



THEMES OF JUSTICE AND CONTROL IN VICTORIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

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Abstract

The eighteenth century was the height of the novel's popularity as a literary form. The writers Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne made major contributions to the development of the English novel. They had an impact on authors who followed them. The industrial revolution, which included the development of the printing machine, coincided with the 18th century and greatly aided in the birth of the novel. The industrial revolution's knock-on consequences raised people's standards of living. The morals of the Victorian age and Victorian society were accurately reflected in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Knowing that the Victorian period was characterised by virtue, strength, economy, manners, cleanliness, honesty, and chastity, among other things. Victorians used to hold these principles in the highest regard. Dickens developed many Victorian characters in *Great Expectations*, who we have seen both in fine operating order and not at all. Next, we may go on to the middle-class household, where Pumblechook served as the regime's representative. Last but not least, in the book *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham served as a symbol and flag of the wealthy and cultured Victorian lady who represented the upper class society. Thus, we may conclude that *Great Expectations* discussed and illustrated the Victorian England class structure, and that the book's characters upheld the authentic portrayal of the Victorian age.

Keywords: *Great Expectations*, Novel, Victorian era, Charles Dickens, 18th century, English novel, Upper class, Lower class, Rise of the middle class.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay is intended for undergraduate English and literature majors who may be required to research the historical evolution of novels in general or novels or literature from the 18th century specifically¹. Its goal is to provide a general overview of the history and rise to popularity of the book as a literary form. In order to provide context for the birth of the novel, the study begins with its precursors or antecedents.

After discussing the romances, which eventually gave rise to the novel appropriate, the origins of the novel can be traced back to the epics, which are the oldest works of literature in the world. The article also outlines additional types of literature such as picaresque and episodic which were the basis of the novels. The paper's last section provides a succinct overview of the many novel genres that emerged after the eighteenth century.

Despite a number of seeming contradictions, the Victorian era was marked by social reforms and significant advancements in industry and technology that placed Britain at the forefront of world power. Growing poverty in neglected districts of large cities like London draws attention

¹ Compton-Rickett, A. (1995). *A history of English literature*. New Delhi: UPS.

away from problems; in fact, these portions of the city provided an ideal setting for crime, allowing criminals to operate with impunity². This was only partly accurate; in fact, I concentrate on the false sense of criminality after closely examining papers detailing the spike in crime statistics during those years.

Even if little, insignificant crimes were commonplace, books and newspapers began portraying crime in a dramatic manner to entice readers to purchase them. This was put into effect via new legislation and sentencing modifications that were passed; they will be examined in the first chapter's second part. The Prison System is among the most crucial topics to examine while discussing punishment. Because of this, I thought it was fascinating to focus on the modifications made to the Victoria jail Systems and the actual alteration of pre-existing jail constructions. I provide a fair assessment of the Victorian-era Prison System in the book, focusing on the personnel, the convict population, and the jail's architecture.

One of the best novels with a Victorian subject is *Great Expectations*. Dickens has created a lively figure in Pip, his primary protagonist. Over time, Pip's traits evolved, and at one point, Dickens turned him into a conceited guy because he was feeling quite strange after visiting his boyhood buddy Joe, who had moved to London. Another friend of Pip's, Biddy, sent a letter on Joe's visit to London, but Pip didn't seem pleased.

Rather of being joyful, Pip experienced discomfort. He wished in his thoughts that they had not met with Joe. Pip believed that Joe didn't require anything to see his former sophisticated lifestyle. Pip's arrogance did intensify and reach a point where he considered making Joe an offer of money. Pip did act quite weirdly and showed no interest in Joe after their encounter. Pip was embarrassed by Joe's presence in his position as a consequence. He was uncomfortable since he believed Joe was acting impolitely, and he also didn't like his coat or old-fashioned cap. Therefore, Pip's attitude of severely disregarding Joe has been made extremely plain to him. Joe didn't want to spend that night in Pip's room as a consequence of this.

