

# Unveiling The Christian Side Of Charles Dickens

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## Abstract

*Over the period Dickens has been conventionally analysed as a social reformer and a social critic. It seems that the critics have given less attention to the religious aspects in Dickens' works. Charles Dickens is a greatest novelist and a social critic of the Victorian Era who is best known for his characterisation, narrative style and plot. Born in Portsmouth he lived poverty stricken childhood leaving his education and working in the factory after his father's imprisonment for debts. Although he had no formal education he succeeded in producing many journals, novels, short stories and gained popularity among the readers. He belongs to the Victorian Era which is known for its rigid religious principles and every writer of that era has displayed their religious influences on their writings. Many of the writers used Biblical allusions and themes in their works to communicate the significance of religion to the Victorians. Writers like Christina Rossetti, William Golding, Ernest Hemmingway etc, used religious motifs in their works to share their beliefs and also to install faith among the readers. Charles Dickens also has used many religious allusions in his writings yet he was not popularly known for it. Although he lived in the age of religious novels he was not considered a religious novelist. Thus this article analyse the reason for the negation of Dickens' religious side and unveil the professing Christian in Dickens with the Biblical analysis of his well known works.*

**Key words:** Criticism, Biblical allusions, Unitarianism, Dickens' Christianity.

## INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Era was considered to be religious and strong in Christian faith. Religion had its influence in literature as the writers used literature a medium to kindle the faith of the Victorians. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution shook the world. Paul B. Badey, a Ph.D scholar from Nigeria in his article 'The Christian Implications of Darwin's Theory of Evolution' states,

No matter how rational and scientific this theory may appear, it shocked the church and other liberal thinkers. Darwin believed that human beings developed from an earlier species of apes that changed millions of years ago. This is at variance with the traditional theory, that each species was created by God. (Badey, 1,2)

It altered the Christian belief that God created man and denied the existence of God. Thus Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 created a crisis of faith among the believers. This created a sense of responsibility among the writers of Victorian Era to use their piece of work to draw the people back to Christian faith. Many writers used Biblical allusions and themes in their works to communicate the significance of religion and to bring the people closer to God. Writers like Christina Rossetti, William Golding, Ernest Hemmingway etc, used religious motifs in their works to share their beliefs and install faith among the readers. Christina Rossetti who is known for her popular sonnets and ballads is committed to High Anglicanism and thus her works like *The World, Goblin Market and Other Poems* reflects the disastrous consequences of forgetting God and running behind worldly pleasures. In *A Better Resurrection* she portrays the lack of spiritual sustainability in

the life of the people. Another popular writer of that era William Golding takes the people back to the first sin of man through his novel *Lord of the Flies*. The island that is corrupted by the arrival of humans in the novel symbolises the Garden of Eden. The character Piggy represents human intelligence, civilization and arrogance. Similarly Ernest Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* has major figures of the New Testament from the Bible. Santiago represents God like figure whose struggle to catch the fish Marlin and the injury in his palm symbolises Christ's suffering on the cross. Santiago's teaching on fishing to Manolin represents Christ's teaching to his disciples. Thus the novel is rich with Christian imagery. *God's Grandeur* one of the famous religious poems by G M Hopkins condemns modern man for his thirst on profit and separation from God's voice. The lines read:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell (II. 5-7).

The repetitions of 'have trod' shows the disgust of the poet over the man's long-failing ignorance and selfishness. The words 'seared', 'bleared', 'smeared' represents man's monotonous daily chores of modern life that keeps them busy and separates them from serving their creator. Hopkins believed that reconnection with nature (God's creation) would invigorate a relationship with God. Robert Browning one of the late Victorian poets used literature to preach about God, immortality in his works. *The Ring and the Book* uses many biblical references to illustrate the character of each of his diverse matters. Alfred Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam* mourns for the loss of Tennyson's friend. Though the poet begins the poem with the tone of despair he ends it with hope of life after death. Thus through literature the writers conveyed the message of hope of Heaven, the existence of God and the necessity of dependence on God.

