

## Poor Children in the Victorian Era

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### Abstract

This study aims to show the situations of poor children in the Victorian Era during the nineteenth century in Britain, how they suffer in their childhood and how they were classified into rich and poor. Those who were poor lacked of dwellings, health and education. The study explains the threat of the children of the streets to big cities in England, the capital London was in top, by spreading serious types of crime. Also it depicts the work of children in factories in crucial and unhealthy circumstances for long hours irrelevant to their age. The researcher applies the analytical and descriptive method to accomplish this literary work. As a result of urgent humanitarian appeals, a specialized hospital for children was established in London to take care of the poor children of the streets as well as other various health centers for the same purpose. The data of this study has been obtained from some previous researches and different references that related to the topic. Victorian Era was a fertile land to produce valuable works of literature by well-known writers like Charles Dickens who reflects the abused of poor children during the Industrial Revolution in many of his novels. There was some improvement in legislations concerning labor and education as an inevitable result of great efforts of social reformers and writers.

### المستخلص

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى عرض أحوال الأطفال الفقراء في فترة العهد الفكتوري خلال القرن التاسع عشر في بريطانيا وكيف عانوا في طفولتهم وكيف تم تصنيفهم على أساس غني و فقير حيث كان الفقراء ينقصهم المسكن والصحة والتعليم. توضح الدراسة تهديد أطفال الشوارع للمدن الكبرى في إنجلترا وعلى رأسها العاصمة لندن وذلك بانتشار أنواع الجرائم الخطيرة. كذلك تتعرض الدراسة لعمل الأطفال في المصانع تحت ظروف قاسية وغير صحية لساعات طويلة لا تتناسب مع أعمارهم. تبني الباحث الطريقة التحليلية والوصفية في إنجاز هذا العمل الأدبي. تم إنشاء مستشفى متخصص للأطفال في لندن نتيجة للمناقشات الإنسانية الطارئة والمتكررة وذلك لرعاية أطفال الشوارع الفقراء بالإضافة لمراكز صحية عديدة اسست لنفس الغرض. أخذت بيانات هذه الدراسة من بعض الدراسات السابقة ومصادر مختلفة ذات صلة بالموضوع. كانت الفترة الفكتورية تربة خصبة لإنتاج الأعمال الأدبية القيمة بواسطة كتاب مشهورين أمثال شارلس ديكنز الذي أوضح الاستغلال السيئ للأطفال الفقراء أثناء الثورة الصناعية في العديد من رواياته. طرأ بعض التحسن في مجال التشريعات القانونية فيما يخص العمل والتعليم كنتيجة حتمية لجهود مقدرة بذلت من دعاة الإصلاح الاجتماعي والكتاب.

### Introduction

The Victorian Era (1837 until 1901) was rich in art works; there was abundant production of poems, plays and stories written by famous authors

such as Charles Dickens. The idea of introducing children in plays and stories flourished during the Victorian period and became common to the audience.

Many writers have depicted the critical situations and suffering of children in life. The capitalists misused the children in their workshops and factories which reflected an ugly face of the Industrial Revolution; they seek big profits with low weak wages this can be achieved by employing the helpless children of the poor families.

#### **The Objectives of this paper**

The objectives of this study can be as follows:

- 1- To reflect the situation of poor children during the Victorian Era, and its influence on society.
- 2-To show poor children were deprived from education, health and stable life and to discuss the spread of the children of the streets as a phenomenon in many big cities which became a direct threat to all people in England.

#### **Classification of childrens**

There were two classes of children during the Victorian period; those who born in houses of wealthy parents, they could guarantee luxuries excellent food and best education. The second class of those who were born in less fortunate homes, things would be difficult and complicated for them. Boys who born in rich families were often sent to boarding for education or were tutored at home by eminent tutors while girls were trained to in household activities like sewing, knitting...etc. which would make them the proper housewives in the future.

On the other hand, children in poor families couldn't go to school and resume their studies, so they were employed by industrial units as they were important sources of labor to the industries. Despite the hard work, they could be paid a very less sum of money. They worked for long

tiring hours in the factories doing hazardous jobs. Boys around the age of eleven or twelve years old were employed to clean chimneys.