One of the most significant social critics of the Victorian period, Charles Dickens eloquently criticised the moral, social, and economic injustices of the day via fiction. He supported several significant social changes and shown empathy and sympathy for the weaker and less fortunate members of English society. Dickens' painful early experiences—his father was incarcerated in the Marshal Sea Debtors' Prison due to the Insolvent buyer Debtors Act of 1813, and he himself worked at a shoe blacking factory at the age of twelve—are the source of his profound awareness of societal evils. Dickens gained a keen social conscience and the capacity to sympathise with those who were harmed by economic and social wrongdoing as an adult.

Dickens saw his fiction as a platform for discussions about moral and social change because he believed in the socio-political and ethical possibilities of literary works, and the novel in particular. Dickens became a vocal opponent of unfair social and economic situations via his social analysis books. His strongly felt societal critiques contributed to the reading public's increased knowledge of social issues. He unintentionally aided in the passage of many laws, such as those that limited the use of the death penalty, cleaned up the Magistrates' Courts, improved the administration of criminal jails, and ended the cruel practice of imprisoning people for disagreements.

² Hasan, M.N. (2015). The eighteenth century and the rise of the English novel. *International Journal of Literature and Art*, 3 (2), 18-21.

2. THE NOVEL'S ANCESTRALS

Although the English novel became well-known in the seventeenth century, the world's oldest work of literature, the Epic of Gilgamesh, dates back to 612 BC. The first significant poet and literary innovator, Homer lived in 700–800 BC and is credited with writing the classic Greek epics titled *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, among others. He founded the epic tradition, which had a distinct framework and subject matter. Roman poet Virgil composed the epic works *Beowulf* and *Aeneid* about 900 BC; Milton (1608–1744) used the latter as a basis for his *Paradise Lost*. The great works were poems with narratives that described human interactions with monsters and the heroic things that people did to win conflicts. Following the epics emerged a new genre of literature known as the romances, which first appeared in French in the twelfth century. It was also referred to as mediaeval romance or chivalric romance since it was very popular throughout the mediaeval era, which lasted from 1000 AD to 1450 AD. By selecting themes like courage, honour, adventure, and courtly love with distinctive elements of using magic, spells, and magical abilities in the romance to pique readers' curiosity and interests, the academics broke from the tradition of the epic. "Romances originally appeared in verse, although later in writing as well," claims Abrams (1995)³. One of the most famous English romances is Malory's prose work *Morte d'Arthur*, which describes the story of Arthur the King and his fellow knights of the Order of the Round Table and was published in approximately 1470.

Finally, this injustice took place. As a result, in addition to his most recent crime, which is revealed towards the book's conclusion, we also know about Magwitch's prior crimes and how he carries prior criminal records. Conversely, Cooperson seemed to be a decent guy with a distinguished and aristocratic lineage. There was a major problem in England between the affluent and the poor. This distinction between classes emerged by evaluating the lifestyles of both sides. We might start by talking about the simple and innocent individuals who lived in the countryside. They were also obedient, kind, and honest.

However, the populace of a metropolis like as London become artificial and convoluted. For instance, upon Pip's arrival in the city, he explored the region and was unimpressed with the town where Mr. Jaggers had his office, which was dubbed "Little Britain." The area has a reputation for being polluted⁴. The location of Mr. Jaggers' office was, to be honest, somewhat dismal. There was a forty-year-old middle-aged housekeeper who worked for Jagger. She was usually occupied with watching her master, particularly when she was in the dining room.

Pip saw Jagger's care for everything when he was in his house, so he started doing things on his own and spreading the word about them all. One of the astute solicitors, Jaggers extracted whatever information he desired from each of his clients. Pip's sister Joe's family serves as the vehicle through which rural England is portrayed in this book *Great Expectations*.

