

---

## **Negligence of parental responsibility in reference of the novel Little Dorrit by Charles Dickens**

**Dr. Archana Gautam**

*Assistant Professor*

**Hindustan College of Science and Technology,  
Farah (Mathura) India**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper to throw the light on the Irresponsible parents, who put themselves first, who often risk their children's well-being. Parents who are often emotionally detached to such an extent that they can subject their children to many risks, both physical and psychological. Dickens was against the treatment of children as 'things' or 'objects' by their parents, to be used or misused as they liked. Too many parents even in our times have a sense of property in their children, as the father It may be said, on the basis of the observations made in novels of Dickens' that Dickens was a true social reformer. A humanitarian, and a novelist with a purpose, he always portrayed the pain, humiliation and 'wretchedness' of orphan children, or children who had suffered at the hands of their selfish and self centered parents Dickens' novels are mostly autobiographical. He writes from his experiences and observations. He arouses pity in us for the abandoned children who are deprived of the joys of childhood. He voices his resentment against these parents, guardians and foster parents who ill treated and exploited children. Dickens was a novelist with a purpose. He focused on the various evils of his time. He was well conversant with the sorrows and sufferings of the children of his age. Dickens has endeavored to awaken the conscience of an age which was insensitive to the ill treatment of children, often owing to the indifference or selfishness of their own parents.

Dickens has great sympathy for such children because of his own experiences as a child. As a social reformer he draws the attention of the readers and the government towards these poor children who were forced to live in prisons because their parents were imprisoned. He also explains how children were abused and starved in the schools due to their irresponsible parents or relatives who were not willing to take care of them and who packed them to these miserable schools. Children were given stale food and lived in unhygienic conditions. While the teachers enjoyed hearty meals of bread, butter and milk. Dickens has deep sympathy for these rejected children.

**Key Words-** Irresponsible, Neglected, Exploited Egoistic,

---

## **Little Dorrit**

Little Dorrit which has drawn much critical attention in recent times was published in monthly installments between 1855 and 1857. It was originally called *Nobody's Fault*. Little Dorrit, says Lionel Trilling in his introduction to the novel, is one of the three novels of Dickens' great last period. He views it as a profound work that is essentially about society. The novel was written at a time when Dickens was giving more and more of his time to social questions. Little Dorrit, in particular, has a series of portraits of irresponsible and repressive parents and their dehumanization and exploitation of their own children.

There is much emphasis in this novel on internal life and on personal responsibility, particularly, the role and responsibility of parents. The novel has several egoistic parents that have blighted the lives of their children. These are false and inadequate parents. They represent delinquent parenthood, and Dickens sets them forth with great irony. Lionel Trilling believes Dickens discovered the matter of Little Dorrit in his own childhood experience.

William Dorrit, in the novel, is a man who has been imprisoned in the Marshalsea prison for debtors for so long that he has gained the nickname 'The Father of Marshalsea.' His suffering and indignity in the prison is made less painful by the adoration of his youngest daughter Amy (the 'Little Dorrit' of the title). The story follows their luck in receiving a fortune and becoming affluent. It also shows how outside the prison walls there can exist equally confining prisons of our own making, particularly due to our aspirations.

Most of the action of Little Dorrit takes place in and around the debtor's prison; the Marshalsea in London, where William Dorrit has been imprisoned.

The story begins with scenes from the prison in Marshalsea, in which the people of various type, all debtors, are kept. The condition of the prison is miserable. Dickens describes this prison; "In Marshalsea that day there was a villainous prison. In one of its chambers, so repulsive a place, that even the obtrusive stars blinked at it, and left it to such refuge of reflected light as it could find for itself". The dominant symbol of this novel, is, thus, imprisonment. Marshalsea, the dark and dingy prison where, Dickens writes, "The morning light was in no hurry to climb the prison wall and look in at the sturgery windows" (Chp-IX). In a later chapter he tells us, "The shadow of the Marshalsea was a real darkening influence, and could be seen on the Dorrit family at any stage of the sun's course. (Chp-XXI)

Mr. William Dorrit, the father of Little Dorrit is an easy going man who squandered away his money and could not pay off the money he had borrowed. He was under the false illusion that his friends would help him. The friends deserted him and he lands in prison with his wife and two children. The prison is a microcosm of the society outside. The hopelessness of prison life is best expressed in the words of the doctor, an old jail-bird, who says: "We have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found?"

