

**MEN IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY IN THREE
DICKENSIAN NOVELS**

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Dedication

To my parents for their support

Abstract

Dickens protagonists often gain self-realization by their relationships with other personalities. Although they try to avoid suffering, it is a substantial factor in the making of their identities. This thesis attempts to establish a connection between suffering and the attainment of self-realization with regard to the identity making of Paul, David and Pip in Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations* respectively. The psychological approach is to account for the relationship.

The study concludes that suffering is a necessary condition for the protagonists to attain healthy personalities and that helpers play an important role in supporting them to overcome the causes of suffering and to achieve self-fulfillment. Suffering in *David Copperfield* activates David's consciousness, and by the help of Peggotty, Betsy and Agnes he succeeds in eliminating his romantic personality and so he gains self-realization.

In *Great Expectations* suffering awakens Pip to the fact that money and high social class do not enable him to achieve self-realization, and with Joe, as a helper, he gains an authentic personality characterized by self-dependence. But as a human being whose personality is subject to deterioration and change, Pip's personality relapses when he reunites with Estella. However, in *Dombey and Son*, Paul, who remains subject to his father's severe restrictions, experiences acute suffering. Nevertheless, due to

the absence of a helper in his search for identity, Paul never makes it. His struggle for identity ends up in death.

I will begin with Wordsworth who is important in this respect because of his influence on Dickens. Robert Langbaum argues that Wordsworth asserted a new romantic self that drew its significance from an “organic connection ... with nature” (7). In other words, the Wordsworthian self, Langbaum argues, gains value through its connection with “the external world through sensation” and through its relationship with “the archetypal phases of identity”(45,46). Therefore, the problem of identity in Wordsworthian terms, Langbaum argues, is presented as the problem of “self-consciousness” leading to the “loss of feeling” (53).

Wordsworth’s poetry portrays a vision of human life in which man stands in isolation. Davies and Beatty argue that Wordsworth presents man in an incoherent civilization that deprives him from his identity, stability and balanced relations with his environment and mankind (53). The feeling of the lack of identity and stability is clear in Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage”:

’T is now the hour of deepest noon.
At this still season of repose and peace,...
Why should a tear be in an old man’s eye?
(II.187-88,192 qtd. in Davies and Beatty 36)

These lines juxtapose man and nature. Nature is described as “still” and a source of “repose and peace”. These traits give a sense of steadiness and tranquility, whereas the old man is portrayed as tearful, a portrayal which

conveys the feeling of sorrow and instability. The state of sorrow and instability that the old man experiences highlights his inability to adapt to the conditions of life and shows the imbalance of his personality.

However, at the end of “The Ruined Cottage”, the Pedlar who suffers from sorrow which is a sign of the lack of stability in his personality, undergoes intrinsic change:

Be wise and cheerful, and no longer read
The forms of things with an unworthy eye.
...That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief
The passing shews of being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream that could not live
(II.510-12, 520-22 qtd. in Davies and Beatty, 39)

That is, the conditions of instability and suffering give him better understanding of life and make him conscious of nature’s total pattern of beauty and permanence. Through this feeling the pedlar regains equanimity; his identity is restored. The senses and the heart play a major role in deciding the stability of the Pedlar’s identity. The turning of his senses to receive the beauty of nature arouses happiness in his heart, a feeling that activates his consciousness and entices him to interact with and respect his surroundings.

In the Victorian period, the world underwent radical social and religious changes. Thoughtful Victorians were persuaded by historians and scientists

that the facts of nature described in the Bible might not be true (Annan 153). As a result, man searched for the laws that governed nature and that were independent of God. Consequently, radical shift from “God to man”, from “dependence to independence” and from “otherworldliness to this world” took place (Tarnas 319). Accordingly, man’s relation with God that was thought to be the source of emotional balance and of the integration of his identity was no longer existent.

These changes imposed a feeling of loneliness and suffering on man since he was no longer supported by divine grace that resulted in psychological problems. However, man did not quit his hope of reconstituting his personality. This hope, Richard Tarnas points out, stemmed from the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, which enabled man to penetrate nature and to change his universe (319). These changes, Tarnas argues, provided man with a new sense of “power and dignity” that enhanced his sense of identity (319).

In the light of the radical development in human life, it is interesting to deal with the social and family life in the Victorian age because of its direct influence on the human personality. The social life in England in the Victorian age neglected the individual. Houghton argues that the world tended to become more comfortable for the masses, and more uncomfortable for those of natural gifts or distinctions (338). That is, gifted people take pains to give meaning to their existence and value to their

personalities. Also the new democracy, political and social, appeared to be the cause of a state that increased “the competition for positions of authority and prestige” (Houghton 338).