Initially, upon beginning our reading of the book, we learned about Pip, an orphan who shared a home with his sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Joe Gargery, in a marsh near a river. Thus, we saw that the wealthy were nasty and self-centered on the opposing side. This brings us to the primary traits of Victorian society. Some of the characters in *Great Expectations* were

³ Kettle, A. (1967). *An introduction to the English novel*. New Delhi: Universal Book Stall.

⁴ Kuiper, B. (2012, March 23-24). *Pilgrim's progress: How a novel can affect an entire culture's communication*. Paper presented at Faith and Communication Conference, Campbell University, North Carolina.

adorned with the traits of avaricious and unscrupulous individuals. Pip paid a second visit to Miss Havisham's home and discovered several of her relatives, but Pip thought they were "toadies and humbugs".

2.1 Great Expectations' Victorian-era depiction of education

The representation of teachers in the book *Great Expectations* was represented by a number of institutional chances. There was a character named Mr. Wopsle's great aunt, who gave her kids irrelevant information since she had little opportunity to educate the lower classes. A variety of education programmes were still in place in Victorian England, but they restricted some individuals, particularly the underprivileged. Pip, the main character of this book, was fortunate to have an enigmatic patron who helped pay for his schooling and groom him to be a gentleman. Fortunately, a mystery benefactor promoted him to one of these opportunities by paying for his "gentleman's schooling"⁵. Mr. Pocket, a graduate of Cambridge, did provide the scholarly expertise that aligned with his own area of interest. In fact, this very schooling produced egotistical individuals who will not serve society in any way. We may claim that Pip was not really grasping the significance of a scholarly education, which left him with no advantages for society in respect to that worldview. Dickens did, however, provide a realistic picture of lower class individuals who struggled to access basic educational possibilities in this work of fiction.

2.2 The Victorian era is portrayed in the book *Great Expectations*

Dickens' *Great Expectations* is one of the many philosophical novels from the Victorian period. This book does a great job of depicting its own era. Dickens based his 1860 book *Great Expectations* on the life of Pip, an orphan who was adopted and nurtured as an adult. The novel did accurately depict the characteristics of the Victorian age, including the disparity in social classes, industrialization, Victorian ideals, and the position of women.

The story did introduce us to a typical lower-class household early on. Their village was situated among wetlands. Pip's sister, Mrs. Joe, was a typical Victorian low-class housewife. Mr. Joe became a blacksmith. She was overwhelmed by her domestic responsibilities and would often beat Pip, feeling unhappy that she could not remove her apron due to her demanding tasks. Following that, the book's prologue introduces us to elegant, well-groomed, and graceful ladies like Havisham, the heroine, and Estella. Additionally, these two distinct families served as the earliest instances of different social strata in the community.

As a result, we learned that the Victorian period was associated with a certain social order. The Gargery family, who really represented a low-class, illiterate lifestyle in a hamlet, was the first thing we saw. However, Miss Havisham did reside in a house known as Satis House⁶. There was another family, "The Pockets," who had a large household of servants. Estella was a young woman with foreign education and talent for dancing. After receiving money from the mysterious donor, the main character, Pip, became wealthy. He underwent a transformation and began leading an opulent lifestyle.

3. The Victorian Era: Crime, Respect, and Reforms

3.1 The Victorian Compromise and the Victorian Era

Due to the close relationship between the legal and criminal system and its social and political environment, it is important to pay attention to the advancements, reforms, and discoveries that

⁵ Naeem Educational Organisation, (2010). *Reasons for the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century*.

⁶ Ogana-Roxana, I. (2010). *Tristram Shandy: An original and profound English novel of the eighteenth century*.

defined the historical period in which they were implemented. The Victorian Era, as it was called, ran from 1837 to 1901⁷. Because of the widening disparity between the middle and working classes, Queen Victoria ascended to the British throne during a challenging political era. There were many worker rallies throughout this time of change. One such example is the Chartist movement, which began in Britain's capital city in 1836 and became the greatest workers' organisation when it began to expand across the nation in 1838.