Peace. That's the word for it. Peace". The truth, however, was that the shadow of the Marshalsea cast its darkness on the Dorrit family. The impurity of the prison darkens whatever is left of Dorrits' spirit.

Mr. Dorrit wants to live alone without his family because he feels guilty that his wife and children have to suffer because of him. The two children, Fanny and Edward, who would have led normal lives, are also brought to the prison. They forget their earlier life, and play happily with other children in the prison. They are blissfully unaware of their own unhappy condition which makes them more pitiable in the eyes of the readers. They are forced to lead unhealthy lives due to their parent's circumstances.

There is clearly an autobiographical element in the novel for when Mr. John Dickens was sent to the debtors' prison with his wife and children, young Charles had also had bitter experiences of prison life and had faced the indifference and cruelty of society.

The prison is like a living hell. Philip Hobsbaum says; "Dorrit has two children, but as the same disconcertingly realistic turnkey observes, is pretty childish himself, and so his wife, who has a child coming, and two children, all live together in a spirit of helpless childishness in a single room with a few sticks of furniture because they think it better that they should not be separated even for a few weeks".

Mrs. Dorrit gives birth to a baby girl, Amy, but she is so tiny that everybody calls her 'Little Dorrit'. If parents are in prison, children too are born prisoners. It does not matter that a prison cannot be a home where children are cared for. The child, thus, has to suffer for no fault of his. Who is responsible for her being in prison? **Parents, society, or government?**

Little Dorrit, born in prison, is loved by everyone and is known as 'the child of the Marshalsea'. The turnkey who is a kind hearted man, takes interest in her. He remarks 'I ought to be her god father'. Amy feels that the turnkey is far better than her false friends.

When Amy starts walking and talking the turnkey becomes even fonder of her and bribes her with toys so that she would come to talk to him. Amy too becomes very fond of the turnkey, so that she comes to him on her own at all hours of the day.

Young Amy, who is always confined within the four walls of the prison, wonders what the world looks like outside. She asks the turnkey about the fields and the world outside for the little girl is not able to watch the beauty of nature or to feel the fragrance of fresh flowers. Dickens reveals the curiosity of her little mind when she asks the turnkey about the fields. 'Where are they'? She asks him.

'Why, they're over there, my dear,' said the turnkey. 'Just about there'.

'Does anybody open them, and shut them? Are they locked'? The turnkey was discomfited. "Well", he said, 'not in general'.

'Are they very pretty, Bob'?

She continues. 'Is it very pleasant to be there Bob'? "Prime" said the turnkey. 'Was father ever there'?

This child does not have any idea of the world outside the prison, not even the simple ordinary aspects of nature. Dickens' humour is full of deep pathos. For Dickens and Blake "the perfect image of injustice is the unhappy child".

Mr. Dorrit's wife dies in prison but he recovers from the blow in a month or so.

Mr. Dorrit hopes to be the 'Father of Marshalsea. The turnkey once says to him. "You and me is the oldest inhabitants. I wasn't here myself, above seven years before you. I shan't last long. When I'm going off the lock for good and all, you'll be the 'Father of Marshalsea'.

When the oldest turnkey finally dies, Dorrit himself becomes the longest serving inhabitant of the prison. 'The Father of Marshalsea' which he had so desired to be. The title is borne by Mr. Dorrit with much gratification for it establishes him as the First Gentleman, albeit within prison walls.

William Dorrit, whatever he may be to the Marshalsea, is a poor father to his own children. Weak, dependent, essentially childish, he affects not to know that his elder daughter supports herself by dancing and his younger daughter goes out sewing in the homes of various ladies.

The irony is that this daughter, Little Dorrit, is not impatient of such moral invasion, the characteristics of nobility. She says, "It would be a new distress to him even to know that I earn a little money, and that Fanny earns a little money. He is so anxious about us, you see, feeling helplessly shut up there. Such a good father"! To Little Dorrit, her father is a child to be forgiven and cherished.

Unable to exercise even the simplest parental function, this man is ready to accept any sacrifice from his daughters, specially the saintly Amy, the 'little' Dorrit. The diminutive is not only an essential part of the plot. "It is also picturesque and symbolical – the small frail figure who is nevertheless the fount of moral strength; the protectress, the neglected, loved by all and, until the end, understood by none".