#### **The situation of poor families**

Children were compelled to work and jeopardize their lives because Victorian people lived in large families. The miserable living conditions forced those families to take any chance to gain money. Thus, children were pushed into working to assist the parents to earn money and support the budget of the family. I disagree with those people who justified children's working as an act of helping those in dire need of money. The attitude exploited the children rather than saving their innocent childhood. They were made to work hard and for long duration as their parents did. Accordingly, there was no time for children to go to school and obtain education.

In the nineteenth century there were many poor and wretched people live in London and some other big cities. They dwelled in small dirty houses and didn't have sufficient food. Some people lived in workhouses which were used to be terrible places where bad food and beds were supplied for the poor, but they forced to work very hard. So, their children brought up in very difficult conditions as they stayed near factories and in unhealthy dwellings with poor hygiene.

In addition, they had terrible nutrition they ate some bread, pork, milk or cheese irregularly and insufficiently. Children worked with all their might to satisfy the necessary needs of their parents. They underwent very burdensome conditions of employment. Days were too long for them, eight or twelve hours a day, six days a week.

Sometimes children carried stones without wearing shoes as their families were too poor to buy them and they were in rag clothes, even their buildings could collapse at any time. They looked like slaves in the Industrial Revolution. There were no insurance services and when children had accidents or were ill, they didn't receive any assistance.

### **Charles Dickens and children**

In his writings, Charles Dickens depicts the suffering of poor children in their daily life. For instance, the scene in his famous novel *Oliver Twist* when the poor children in the workhouse gathered together after a meal and held a meeting to discuss the lack of food in their meals, finally they decided to ask for more food and Oliver Twist—a thin and weak boy—was appointed to this perilous mission:

**'Please, Sir, I want some more'**

**(The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds; and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralyzed with wonder, the boys with fear.)**

**'What?' said the master at length, in a faint voice.**

**'Please, Sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.' (Oliver Twist ch.2 p.10)**

Another example in *Bleak House* (1852-1853) which foregrounds the permanent unsettlement of the street urchin child Jo who is forever walking the muddy maze of London streets:

'I have always been a moving and a moving on, since I was born' (*Bleak House* 308) In the course of the novel, Jo seems to melt into the mud that he shovels way day after day. From his first entrance as a rejected witness for Nemo's inquest, when he is

described as: 'very muddy, very hoarse very ragged' (*Bleak House* 176). Jo is constantly connected to the indistinct, chaotic element of mud: 'Jo don't know no think apart from the fact that it is hard to keep the mud off the crossing in dirty weather and harder still to live by doing it'. (*Bleak House* 256).

Whenever he can afford to pay for lodgings, he spends the night in the ruined houses of Tom-all-Alone's, where he becomes part of the indistinct crawling mass of paupers: 'Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swam of misery. An on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers'. (*Bleak House* 256-7).

The forced mobility of Jo—the street child—proves fatal when he unknowingly spreads the smallpox which he has contracted at Tom-all-Alone's, Jo thus becomes the fulfiller of the ghost child's bleak prophesy in 'Drooping Buds' whose warning is repeated by the narrator of *Bleak House*: 'There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. There is not an atom of Tom's slime [...] but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, the highest of the high'. (*Bleak House* 710).

As Steven Conner has observed, Jo's affinity with the metropolitan mire establishes a bond between the little street sweep and another character in the novel, George's stunted servant, Phil: Jo shuffles and smears his way along in the same fashion as the crippled Phil who can only move by leaning his shoulder on the wall to stabilize his limp, leaving a smear on the walls.

Phil has been a child of streets and like Jo, this origin seems to have stained him in a permanent way.

'Phil!' Says the master [...], you were found in a doorway, weren't you?

'Gutter', says Phil.' Watchman tumbled over me.'

Then vagabonding came natural to you, from the beginning.'