It is crucial to emphasise that three new political organisations were founded during the Victorian era. The Workers Party, which was established in 1900, the year before the queen passed away, the liberals who originated from the Wigs, and the supporters of conservatism who came from the old Tories. The party known as the Labour Party was founded on a highly original and fundamental reformation, since it allowed workers' representatives to sit in Parliament for the first time.

Queen Victoria came to represent a period of time marked by advancements in science and industry. The development of railroads and steamboats made travel shorter, the use of steam in machinery increased factory output, and the construction of pipelines and tunnels allowed sewage to be removed from urban areas. The telegraph and gas lighting inventions can also be mentioned. In 1851, Queen Victoria and her partner in crime Albert Saxon Gotha, Germany made the decision to showcase all of these inventions at the Great Exhibition of London.

This period of discoveries, reforms, and puritanical reverence was really a front for the true nature of British society, which was concentrated in London, the nation's metropolis. The opposite side of the coin represented the part of English society where drug use, poverty, and crime were rampant. While women were expected to adhere to rigid morals and laws, cover their legs, and behave respectably, thousands of them were forced into prostitution by the social norms of the day. In the London Slums, murder, robbery, pickpocketing, stealing, gambling, and opium usage were commonplace incidents⁸. These were run-down areas of the city where impoverished people lived in attractive conditions; there were too many of them, there was poor sanitation, diseases began to spread, and, as was already mentioned, crime rates began to rise; in fact, this was the ideal area of London for criminals to operate in peace and quiet.

The novel rose to prominence during the Victorian era. People began reading novels and checking out books from libraries because the novels were published in instalments, which meant that they appeared in newspapers serially⁹. These are the key reasons why middle class individuals now find it simpler to read books. Novelists were now expected to amuse readers while also delivering a societal and moral message. This was their new moral and social duty. In light of the social upheavals that were taking place at the time—the industrial revolution, the fight for democracy, the growing poverty in a booming Britain, and the rising crime rates—this was crucial in order to pique readers' attention.

3.2 Legal Changes and Rising Crime Statistics

The court system was "a jumble of interconnecting civil, ecclesiastical, and constitutional jurisdictions" (Tucker 2014: 163) when Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837. In fact, the Empire had issues with extradition and jurisdiction with the British Islands and the colonies

⁷ Rajimwale, S. (2004). *A history of English literature*. New Delhi: Rama Brothers India Pvt Ltd.

⁸ Rees, R.J. (1973). *English literature: An introduction for foreign readers*. Delhi: Macmillan India Limited.

⁹ Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House* Ware, Herdfurthshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1993 (P. 3).

within Canada and the United States. During the Victorian era, these issues with disorganised jurisdiction were the hardest to handle; however, this was not the case for legal changes, which resolved a number of issues that England was dealing with at the time.

The one possibility of survival the prisoner had to survive was a royal forgiveness, which included the fact that he would be exiled to the America colonies; being released from transport, which regularly occurred for different reasons, such as vengeance on the prosecution, was deemed a deadly offence. A few hundred criminals were executed in a spectacular fashion each year as part of a policy intended to effectively combat crime. The irony is that a large number of well-known criminals, whose heinous acts were known to the whole public, were either sent abroad in other British colonies or never punished.

It is accurate to state that crime rates began to rise sharply during Queen Victoria's reign. People of the Working Class had to commit minor crimes in order to survive in the deteriorated parts of the city where they resided. The most of them really lived in abject poverty, having gathered in workhouses with pitiful pay and appalling sanitation. As a result, many women were pushed into prostitution and children were made to steal in order to feed¹⁰. In terms of homicides and violent crimes, the picture was rather different. Victorian society began to believe that anti-crime legislation and government reforms had failed. Even if the yearly release of criminal data did not support their incorrect belief, they yet thought that the crime rate was rising.