### **Criticism on Dickens' religiosity:**

Like every other Victorian writers Charles Dickens also used Biblical allusions and motifs. Emily Anne Brown quotes T.S. Eliot who concurred:

Dickens excelled in character; in the creation of characters of greater intensity than human being. (Brown, 9)

Thus Dickens was highly known for his characterisation style and plot. Although he lived in the age of religious novels and used religious allusions in his works, he was not widely recognized as religious novelist. Sue Sorensen, a faculty member from Canadian Mennonite University in her article, 'What Charles Dickens Never Said about the Christian Life' says that

Throughout his lifetime, perceptive Christian commentators did note his lack of commitment: His works are not blasphemous or irreverent-nothing of the sort. But when Dickens comes up against the reality of Christian belief, he does become unaccustomedly vague and dim. (Sorensen, 7,10)

On analysis of his works many critics have felt that his works do not explicitly denote Christian beliefs and morals.

There could also be various reasons for the denial to focus on the religious side of Charles Dickens. One reason could be that Dickens' family was not prominently devout. Although Dickens was raised by Anglican parents he attended Baptist church because he disliked Anglican doctrines. G.K Chesterton says "the tone of Dickens towards religion, though like that of most of his contemporaries, philosophically disturbed and rather historically ignorant, had an element that was very characteristic of him. He had all the prejudices of his time. He had, for instance, that dislike of defined dogmas, which really means a preference for unexamined dogmas". Since Dickens outwardly spoken his hatred on conventional religious doctrines there was a general impression that

he disliked Christianity on the whole. Another predominant reason is that through the analysis of his works critics felt that his biblical allusions in his works could not do justice to the plot. Janet L. Larson in her article *The Fractured Code in Dickens' Fiction* states that his religious allusions took "the strangest counterfeit air". Like Larson many critics felt that the biblical images allusion counterpoints and contradict each other and lacks clarity. She also adds "this essential aspect of his art has not been much studied in comparison with his plots, characters, imagery, or symbolism. One suspects that the main cause of this relative neglect is the stumbling block presented by one kind of biblical usage in Dickens – those sentiments of 'the New Testament in its broad spirit', as he put it in his will, that are sometimes implicated in the worst stylistic excesses of his work". Thus critics feel that although Dickens makes an attempt to bring biblical allusions in a positive way he ends satirising it.

In Dickens' well known novel *Bleak House*, Peepy Jellyby, one of the minor characters replays the drunkenness of Noah by dipping the toy figure from his ark. This satirises the noble scene from the Bible. Sue Sorensen adds,

The Day of judgement in *Bleak House* is a refrain, a slogan and a very bleak joke.(Sorensen, 4)

She says the elderly Miss Flite keeps waiting for the case to be judged and she goes out of her mind by waiting so long. Thus this incident satirizes the beliefs of Christians on the Judgement Day. Similarly Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* attacks the Jesuits. Mark Andrew Eslick in his article *Charles Dickens: Anti-Catholicism and Catholicism* says "Barnaby Rudge also plays upon this idea of the Jesuit as 'other'. Gashford is certainly invested with a sense of strangeness".

Larson also presents her comment on Dickens' *Life of Our Lord* as "it is simplified religious testament that replaces 'the church catechism and other formularies' which unnecessarily "perplex" children's mind with religious mystery". Although Dickens attempt to add religion in his writings the critics were not willing to accept the motif of the writer as religious. Larson adds that Dickens has secularised the characters of the Old Testament. The characters like Job, Esther, and David are all humanized in his works. She says, "Dickens has invited allusions from the different part of the sacred book to co-exist uneasily in the same fictional world". She adds that "the anthology of Dickens biblical allusions is hardly concordant. They are the patterns of contradictions and dissonance". The ambiguity of his Christian life and distortedness of biblical illusions in his works has left the critics negate the Christian side of Dickens.

### **Biblical allusions**

Although Dickens is a critic of aristocratic and High-Church elitism he was actually a defender of the poor. Analysing his life would tell us that he was not against God but against the practices of the religion. His childhood was a dark phase of his life which taught him the pain of poverty stricken life. As he was working as a parliamentary reporter he witnessed corruption in English Government. He was inspired to write criticism on the socio-political condition of Victorian period. Dickens used satire as a tool to attack the elitism in his writings. Since religion was the dominant interest during Victorian period he used satire with biblical implications in his works. Dickens was baptized and was raised in the Church of England, he remained insignificant Anglican for most of his lifetime. He turned towards Unitarianism in 1840s as a church alternative. This enabled him to live without the clutches of religious dogmas and involve himself in charity. Dickens letter to Unitarian Harvard professor Cornelius Felton states, "I have carried into effect an old idea of mine and joined the Unitarians who would do something for human improvement if they could; and practice charity and toleration."