The Dorrit sisters are also at the mercy of Mrs. General, a woman prisoner at the Marshalsea who, over the years, has not only grown tolerant of her bonds but has also found a role for herself amid the occupants of her prison home. She harnesses young ladies, including the Dorrit girls, in the proprieties, her own name symptomatic of discipline, ceremony, and the consciousness of rank and place. She is never ruffled, and smoothes even the roughest surfaces of life. Her charges are herded and driven like cattle, to be taught decorum. The irony here is that the Dorrit sisters, like other girls in charge of Mrs. General, have the dimmest chance of entering the high society that Mrs. General has in mind when she marshals them about, instructing them to master the Victorian practice of sweeping problems under the carpet. The Dorrit sisters are told, along with the other girls, that on entering a room full of elegant people they must say to themselves, "Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism" because this would help them immensely to form a demeanor, to appear cool, calm, and collected.



In fact no father could be less responsible or selfish than Dorrit. He advises his daughter to encourage the amorous advances of the Turnkey's son as a means of eking out his own privileges. The impurity of the prison has darkened whatever is left of his spirit. Here we see him as an egocentric father least concerned about the future of his children.

Just as Dickens had suppressed the episode at the blacking factory, Dorrit tries in vain to conceal the Marshalsea. Dorrit's fortunes change for the better. But Amy, Little Dorrit's love and care for him do not diminish in the least. In fact she is a loser because Arthur Clennam, unable to think of her independently of her father William Dorrit, drops the idea of marrying her lest she think he wishes to do so for her father's new found riches. "The extravagance and unworthiness of William Dorrit, and his callousness towards his daughter, make the truthfulness of little Dorrit irrational but heroic". For William Dorrit is a man whose worth is not self-evident in the least. Amy is too innocent and self-sacrificing and is loyal to him despite his disregard. It is no surprise that Dickens must make him die, later, to, as it were, release his hold on the daughter who must seek her own happiness with Arthur Clennam.

But happiness does not come. For, even when Mr. Dorrit is released from prison there is no freedom for the Dorrit family. Wherever they go, they take the darkness of the prison with them. Dorrit cannot so to speak, get enough air. He travels compulsively. But even his travelling is a form of imprisonment. He is unable to move without an entourage, which only impedes his movement.

Finally, when crumbling and gone senile, he unintentionally gives away the whole of his long kept secret. During the final exit of Dorrit surrounded by wealthy English aristocracy at the long dining table he suddenly begins to feel not himself and calls out to Amy to see if Bob was on the lock, letting out the secret of his past life : he was so long used to the prison and its captivity that home and freedom unsettle him. It is not difficult to imagine the great humiliation and embarrassment he must have caused his daughter by revealing the dark secret of his past. Dickens himself suffered such humiliation when told that a person at the blacking factory knew him. He probably lived in perpetual fear of his unhappy past being probed.

Amy's pain and humiliation, as her father proudly tells the gathering of gentility whom he sees as the inmates of the Marshalsea, of Amy's birth in prison, must have been unbearable. But she tries to soothe him, inviting our sympathy. Dorrit turns child, and Amy turns parent. Worse, she is turned into a slave by a father that is himself in confinement.

Dickens makes the Dorrits live in prison for twenty three years. The transition in time is very skillfully managed by Dickens. He could have depicted the inhuman condition of the debtor's prison if he had confined them for six months or two years or five. But Dickens wanted to show the true picture of society in his time. Dickens saw no difference between the world of the Marshalsea and the one outside. Marshalsea is in reality 'a microcosm of the society outside, with all its euphemisms and hypocrisy'. If



there is freedom in the world outside, there is freedom in prison too. They are no longer harassed by creditors or badgered by business queries.

The hero Arthur Clennam, also ends up in the debtors' prison where Little Dorrit looks after him. There is a sense of mystery about Clennam's gloomy and religious mother. Although mentally very alert and vigorous, she turns herself into an invalid and remains confined to her room, a prison of her own making. The first title of the book, *Nobody's Fault* was it would seem, judiciously changed by Dickens. For there is Mrs. Clennam, who is personally responsible for blighting her son's life. She is a false mother in more ways than one; "she does not deny love but she perverts and prevents it by denying all that love feeds on – liberty, demonstrative tenderness, joy, and, what for Dickens is the guardian of love in society, art". Her harsh rousing of Arthur makes him incapable of taking independent decisions or to stand up for himself. In his fortieth year he says "I have no will". Arthur Clennam suspects his mother is responsible in some way for the imprisonment of Dorrit; that to ease her conscience she too stays in prison.