3.3 Penal Facilities: An Overview of the Penal System

In the first half of the 1830s, the English jail administration was made up of structures of varying eras, for instance repurposed ancient gaols, subterranean dungeons and tiny cellblocks near municipal buildings and labour camps¹¹. The prisons that were built after 1823, when the Gaol Act was passed, were the ones that were reformed and new. It introduced frequent inspections by the Visiting Justices and replaced male staff members with female ones for inmates who were female. In addition, three important officials in Victorian prisons—the governor, the priest, and the surgeon—had to keep diaries in which they documented their work and recorded the categorization system used to separate the inmates. To prevent them from influencing one another, they were split up according to gender, age, and the kind of crime they had committed.

During Queen Victoria's reign, more than fifty pre-existing prisons were altered. Ninety new prisons were built using this style between 1842 and 1877 as part of a special construction programme. Notable among those were the Public Works institutions at Portland, Portsmouth, and Chatham. Here, convicts were required to do labour-intensive physical labour as restitution for their error. The Victorian jail system was forced to use separation and hard work in 1865, and the government gave the jail Act of 1877 authority over the management and funding of local prisoners from local judges to a newly established Prisons Commission.

Situated in Reading, Berkshire, England, HM jail Reading is an example of a standard Victorian jail. Oscar Wilde's *Ballad* made it famous and goes by the name Reading Gaol. Constructed between the years 1842 and 1844, this jail exemplifies a prison designed in accordance with the architecture of a distinct system. It was shut down in 2014. The primary structure was

¹⁰ Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983 (P.93).

¹¹ Lodge, David. "The Rhetoric of Hard Times", in Edward Gray, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hard Times*. A collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969.

cruciform and included Tudor-Gothic elements, which were also used in the era's hospitals and workhouses. In the 1970s, a large portion of the old Reading jail was destroyed¹².

4. CRIME AND OSCAR WILDE

4.1 A Compelling Life: Aestheticism, Gay Marriage, and the Penal System

Oscar Wilde's life went in two completely different directions: on the one hand, his brilliance and ability helped him become well-known and successful in a society that was enthralled with his concepts and demeanour; on the other hand, a string of incidents, including the fact that he was homosexual and his ostentatious lifestyle, slowly brought him to ruin. Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wills Wilde, a well-known Victorian poet, writer, and dramatist, was created in Dublin on the October 16, 1854.

His father, Willy Robert Wills Wilde, was a well-known physician who had his own clinic and hospital in addition to being an esteemed writer and archaeologist. He was raised in a prosperous middle-class household. In addition to writing on a wide range of topics—including technical areas like surgery—he was also a prolific writer on Irish mythology. In addition to penning novels, poetry, and tales, his mother Jane Francesca Wilde also wrote writings for the Irish National magazine that supported the cause of the Irish Revolution¹³. It is crucial to emphasise how tense things were at the time between Britain and Ireland. A potato blight that afflicted potatoes produced the Great Potato Famine, which rocked Ireland between 1844 and 1847. Many people had to leave their homes to America, Australia, and England due to poverty. When the Irish government began requesting Home Rule in 1845, things became worse. Despite the fact that Irish-supporting Prime Minister Gladstone worked hard to grant Ireland becoming independent, the British House of Representatives twice turned down his plea.

Oscar Wilde also drew inspiration from the writings of Thomas Griffith, a writer, painter, belletrist, forger, and killer. Griffith was seen by Wilde as a symbol of the aristocratic and hedonistic mentality of the 1880s and 1890s. Because Wainwrights were Dandy-aesthetes, people who valued exquisiteness and perfection and applied them to all aspects of their lives, dressing well was just as essential as being intellectually and artistically excellent¹⁴. The Dandy worked outside of socially enforced boundaries of morality.