'As na'ral as possible', says Phil. (Bleak House 351)

The representation of these two children of the streets by Dickens rehearse, albeit sympathetically, the connection which many contemporary social reformers drew between the nomadic lifestyle of streets children and the spread of epidemic diseases. In the reports and speeches of social reformers such as Lord Shaftesbury, Thomas Beggs and Mary Carpenter, we find copious warnings about the 'race of cripples' haunting the metropolis and spreading physical as well as moral diseases.

In his 'Inquiry into the Extent and Causes of Juvenile Depravity'(1849), Beggs based his bleak summary of the condition of London's street children on the assessments of medical men.' The children [...] are diminutive, pale, squalid, irritable; I rarely saw a child in a really healthy state'.

A very clear example that shows the suffering of children in Dickens's writings is in his novel David Copperfield (1848-1850), David's life with Mr. Murdstone and their relationship is depicted as a horrible experience for a small boy. He is treated with disregard to his person and later physically punished.

For Murdstone, David has the same value as an animal, may be even worse: "David, he said, making his lips thin, by pressing

them together, if I have an obstinate horse or dog to deal with, what do you think I do? I don't know. I beat him".(David Copperfield 72). From this quotation, it is evident that David is worth nothing in Murdstone's eyes and his existence is compared to be of an animal.

David's suffering in his childhood continues at school where the boys are frightened by Mr. Creakle and where David is humiliated by the sign he has to wear on his back as a result of biting Mr. Murdstone.

"Take care of him, he bites" (David Copperfield 119).

**The children of the streets :**According to Katharina Boehm, the rhetoric of Carpenter's Juvenile Delinquents (1853) took the frequently drawn connection between the growing number of street children and the spread of contagious diseases one step further. In Carpenter's book, the children of the streets are themselves turned into the disease that threatens England as a whole not only London as city:

'They are sadly diseased set of patients whom some in desperation, would gladly exterminate if they could. Fortunately, they cannot; indeed it would be of little use to themselves or others if they were able, for abundance of other poisonous weeds would be continually springing up with a rank growth in a soil filled with all sorts of impurities; they cannot sweep those poor diseased children away, we must *try to cure them and to eradicate the seeds of the complaint'*

Carpenter calls for the establishment of a space for the moral betterment and social reintegration of London's street children.

Again she turns to clinical images: 'Such a condition is one of grievous moral disease; it needs a moral hospital, and requires a treatment guided by the highest wisdom of those who have learnt the art of healing from the physician of souls.'

We can notice that Bleak House becomes such a 'moral hospital' for Jo when he escapes from London in a condition of serious illness (may be smallpox). Jo's journey to Bleak House like Dickens's representation of the children's hospital as a remote heaven for the children of the poor in 'Drooping Buds' depicts the desire to pinpoint the exact location of the disturbingly elusive children of the streets'.

As Katharina Boehm stated that, the imaginative link between the children's hospital and the children of the streets implied by 'Drooping Buds' was made more explicit in the essays and newspaper articles which followed Dickens and Morley's article.

Charles Dickens officially joined the ranks of the children's hospital's supporters when he co-authored the first extended journalistic report about the newly founded hospital for Household Words. That article entitled 'Drooping Buds' was jointly written with Henry Morley, the magazine's most prolific commentator on social and educational topics. It appeared on the cover of Household Words in April 1852, a space traditionally reserved for contribution turning on matters of social and sanitary reform. After its publication, donations poured in and stabilized the greatly strained budget of the hospital. 'Drooping Buds' became a

touchstone for numerous later reports and literary essays about the institution, which engaged with an imitated Dickens and Morley's article.

'Drooping Buds' extracted the essence ideas of West's innovative lectures and circulated them among a mass audience of adults and children, general readers and medical practitioners, for instance, one of the most important principles of West's pediatrics was his belief in the fundamental differences between the child's body and the adult body and in existence of families of diseases and disabilities which either affect children alone or in a signally different way from their occurrence in adults.