He set his focus on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. *The Life of Our Lord* begins as "My Dear Children, I am very anxious that you should know something about the History of Jesus Christ...No

one ever lived who was so good, so kind, so gentle” (3). He mentions the after-life and his belief of heaven. *Bleak House* was highly quoted by the critics to say that he satirized judgement day but in *The Life of Our Lord* he advises his children to be merciful, forgiving and do right in everything so as to find a place in heaven. Gary L. Colledge came up with a term ‘Real Christian’, rather than being hypocritical like those of his time Dickens followed the path of Christ and lived his life as ‘Real Christian’.

In his famous work *A Christmas Carol* Dickens conveys the message that Christmas is all about helping the poor that sharing card and merrymaking. Similarly *Bleak House* portrays the society that has gone wrong because of its attempt to build civilization on basis of law and ignoring the moral values of Christianity. Thus in all his novels he has instilled the qualities of faithfulness, humility, charity, and forgiveness in his characters because he believed these are the necessary qualities of mankind. In *Bleak House* Esther Summerson aspires for servant hood, she loves helping others and be kind hearted. These reflect the qualities of Christ who dedicated himself for servant hood. In *Dombey and Sons* Florence exhibits selfless and sacrificial love towards her father. Similarly Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* expresses sacrificial love to her grandfather although he destroys all the money in gambling. In *Oliver Twist* Dickens attacks hypocrisy and portrays the importance of helping the poor and needy. The concept of forgiveness is ever present in Dickens’ novels. In *Great Expectation* Pip asks forgiveness from Joe, similarly Emily asking forgiveness from Mr. Pegotty in *David Copperfield*, Lady Deadlock seeks forgiveness from Esther in *Bleak House*, Mrs. Clennam seeking forgiveness from Amy in *Little Dorrit*. These instances show that the spirit of forgiveness is the inevitable part of Dickens’ novels.

### **Dickens’ Christianity**

Dickens not only used his works to convey Christian morals he also outlived his Christian life as an example. He practiced Christianity by devoting his time and energy for charity. Through his speeches, public readings and writing he fetched support for adult education, health and sanitary organizations, prison reforms, and recreational societies. He worked to get funds to provide relief and pension for disabled writers and artists. Dickens involved himself in supporting the projects of Miss Angela Burdett- Coutts, a wealthiest woman in Victorian England. ‘The Ragged Schools’- Instructions to the outcasts in London and ‘Urania Cottage’- the home for homeless women are two of her philanthropic project. Dickens wrote series of letter to the national daily newspaper in the United Kingdom titled *Daily News* and an article for *Household Words*, a weekly magazine encouraging support for the project. Urania Cottage is setup by Dickens himself and managed behalf of Angela Burdett Coutts to rescue fallen women from the life of prostitution or crime. He also insisted the need for Christian moral education in the home.

In one of the opening of public libraries, Dickens has said that the underlying purpose of education is to bring people closer to an understanding of Christ. Dickens wrote to David Dickinson as a response to his criticism of reference to the doctrine of the new birth in *The Pickwick Papers* (266-67) as “That every man who seeks heaven must be born again, in good thoughts of his maker”. The Victorians followed Sabbatarianism and denied to help the needy on Sabbath day. This was hated by Dickens and he followed the Christ teaching “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”. Thus he worked even on the Sabbath day to raise funds for the needy. Dickens saw the Old Testament as the set of rigid rules and he hated it as it was reflected in the attitude of the Victorians. He valued the New Testament more as Christ not only preached but lived and demonstrated his teachings. As the teachings of the New Testament have parables and simple language so as to reach the layman Dickens followed the same simple language in his writing of novels. He stood for the poor and for the fallen people. He believed in forgiveness, acceptance and redemption from sin as The New Testament teaches in Ephesians 1.7- “We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace”. When Victorian society treated the fallen as

outcast, he gave them hope for living. When sufferings of the working class were denied to be brought to limelight Dickens used his novels criticized industrial revolution and brought the sufferings of the working class before the eyes of the readers and conveyed the need for change. When the Victorian society followed the religion named Christianity, Dickens followed Christ and his teaching and lived as a true Christian.

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