4.2 Oscar Wilde's Crimes and Their Prose and Poetry

Simon Joyce takes up the writing of G. K. Chesterton's *The Man who was Thursday* (1908) to explain the traits of a dangerous offender in his piece on sexual politics and the Aesthetic of Murder: *Oscar Wilde in the Ninety* (2002) on Wilde's aesthetic of crime. "We deny the snobbish Anglo assumption that people without education are the serious criminals," is the viewpoint put out. We say that the knowledgeable criminal is the dangerous one. We argue that the completely lawless contemporary philosopher is today's most dangerous criminal. Bigamists and thieves are basically decent persons in comparison to him. (Joyce 2002: 501 quotes Chesterton 1986: 25)¹⁵. It is noteworthy to note that the concept of the sophisticated offender is a fabrication intended to deflect attention from Victorian England's socioeconomic issues,

¹² Shires L M 'Of Maenads, Mothers, and Feminized Males: Victorian Readings of the French Revolution' (pp 147 -165) in Shires L M, (ed.) 'Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History and the Politics of Gender' (Routledge: New York, 1992) p 155.

¹³ Krebs, Paula M 'Folklore, fear and the Feminine: Ghosts and Old Wives' *Tales in Wuthering Heights' Victorian Literature and Culture* (26) (1) (1998) 41-52, 43.

¹⁴ Gibbons, Jenny 'Recent Developments in the Study of the Great European Witch Hunt' *the Pomegranate* - Lammas (1998) (5).

¹⁵ Raby, Peter (Ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

including poverty, unemployment, and hypocrisy. It is the process of distancing crime from morality and portraying it as a beautiful art consisting of deeds without a reason.

5. POST-PRISON WRITINGS: THE LETTERS AND THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

5.1 The Jail and Murder Oscar Wilde authored

After being imprisoned in Reading, Berkshire, England on charges of sodomy, The Ballad of Reading Gaol was freed. On November 23, 1895, Wilde was sent from Wandsworth Prison to Reading Jail. He was freed from Reading Jail on May 18, 1897. He completed The Ballad in less than a month, and Leonard Smithers eventually published it in London in February 1898. The author's identity was omitted from the poem's original publication and replaced with Wilde's mobile phone number, C. 3. 3.

The Ballad has been used for promoting prison reform but also for denouncing the problems of the Victorian prison institution. In fact, the peculiarity of this ballad is the union between aesthetic images and political contents, which helped disclose the controversial issues of unproductive labour, imposed silence and conditions of prisoners, especially of children¹⁶. The project of this poem was very important for Wilde: it was the account of the repercussions he had to deal with, the horrors and atrocities he saw in prison that changed him forever.

The Tale of Reading The widely discussed and criticised murder scenario that opens Gaol is based on a real event that Wilde may have read about in some newspaper stories.

Because blood and wine are crimson and were on the palms of his hands when they discovered him with the deceased—the unfortunate dead lady he loved and had been killed in her bed—he chose not to wear his scarlet cloak.

Using a razor, Charles Thomas Woolridge, a cavalry trooper in the royal guards, assassinated Laura Ellen Woolridge, his young wife, on March 29, 1896¹⁷. Because Woolridge had been waiting for her on the sidewalk close to their home and had slashed her neck three times out of jealousy, it was at the time thought to be a planned assault. Consequently, he was ordered to be hung at the Reading prison, where he passed out after the Home Secretary denied his request for a mitigating circumstance about the death penalty. Despite its placement several years before, Woolridge's sentence marked the second use of the Reading prison's scaffold. The first stanza, which is the only one that deals with the murder itself, alludes to "familiar aesthetic and Decadent motifs¹⁸." In reality, the topic of the stanza is death, and Wilde stylizes the scene to make it seem visually appealing.

