institutions like orphanages and workhouses run on charity for the orphaned and abandoned children. The motive behind these charitable institutions was good but the 'Poor Laws' that governed them were ineffective and hence remained purposeless. The condition of the children was bad under such 'organized charity.' Humphry House's vivid account of the Poor Laws helps us understand the maintenance of these institutions in Dickens's times.

10. In this chapter, Jo, the victim of the law, in Bleak House and the novelist's symbolic way of presenting the whole world as a prison in Little Dorrit are discussed.
...the main practical aims of the new Poor Law were to reduce the cost of relief by joining parishes in unions and applying a uniform standard throughout the country; to put an end to the system of supplementing wages out of the poor-rates which was artificially lowering wages and also depriving labourers of self-respecting motives for industry; to take the administration of the law out of the hands of the Justices, who had frequently used it for their own ends; to regularize the conduct of workhouses, which were often squalid, disorderly, miserable, and managed by mercenary sharks.\(^\text{11}\)

Humphry House goes on to say that Dickens "concentrates mainly on the bad workhouse feeding, the absurdity of such officers as Bumble and the utter failure to make any proper provision for the pauper children" (p.96). No picture can reveal more powerfully than *Oliver Twist* the appalling situation of the poor orphans in those institutions in England. *Oliver Twist* sees "a systematic course of treachery and deception" in the workhouse where no one can 'ask for more.' When the ill-fed, mal-treated workhouse

\(^{11}\) Humphry House, *The Dickens World*, p.95.
orphan cries himself to sleep, Dickens exclaims with devastating irony:

What a noble illustration of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep (OR, p.10).

What is more, the regulations concerning the workhouse are presented very sarcastically, especially when Dickens says that "the number of workhouse inmates got thin as well as the paupers; and the board were in ecstasies" (p.11). Towards the close of the book, Dickens makes Mr. Bumble himself, once the corrupt beadle, question the sanctity of the workhouse system and the validity of the law which is an 'ass'—an 'idiot'.

It is clear from the above instances that Dickens employs the child-figure in fiction as a vehicle for his social criticism. In fact, we may go a step further and say that the child-figure becomes, in Dickens's hands, a mythic symbol as it were. For it is necessary to remember that he was never content to think in terms of the externals of social and educational reforms. He was not content to be a
mere radical. He is, therefore, not to be misunderstood as merely a social reformer who exposed the ills of the society through his child portraits. One must pay serious attention to him as a thinker and artist in his own right.

Dickens was a social, educational and political thinker. His perceptions about the fate of children were marked by clarity and profound thought. It is against the background of the sad state of affairs of the times that he presents the child-figure. It remains true that, as David Grylls says, "the change may be less in the state of affairs than in the state of perception and judgement. It is at the same time true that Dickens's own ruminations on the issue only reinforced the perception that he had gained directly from his experience. His awareness of the fate of children and his wealth of perception about

them no less than his artistic finesse are behind the fullness and richness of his novelistic experience presented in the fiction. In this respect, at the centre of his characterisation in general and of his depiction of his child characters in particular, there is self‐knowledge, self‐awareness and self‐consciousness. His imagination almost recreates the Victorian family, school and law, which are refracted through the consciousness of his child characters. These institutions are aspects of the Victorian society seen through the medium of Dickens's imagination and therefore they necessarily get transformed in the process. In other words, he merges the problems of his child‐figures into his consciousness. Dickens became aware of the need to create and explore the consciousness of the child by way of "recognitions and relationships," to use a phrase of Raymond Williams. 13 The basic theme of childhood in terms of

human relationships is illustrated by Dickens brilliantly. He shows a remarkable skill in linking the childhood theme with the themes of love and marriage. His preoccupation with these themes is to be found in *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*. He shows a superb maturity in handling these themes for the purposes of presenting real and enduring relationships. They are steeped in social reality, although they are his pure fictional creations. Hillis Miller has pointed out that Dickens's England is a reality to us.  

His novels recreate the Victorian world with an authenticity better than that which can be achieved by mere

14. J. Hillis Miller shows Dickens's novels as "a symptom of the age" and "sees Dickens's own creative vision as in part determining the 'Victorian spirit' itself." Miller, whose criticism is what is known as "the criticism of consciousness," thinks that Dickens almost creates a Victorian England in his novels. Victorian England is a reality to us because in his novels he has embedded, among other things, the fate of so many children of his time. See Hillis Miller, Introduction to Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels, pp. ix and x.
documentary realism. (In fact, attempts have been made to identify characters and trace events and episodes in the novels to what happened to Dickens himself or his contemporaries). No wonder, his portrayal entitles him to the status of a realist in a better sense of the term than Gissing’s use of it. Gissing’s contention is that Dickens’s realism is not documentary realism. While Dickens never aimed at mere documentary realism, he knew that he had to steer clear from smooth conventionalism and unnatural idealizing. As an artist, he allowed himself so much ‘realism’ as is necessary to create an illusion of realism. Far from giving a mere transcript of life, Dickens carries out a probe into psychological states, the motives of those who ill-treat the child and the inner psychological sufferings of the Victorians.

15. George Gissing, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (London: Blackie, 1903), pp. 67-78. Also see F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, p.26. Leavis says that Dickens is "possessed by an intense and penetrating perception of the real." "The art that serves it does not run to the luxuries of pathos and sensation or to redundancies."
Dickens is not only a master-child psychologist but a pioneer in this regard. In fact, during the Victorian age, with the exception of George Eliot, hardly any other major novelist displayed anything like a true insight into the child's mind. Dickens gets into the mind of the child about its problems such as orphanhood, deprivation and isolation. He was able not only to describe the sufferings of the child in isolation but also in the family and at school. He looks at these comprehensively from the point of view of a child and takes a 'child's-eye view', as it were, of the Victorian adult world. His vision of the adult world and his 'fellow-feeling' with the child seemed to have made possible the psychological analysis and delineation of child characters in his fiction.  

Dickens presents children as victims of the adult world which had no care and no concern for the child world. As Philip Collins points out, "the

adult world is generally hostile, vicious, uncomprehending or indifferent; or the child has to minister to, instead of being supported by, it. The portrayal, in the process, inasmuch as it starts with actual social conditions and develops into a psychologically convincing situation, acquires a contextual and universal validity at once.

Dickens relates his child characters to the Victorian context of the social institutions. An examination of the way he presents the family in *Dombey and Son* and *Hard Times*, the school in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Hard Times*, the law in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* will make it clear how far Dickens's art transforms the actual and the real, and in what sense he might be considered a realist.

17. Philip Collins, *Dickens and Education*, p. 182.