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Towards Understanding Teaching Ethos in Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*

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Abstract:

"Our Mutual Friend" is the last completed novel written by Charles Dickens. This novel is largely believed to be the most challenging that Dickens produced and is known for the seemingly rushed ending. This is one of his most sophisticated works and it combines psychological insight with the social analysis. In the words of critic J. HILLIS MILLER, "money, money and money, and what money can make of life", but at the same time it also highlights the education system of the 19th century. Shuttleworth laid the foundation for a national system of popular education. He opened the first teaching training college in Battersea in 1840. Dickens and Shuttleworth both of them had a great acquaintance in the reformation of education policy so they shared their interest and worked for the pauper children and ragged schools. In the present research paper I would highlight the concept of TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING TEACHING ETHOS IN CHARLES DICKENS' OUR MUTUAL FRIENDS.

Dickens was born on 7 February 1812 in Landport, Portsmouth, in Hampshire, the second one of eight children to John Dickens, a clerk in the Navy Pay office at Portsmouth and his wife Elizabeth. *Our Mutual Friend* was published by Macmillan Press in 1962. This book was popular not only in England but also across the globe for its acceptability in the society. This book had a direct communication to everyone's heart. People took it as a dire need of the time. While Dickens, as the son of a clerk acquired some formal education, provision for the poor was far less readily assured. The British and Foreign School Society were established and given the charge of shaping the mind of youngsters basically for the poor. Dickens as a farsighted person objected to the National Society's insistence on Church intervention in education. The revolutionary mind of the novelist had made a great impact on the policy makers of education in which we cannot forget the name of James Kay Shuttleworth, Statistician and critic of the Monitorial system.

Shuttleworth laid the foundation for a national system of popular education. He opened the first teacher training College in Battersea in 1840. Dickens and Shuttleworth both of them had a great acquaintance in the reformation of education policy so they shared their interest and worked for the Pauper children and ragged schools. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens admits that he had given a title to the ragged schools, that is "temple of good intentions" (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* Chapter 2.1).

Bradley Headstone is a stipendiary teacher in *Our Mutual Friend* well paid, and expected to train the pupil teachers placed under him. The arrangement made by the government had a hopeful prospect for the shaping of young minds but it was failed at its goal. It may be the cause of lacking the knowledge of teacher, or, because, his temperament, and sometimes unsympathetic attitude towards the teacher and pupil teachers. Dickens had made attempt to raise the issues which hamper the path of education policy and its implementation. In the time of Dickens, most of the institutions were not duly funded by the government agencies, and some of the institutions were established for girls only, including Minerwa House, in which the pupils, "acquired a smattering of everything and a knowledge of nothing" (*Pickwick Papers XVI*)

Dickens raised the issue of noisy or overcrowded classes where most of the students were unable to comprehend the lessons taught by the teachers due to the dismal conditions of the classroom. Even a good, committed and focused teacher could not perform in this environment but deliver a 'Lamentable jumble' alone. Even good, trained teachers also become victims of the prevailing ethos and whose minds become a place of 'Mechanical Stowage' a warehouse, ever ready to meet the demands of the retail dealers history, geography, astronomy or political economy.

The report of the New Castle commission which came in 1861, submitted some regulations regarding the reformation of education policy extending the possibility of sound elementary education to all classes. The purpose of his policy was to make the people

aware to the root level education that was the dire need of the time. Dickens was not in the favour of creating graduates for the purpose of receiving a good job but they had to play a vital role in the reforming of society. Society is a wide canvas that should be aware to the requirement of the time. Being a farsighted, he always emphasized on the need of workforce and committed mind. He wanted to shape the mind of people and he was also succeeded in his goal.

Our Mutual Friend endeavors the sociological development of the new generation of teachers. He showed the ineffective role of training colleges and they were failed at a great extent in their purpose. He repeated again that a great store of this teacher's talent, stored in his mental 'wholesale warehouse' was always ready to meet the demands of retail dealers. Headstone is one of the well paid teacher, reflecting the enhanced status of qualified teachers, Headstone pervades a vicious outlook, which proves to be his undoing. He falls for Lizzie Hexam, but because of his obnoxious behavior, is rejected. Despite this view, Headstone confirms that he has a 'right to be considered a better man' than Wayburn, with 'better reason for being proud', the Latter calmly counters, "How I can reproach you with cast stones that were never in my hand problem for the inactivity of a school master to prove?" (Dickens Book II Ch. VI)