An assertion about love and death forms the work's structure and underlying psychology. It is evident throughout the poem, but it is summed up in the stanza about men's propensity to murder what they love. Here, Wilde draws a comparison between Woolridge's predicament and that of all men. In a way, he is admiring Woolridge for having the courage to kill his wife and turn himself in to the police; as a result, when Woolridge passes away, he does so without feeling guilty and is able to live out his final days strolling through the prison yard with his head held high. In essence, Wilde's assertion is:

¹⁶ Robinson, Peter. Sex, Lies, and Poetry: "The Ballad of Reading Gaol". *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 44(4), 2015, pp. 299-320.

¹⁷ Rogers, Helen. Incarcerated Bodies. Interactions and Emotional Dynamics in an Early Victorian Prison. *Victorian Review*, Vol. 42(1), 2016, pp. 20-25.

¹⁸ Rogers, James Allen. Darwinism and Social Darwinism. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 33(2), 1972, pp. 265-280.

However, every man murders what he loves. Let this be heard by everyone. Some do it with a sour expression, some using an endearing term, the coward delivers a kiss for it. The valiant sword-wielding guy

.....

As part of his writing technique, Wilde adopts a poet-like persona for his narrative character, which enables him to examine the sentiments that are denounced and experience them more fully than Woolridge did. There are two narrative strands: the first is the first-person account of Woolridge's acts and actions in the third person, and the second is the first-person account of Wilde's poet-like persona. The Ballad, which is known for its extensive use of pictures and symbols, reaches a metaphorical level¹⁹. On the surface, we can see themes of criminal behaviour and punishment, but a closer examination reveals a reference to how people who disobey social norms, legal requirements, and religious orders are excluded from society. In addition to criminals like Woolridge, Wilde also alludes to the marginalisation and isolation of homosexuals like Douglas and himself.

5.2 Women (as) Sufferers

Given that Wilde lived in a culture that was overwhelmingly male-oriented, it's important to comprehend how the lady in a ballad of Reading Gaol is portrayed as the victim. Throughout the Victorian era, women were supposed to marry, take care of their families, remain at home, behave respectably in public, and exclusively work in their husbands' businesses²⁰. They had to abide by very severe restrictions, uncover their legs in public, and dress appropriately. Even in cases when a queen was in charge, they were often seen as submissive members of society. The victim of The Ballad is a trooper's wife, who is referred to as "the poor dead woman who he loved." In order to make murder seem like a natural by-product of love, Wilde emphasised the word "love" in this verse of the first stanza. The verb "murdered" appears in the following line. The bed, which serves as the crime scene, symbolises the link among love and murder, which is the outcome of excessive desire and jealousy. Wilde emphasises the link between sensual closeness and criminal activity.

5.3 The Death Penalty and the Horrible of Life in Prison

Oscar Wilde's post-prison writings consist only of the ballad of Read Gaol, *De Profundis*, and two letters sent in May 1897 and May 1898 to *The Daily Chronicle*. These three pieces, as previously said, centre on the author's own experience with prison life and its consequences. During his incarceration, Wilde saw the disintegration of his life. Initially, his belongings were auctioned off when he was declared bankrupt. Second, he was psychologically terrified by the wrongdoings and atrocities he saw in the two prisons where he was held.

As per Tim Young (1999: 41), there are reports that Wilde said he had died in jail and that he had changed after being released. Constance Lloyd, his wife, also acknowledged that her husband had undergone significant transformation during his years in jail, saying that "he had fallen from his happy middle-income world into what could possibly be properly characterised as a hell on heart." The 1865 Prison Act, which required severe treatment of convicts in order to punish and mortify them, was still in effect in British jails at the time.

¹⁹ Rowbothan, Judith. Stevenson, Kim. *Criminal Conversations: Victorian Crimes, Social Panic, and Moral Outrage*. The Ohio State University Press, 2005.

²⁰ Schnitzer, Carol. Oscar Wilde in Prison. *The Wildean*, Oscar Wilde Society, No. 26, 2005, pp. 64-68.