In a similar style, Dickens and Morley's article argued: "It doesn't at all follow that the intelligent physician who has learnt how to treat successfully the illnesses of adults, has only to modify his plans a little, to distinguish the proportions of his doses, for the application of his knowledge to our little sons and daughters. some of their diseases are peculiar to themselves; other diseases, common to us all, take a form in children varying as much from their familiar form with us as a child varies from a man."

The writer Katharina Boehm noticed that, two extended passages in 'Drooping Buds' offer complementary views of the hospital: The first opens with a panorama perspective of London, gradually narrowing down the view until nothing but the hospital is visible; the second presents a glimpse of the hospital before expanding into a panoramic survey of the metropolis, swelling with the bodies of diseased, disabled and dead children.

The hospital is thus carefully located on an imaginary map that details the topography of a child health in London. The city and the hospital's location within it, is first pictured as an ancient tree:

*'London like a fine old tree that has lived through some centuries has its dead bits in the midst of foliage. When we had provided ourselves with the address of the child's hospital and found it to be No.49, Great Ormond Street, Queen Square, we were impressed with a sense of its being very far out of the way. Great Ormond Street belonged to our great grandfathers; it was a bit of London full of sap a great number of years ago. It is cut off now, from the life of the town-in London but not of it- a suburb left between the New Road and High Holborn.'*

From her own point of view, Boehm explained, the image of the oak grown of centuries, presents London often pictured as a city fractured in halves; the prosperous West End of the silver fork novels and the criminal and poor East End of New gate narratives, as an organic whole, containing and preserving even dead branches which are no longer connected to the life-giving sap of the tree.

The dead children's bodies in 'Drooping Buds' are implicitly assumed to belong to the children of the poor and to those children who live in the streets; their death, so the argument of the article runs, could have been prevented if the establishment of a children's hospital only had been accomplished earlier.

There is a marked contrast between the representation of these poor children, of whom nothing remains but decomposing matter clogging the veins of the city and the ghosts of middle and upper class children who also make their entrance in 'Drooping Buds'. Visiting the hospital, the narrator daydreams of the departed house fairies, those middle and upper class children who lived and died in the stately mansion in Great Ormond Street before it was turned into a hospital.

As these children gather before the reader and take turns in telling their stories, it becomes clear that in contrast of the poor, these children are indeed granted some sort of afterlife. The children of the middle and upper classes, the article implies, live on because in contrast to the children living in the streets, they had a beautiful home in Great Ormond Street while alive and a place full of memories to return to as ghosts.

The contrasting pictures of deceased children-articulate ghost children and slowly decomposing corpses-seems to have lingered in Dickens's imagination. Another group of well-to-do ghost children appeared in Dickens's noted speech at the first annual dinner for the benefit of the hospital in 1858. Four years later, 'Between the Cradle and the Grave' drew up a further map of the distribution of child corpses in London. The article pictures a ghostly line of little corpses that would border a long highway through the town cutting through the city from White Chapel beyond Kensington.



The picture of the corpses which-instead of staying buried in earth- seem to erupt onto the surface of the city alludes to campaigns that sought to prohibit the establishment of burial grounds near residential areas. Dickens supported Edwin Chadwick and other sanitary reformers in their endeavors to change legislation.

We could notice another gloomy image illustrated by Boehm, the chain of corpses encompassing east, central and West London works to a similar effect as the al-pervading fog in Bleak House which constantly remembers the reader that impure air transports contagions particles from one part of the city to another, regardless the invisible social boundaries between richer and poor ones.

The ghastly chain of little corpses starting at Bow church in the east and extending beyond Kensington Gardens in the west, illustrates the fact that epidemics and childhood diseases were indiscriminately taking their toll among middle and working-class children. 'Between the Cradle and the Grave' retraces the social geography outlined in Bleak House, the first of Dickens's mature works to enter into a full-blown critique of the social and bureaucratic evils haunting London and England as a whole.

I agree with Hugh Cunningham in arguing that, a marked shift occurred in cultural representations of street children at the middle of the nineteenth century. In the 1840s proponents of the Evangelical Ragged School movement and commentators on juvenile delinquency such as Carpenter and Beggs, addressed the alleged depravity of street children as an evil of national

dimensions that was capable of shaking the foundations of political and social order.