Beals argues that the Victorian family won a reputation for itself as a noble social institution, and upon its continuance relied all that was fine and stable in British civilization (343). Ruskin gave an account of the concept of home in the Victorian Age in *Seasam and Lilies*:

This is the true nature of home – it is the place of peace; the shelter, not from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division . In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxiety of the outer life penetrate into it , and the inconsistently-minded ,unknown ,unloved or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold , it ceases to be home (qtd. in Houghton 343).

Ruskin, Houghton points out, viewed home as a shelter from anxieties of the modern life, and a place of peace where “the longings of the soul” might be realized (343). In the home so conceived, man could restore the humanity he seemed to be losing under “the pressure of competitive life” (Houghton 345)¹.

What is prominent in Ruskin’s definition of home is the contrast of home and outer world. Home, on the one hand, is viewed as the place where man is kept safe from the anxieties of modern life, and a place where the individual can fulfill the earnest desires of his personality. The outer

world, on the other hand, is depicted as the source of disorder, hatred and hostility, which threaten the peace of home. The role of the wife and husband in this case is to hold the troubles of the outer world out of their home. That is, the husband and wife play a great role in keeping the stability of home life.

Yet, even the Victorian family had its internal imperfections. Beales argues that “simple grouping of parents and children” was a difficulty since problems in child-parent relationship were raised (343). Beales adds that there were problems of discipline, training and relations with the outside world as well as psychological problems (343). For the middle class, “internal strains” were developed, and for the workers “external influences” were apt to threaten collapse; thus, the Victorian family showed signs of “wear and tear” as the decades draw on (Beales 344). Accordingly, the weakness in the structure of the Victorian family had a major influence on the formation of its members’ identities.

Matthew Arnold is one of the famous Victorian writers who deal with the loss of Wordsworthian self. He deals with the influence of social life on human personality, and how it results in the loss of Wordsworthian self. This influence is clear in his poem “Self-Dependence”:

‘And with joy the stars perform their shining,
And the sea its long moon-silver’d roll;

For self-poised they live, nor pine with noting
All the fever of some differing soul.

(21-24 qtd in Langbaum 61).

The first two lines are Wordsworthian. Nature is symbolized by “the sea” and “the stars” that the poet admires for their self-dependence: they have no claims upon others. Every object in nature is independent of others and does not feel weak or miserable. According to these lines, Langbaum argues, Arnold highlights an identity problem in which the “conscious man of critical intellect cannot be one thing to the exclusion of others” (61). That is, man is always in need of others to achieve self-realization.

Here, Arnold emphasizes the influence of society on the life of the individual. In living with others and depending on them for self-fulfillment, man is no longer enjoying the sense of identity and self-dependence. Also, living under the restrictions of society diminishes man’s sense of happiness.

Some other writers deal with individuals’ inability to attain romantic personality through which they can be self-dependent and free like nature. Those writers portray the individual under the restrictions of society in an attempt to give a redefinition of human personality. For example, Langbaum shows that Dostoevsky’s antihero in *Notes from underground* develops a pathological identity as a way of protecting himself: he exhibits a continual “perversity” against his own interests “as a way of asserting his

freedom”, an act through which he turns upon himself the hatred he cannot “vent openly in action” (15,16). Also, Dostoevsky emphasizes the role of suffering as “the only cause of consciousness” (qtd in Langbaum, 16).

The dominant influence of the outer world upon the individual’s personality is clear in *Notes from Underground*. The antihero’s heightened consciousness emphasizes his excessive submission to the outer world: he is excessively conscious in order to keep his interests and desires in line with the rules of the outer world. Here, we are before an individual who sees his freedom through passive submission to the outer world and who negates his self in order keep in line with the laws of society.

Stephen Arata argues that Oscar Wilde emphasizes the connection between art and individualism, regarding the artist as society’s master criminal because they resist the fetters of “conformity” (63)². In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde wrote that Dorian dies of his “exaggerated sense of consciousness”(qtd. in Arata 64). As he moves from Henry to Basil, he adopts the valuation of himself as a “monstrous and loathsome thing”(135 qtd. in Arata 63). Arata concludes that in conformity with the ideology that teaches him to read himself as a sinner, Dorian commits suicide (64). Therefore, Dorian, who lives as a part of others’ consciousness, finds the only release through death.

In this novel, Dorian’s vulnerable consciousness opens the way for Henry and Basil, who represent society, to mar his pleasure and to restrict

his interests. It is true that Dorian's suicide can be interpreted as conformity to the rules of society, but, unlike Dostoevsky's antihero, he has the ability to act.

In psychology, Freud, in his paper "Neurosis and Psychosis", points out that human psyche is divided into three entities, the "ego, superego, and id"(188). Freud argues that the id is made up of "powerful instinctual impulses", the superego represents the "real environment" and "the outer world", and the ego mediates between "the outer world and the id"(185-7).