In the following letter to *The Day Courier* (1898), Wilde wrote directly to the director of the newspaper, criticising two incidents that had deeply affected him: the story of the starving infant and the jail warder who attempted to feed him, and the story of the young, "silly" guy who seemed to be insane. There is a mention of the two prisoners who caught Wilde's attention in the fifth section of *The Ballad of Studying Gaol*, where he describes the inmates' daily lives, including the food and water they consume, the way the warders behave, the offensive odour of the cells, and the emotions of his companions.

For the torture the weak and flog the stupid, and they starve the small
scared kid till it weeps day and night. And curse the grey and elderly...

On the Monday before his release, Wilde was on his way to meet a buddy in the reception area when he saw the incriminating scenario. He said that three young inmates, dressed in their prison garb, had just entered the main prison hallway. The youngest was very skinny and undersized, a result of the forced poverty that children and members of the working class had to endure at the period. The little child's mental illness prevented him from eating his breakfast, thus he was screaming out of hunger.

Children suffered predominantly for two reasons, in Wilde's opinion. On the one hand, they were unable to communicate with one another as they spent almost the whole day confined to their cells. The contradiction that Wilde elucidates is that, although the community for the *Stopping of Cruelty to Child* would hold parents accountable if their children received such treatment at home, this kind of brutality was made lawful in jail. The system disregarded anybody who attempted to assist the youngsters, despite the fact that many warders were compassionate with them.

However, the youngsters were starved; for example, breakfast was only a piece of jail bread and a can of water; lunch was an Indian meal; and supper was just another piece of flour and a can of water. This sort of cuisine was for adult prisoners the source of ailments, such as the diarrhoea, which was avoided routinely by astringent drugs. Aside from this safety measure, prisoners' hygienic conditions were appalling.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is practically obvious that Dickens was successful in portraying Victorian society in *Great Expectations* via a few upper class female characters. Miss Havisham was a very rich woman who also loved power and the idea of exacting retribution, but despite all of that, she never felt satisfied or fulfilled. However, Pip also didn't get enough enjoyment out of his existence as a prosperous young man in London.

Dickens's social criticism had a significant impact on succeeding authors who wrote socially analytical works. It should be mentioned that Charles Dickens' writings were crucial in putting social policies into action that improved the lives of the impoverished. Apart from his writings, Dickens' active engagement in pushing social changes enhanced public consciousness in the struggle against poverty, denial of learning, child labour and prostitutes. Thus, Dickens was a brilliant social critic of the Victorian era in addition to a great social reformer.

First of all, my research supported the ambiguity surrounding the Victorian era. On the one hand, there are the aforementioned discoveries and reforms that seem to have brought about an era of prosperity and power for England. However, there were a lot of other issues that were "smartly" kept under wraps, such the rise in poverty and general crime (pickpocketing, prostitution, robbery, shoplifting, and murder), as well as the growth of several illnesses.

In keeping with the subject of crime and justice in Victorian society, I think it's fascinating to examine the findings from my research on the prison system in that era.

Second, I concentrated on Oscar Wilde's biography since a number of things happened to him that affected how he saw the world, including his homosexuality, his affiliation with the aestheticism school of thought, and his imprisonment.

Thirdly, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* by Oscar Wilde, which begins with a true murder case and gradually depicts the horrors of prison life and the death penalty, better captures my concepts and illustrates the connection between crime and punishment.

Another fact that highlights the unequal treatment and ambiguities of the Victorian period is this: although many women in private were also victims of their impatient husbands, a condition that regrettably persists to this day, in public they were expected to uphold high moral standards in order to preserve the appearance of respectability. However, the remaining stanzas concentrate on criticising the Victorian Correctional System and unfair criminal penalties including the death penalty. The poem depicts the brutal realities of the prison system via the actions of the guards, the interment of inmates' bodies, and the enforced quiet. The few pieces that Wilde wrote following his imprisonment reflect how his perspective on life changed.

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