Dickens raised the issue of gender-biasness that hampered the purpose of teaching. The schools were established for both of the sexes, boys and girls, without having any disparity, yet they were kept apart. Having good intentions, teacher were lacking gradually in their skills. It was great concern for the teachers as well as for the students. Consequently, every pupil was childish and innocent. The older pupils were taught to read out of the New Testament and "by dint of stumbling over the syllables and keeping their bewildered eyes on the particular syllables coming round to their turn, were as absolutely ignorant of the sublime history as if they had never seen or heard of it..." (Chapter-XVIII). There is some special feature with Dickens' writing that is of his plot-construction and characterization. He has a good number of characters in his writings which make the people uncertain in memorizing the name of characters portrayed in the novel. In *David Copperfield*, we have more than hundred characters including major and minor characters. In typical Dickens fashion, the major characters eventually get some measure of what they deserve, and few narrative threads are left hanging.

Here, Dickens has delivered a dialogue from *Our Mutual Friend* where teacher, Mrs. Peecher wants to reform her speech before Bradley Headstone, who is visiting the school very soon. For the purpose of placing impression before him, Mrs. Peecher ire on the girl and says:

"... How often have I told you not to use that vague expression, not to speak in that general way? When you say they say, what do you mean? Part of speech they?"

"Personal Pronoun" Marry Anne replies, and a barrage of questions follows, which she must answer.

'Person, they?'

'Third Person.'

'Number, They?'

'Plural number' (206)

The conversation goes continue, until the girl, fully disconcerted, murmurs the rule of grammar drilled into her head, to the satisfaction of Mrs. Peecher.

Dickens also raised the issue of common behavior and working culture of teachers. Normally, a teacher wants to be called with respectable idioms, like 'gentleman' or 'honorable sir' but that was not referred in the schools. Though the teachers were not well off yet committed to their responsibilities given to them. Schoolmasters like Bradley Headstone were by no means well off financially, but their education and responsibility made them feel that they were in an honourable profession and that they deserved to be treated with respect by members of the middle class. Inspectors of the schools usually referred to schoolmasters as 'Person' rather than 'gentleman' in their reports, they had lost 'sight of the fact that they have risen from a very humble social position'

Charles Dickens main attempt lies to draw the teacher and pupil teacher as central characters in his novels so that he can mitigate the problem of school teaching environment and school teachers. Dickens has tried to focus on the dismal educational scene of his time. He had a great concern for the enhancement of dropouts of students gradually. He wanted to check the dismal condition of schools as well as teaching environment. Dickens had the opinion that it was better for a child to be taught at home instead of being dumped into a ragged school where there was but little, if any, of what may be termed 'education'? According to Dickens, every teacher has to be well-conversant with the verbal and non-verbal language which is the basic requirement for a teacher, one who wants to enter in this profession. Students speak in paralinguage for interaction among their friends and a teacher can watch the language being spoken in the exclusive environment should be decoded by a teacher to understand in his/her language. In speech, coding, encoding and decoding are equally powerful to make the speech functional. In a language, direct speech can be understood by the student but the meaning which is behind the word and expressions cannot be conveyed all the time to the students for which one has to have the knowledge of gestures for effective teaching. Each of the teachers in our society wants to become the effective teacher in his classroom so that he can transfer his knowledge among the students in an effective manner. Classroom teaching is a challenging task for a teacher to make it effective in the classroom. In non-verbal communication, there are five primary functions of non-verbal behavior-

- Expression of Emotion-emotions is expressed mainly through the face, body, and voice.
- Communication of Interpersonal Attitudes-this behavior can be developed through non-verbal signals such as tone of voice, gaze, touch etc.
- Accompany and Support Speech- this behavior can be practiced in the form of nodding heads where a teacher has to be well-conversant with this activity else he will not be able to decode the message he wants to convey through the nodding of head. Nodding of behavior m have three types of meaning in which one of them is that listener understands your message second listener has some doubts and third he does not understand speaker's behavior.

Our Mutual Friend presents a microcosm of education system that was prevalent in the Dickens time. Most of the children are the victims of their parents or teachers or nature itself. Dickens' main attempt lies not only in pointing out of the problems but also in extending the best possible suggestions towards the education policy. Besides exposing the ills of bad education it also asks for a considerate and humane attitude towards the suffering children who were the largest suffering community of Dickens' time.

References

1. Dickens , Charles. *Our Mutual Friend*. Oxford: Macmillan, 1962. Print