The children's unsettled ways of living, formerly a source of social and political anxiety, were now frequently shown in romantic and picturesque terms. At the same time, social reformers drew public attention to the reasons that flung children into streets and rendered them as the innocent victims of neglectful parents.

Some journalists invested the bodies of street children simultaneously with romantic fantasies of adventure and freedom and with a set of concerns relating to the spread of moral depravity and infectious diseases. A page-long article about Great Ormond Street Hospital, printed in 1867 in the Daily Telegraph, illustrates that the diseased bodies of the children of the streets-not their environment- were ultimately constructed as sites of moral and physical reformation.

The report opens with an almost celebratory view of street life: 'It is true that children are sent out into the streets to make a living at a very early age, but to that they don't object. There is an air of freedom, a spice of excitement, about the lives of these little Bohemians which reconciles them to the hardships which they undergo. Even in comparison to the children growing up in the elegant nurseries of higher echelons of society, the 'children of mobility' can consider themselves lucky because they are annoyed by none of the galling fetters which shackle the limbs of their coeval superiors; they have no lessons to learn, no schoolroom to loathe, no governess to hate'.

The article runs on to describe the threat of moral and physical disease which lurks everywhere in the streets and which can quickly turn endearing little Bohemians into dangerous little savages. The children of the streets which appear in profuse numbers in the newspaper articles are taken in from the streets and undergo a cardinal process of social reintegration and moral reformation.

**A hospital to nurse homeless children**  
A distinguished specialized hospital emerged in London as an immediate response, hugging many pale and miserable children. It was founded as a charitable house to provide inferior nutrition and care. It was Great Ormond Street Hospital.

The committee of the hospital defined three purposes for the hospital as follows: The provision of medical care for the children of the poor; the advancement of medical knowledge about diseases and disabilities peculiar to childhood and the diffusion of knowledge about childcare among the poor through the establishment of a nursing school.

Looking through the nineteenth century albums of press cutting held in the archive of Great Ormond Street Hospital, a person can get the impression that there was a never-ceasing stream of street children migrating to the children's hospital.

#### **Reformation in labor and education**

In 1802 and 1819, Factories Acts were passed which restricted the working hours of children working in cotton mills to twelve hours. Unfortunately, these acts did nothing. Moreover, they help improve the situation. In 1833, Royal commission recommended children between eleven to

eighteen years be made to work only for twelve hours and those younger ones for eight hours. But the problem here was that, it only covered the issue of those working in textile industry.

However, in 1870 Education Act made it mandatory for children between five to ten years of age to go to school. It was not until 1881 that the Act was made applicable throughout the country. Many children took after school jobs to help managing the budget of their families. Two common indoor jobs were spread at that time, one was to work as a servant and the other was to be sweetshop workers. Girls and boys as young as eleven years worked as servants in people's houses doing the allotted jobs.

There were some businessmen who found the very concept of making a child work in risky factories unreasonable. To some of them, children were suitable laborers to operate the small machines. Thus, poverty played a major role in the exploitation of children and deprived them of their childhood and innocence.

**Conclusion** From this brief survey of children's life-mainly the poor- during the Victorian Era, we could extract that their situation was extremely acute and crucial which let scholars, scientists and social reformers succeed in their urgent appeal for founding pediatric hospitals to reduce that disastrous phenomenon of the children of the streets.

It is so obvious that the society of classes dominated the period. The rich people lived in luxury while the poor could hardly earn their living and stayed in shanty houses. Moreover, others were homeless lacking the necessities of life.



The rich and factories' owners proposed and flourished as the middle and poor classes rooted their endless poverty and gloominess. It is a fertile land and nature for literature, especially story tellers and dramatists who enrich their fancy and contemplations to produce masterpieces in the field. Well-known and twinkled authors have arisen like: Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, George Eliot and the most brilliant Charles Dickens.

We have witnessed great improvement in the situation of working children in factories and a way was paved for establishing many schools for education to all children as well as excellent services in health centers and hospitals.

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