Furthermore, in "Formulations Regarding the Two Principles in Mental Functioning", Freud believes that human psyche is dominated by two principles. The pleasure principle, Freud argues, governs the processes that "strive towards gaining pleasure" while the reality principle has to form "a conception of real circumstances in the outer world" and to "decide whether a particular idea ...was in agreement with reality or not"(22-23). However, the reality principle, Freud points out, aims at "no dethronement of the pleasure-principle, but only a safeguarding of it"(26).

In *Existential Psychoanalysis*, Jean-Paul Sartre gives another contribution to the understanding of the self. He defines human personality as a blend of negative and positive experiences (153). According to Sartre, a human being may have bad or good faith. Bad faith, Sartre argues, is associated with "falsehood", and the one who practices bad faith hides "a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth"(157). On the

other hand, Sartre points out that “I am in good faith, at least to the extent that I am conscious of my bad faith. But then this whole psychic system is annihilated”(159).

In other words, human personality has two conflicting modes. The individual who behaves a bad faith tries to achieve happiness by pursuing false and deceptive aims. Bad faith, as a consequence, is marked by behaviors that contradict the truth of the inner self. Therefore, in order for the individual to achieve an authentic personality, he has to get rid of his bad faith by submitting his behavior to the laws of his inner self.

The development of human identity and the aspects of self-making as they appear in works of literature have been addressed by several critics. Fredrick Garber, in *The Autonomy of the Self from Richardson to Huysmans*, investigates some aspects of self-making. This book shows willed apartness embodied in figures that are settled outside the social order. Clarrissa, Garber argues, rejects marriage because she regards it as a condition in which she will lose the “independence of her autonomous self” (4). As a result, when Lovelace “entered Clarrissa’s body”, Garber points out, he “fractured her selfhood” (12). At this point, Garber adds, Clarrissa seeks to be released from her “violated body” (16). Consequently, she, Garber concludes, finds in death the only way to the autonomy she desires (32).

Other critics have discussed the issue of characters' contest with society. Arnold Weinstein, in *Fictions of the Self: 1550-1800*, illuminates the development of self-world interaction. Weinstein argues that this development is revealed through the character's "critical strategy to respect survival and affirmation" as the most powerful and coherent drive known to man (7). Weinstein believes that the self begins with marginal status: Lazarillo, in Madam de's *Lazarillo de Tormes*, is a servant who is "[l]ess established even than orphans" (20). Then, the self begins to flourish and seek recognition. In Defoe's *Moll Flander*, Weinstein clarifies, Moll has inner strength and has the "ability to say No" (93). That is, she rejects what is imposed upon her by society. Moll, in this case, represents a figure that can take a position distinct from others. The self becomes defiant to society as revealed in Goethe's *Werther*, where the protagonist is presented as a person lacking "restraint and reason" and "yearning for the infinite" (Weinstein 146). Finally, self-expression and creation are viewed through language. Stern, in *Tristram Shandy*, shows that language can express "inner itinerary" by reading; he, according to Weinstein, brings the "inner mobility and freedom of mind to language" (225).

It is appropriate to move closer towards the novelist who will be the target of this study. Charles Dickens is a famous English writer whose novels reveal the development of human identity from early to advanced stages of life. The figure of the vulnerable, innocent child is a prominent

element in Dickens' novels. Those children are seen to grow up, but in the course of these novels one can see their misfortunes due to neglect and maltreatment.

Individual characters are often confronted with family breakdowns that are related to the severing of ties in a mobile society. Society takes a great deal of Dickens' interest. He depicts a society, which seems to have lost its vital traits of community; thus, it is portrayed as an ungovernable chaos where civilization and barbarism walk hand in hand. That is, it lacks solidarity among its members. In several Dickensian novels such as *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations* pathos accompanies the personality development of most of their major characters.

Dickens' protagonists have been dealt with in several studies, which emphasize various influences in their identities. Dirkden Hartog, in *Dickens and Romantic Psychology: The Self in Time in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, investigates "the mode of consciousness" in Dickens' novels, paying a good deal of attention to Wordsworth (2). But Hartog does not apply Freud's theories to the identity making of Dickens' protagonists. Hartog sees the past as a unifying element in the identity of Dickens' characters, and memory comes to be alive in the present (3). In Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, Hartog argues, Mr. Dombey, who is proud and lonely, undergoes "a magical change" of heart when his daughter Florence returns: Mr. Dombey exclaims, "Oh my God, forgive me, for I need it very

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2. Search for Identity. 51. Lesje prefers the prehistoric world of her own making to the boring and threatening present. Men replaced dinosaurs, true, in her head as in geological time; but thinking about men has become too unrewarding. Anyway, that part of her life is settled for the time being. Nothing is settled, though her idealized self wants to believe it. Third gender or third sex is a concept in which individuals are categorized, either by themselves or by society, as neither man nor woman. It is also a social category present in societies that recognize three or more genders. The term third is usually understood to mean "other"; some anthropologists and sociologists have described fourth, fifth, and "some" genders.