Arthur also knows the secret of his birth; that he is a love child. He recoils from an abiding relationship with a woman and harbours a sense of guilt. He retires to the Marshalsea as if by choice. Arthur responds to the stern will of his mother with a clenched, bitter will of his own. For whatever he may say, he does have his ethical will and so turns to the Marshalsea. But Arthur is not the only child to feel unloved and neglected

There is, also in the novel, the illegitimate Miss Wade who has been orphaned from infancy. Miss Wade writes an account of her life, 'The History of a Self Tormentor'. She pours into the account all the bitterness in her heart and soul, the bitterness of a child that feels unwanted and unloved. The self torture of Miss Wade is a perversion of the desire for love. Because she is not loved, she is bent on making herself hateful, perhaps convinced deep down that she was discarded by her parents because she was an object of hatred. She feels she is stamped in the eyes of the world and takes refuge in an unfulfilling, festering, lesbian relationship with Tattycoram, also illegitimate. The Meagles, are very kind parents to their own daughter, but cold and indifferent towards Tattycoram. Miss Wade and Tattycoram run away together, only to find themselves emotionally failed by the other.

When we read Miss Wade's 'The History of a self Tormentor' we feel sympathy for not just her, but, also Tattycoram. What Dickens wishes us to realize is that both these women are unloved. They are both illegitimate, abandoned by their parents, and forced to lead the miserable life of orphans that are not wanted by anyone. Their bitterness is only the expression of the desire for love. Miss Wade's is the "classic maneuver of the child who is unloved, or believes herself to be unloved; she refuses to be lovable, she effects to be hateful." Mrs. Gowan rears her son in such a manner that she becomes the root of his corruption. Mrs. Murdle in the novel refuses to surrender her youth as a mother should.



Little Dorrit also contains numerous subtle criticisms of the government and society of Dickens' time; notably in the so called Circumlocution Office that satirizes government bodies in the Victorian age whose officials did nothing, and are represented in the character of Barnacles.

Little Dorrit is a unique blend of the social and personal anguish of Dickens' own life. It acts out many of the ideas that were troubling him. What Dickens observed around him became identified with several of his own problems and infused the novel with personal feeling. It is also true that the character of Dorrit is based on Dickens' own father, who had also been a Marshalsea prisoner.

Lionell Trilling held that Little Dorrit is more about society than any of the other novels, that it is about society in its very essence. In this novel Dickens points to the irresponsibility seen in the machinery of government; a series of portraits showing irresponsible or repressive parents; a study of dehumanization in the case of repressed children; it is the portrayal of society in prison and society as a prison; there is also the picture of an economy hopelessly out of control.

In Little Dorrit Amy is an example of such a child who begins her life in prison where the treatment of the prisoners was cruel and unjust. They were cut off from real life and had no chance of earning their living and paying off their debts.

Commenting on the novel Bernard Shaw says: "It was pointed out by Charles Dickens in Little Dorrit, which remains the most accurate and penetrating study of the gentle littleness of our class of governments in the English Language, that whenever an abuse becomes oppressive enough to persuade our party parliament-arians that something must be done, that they immediately set to work to face the situation and discover, How Not to Do

In recent times Little Dorrit has often been interpreted in psychoanalytic terms, especially the identification of the hero with the father. Amy probably has been rendered incapable of loving any man other than her father. It would, perhaps, be an act of disloyalty, for her, to love any man other than her father. And when she does, she seeks her father in him, to ease her conscience, so to say. It is important to note that when Arthur Clennam breaks the news of the changed fortune of William Dorrit, she clings to Arthur and swoons in his arms, crying out "Father! Father! Father"! Even when she nurses Arthur Clennam in his adversity she does so in complete innocence, as she nursed her father, laying his head upon her bosom, embracing him

.Charles Dickens made his readers happy by ending the novel on a happy note. Amy and Arthur get married. Unlike little Nell, little Dorrit finds assurance in the arms of a man that is very much a father figures, marking "the formal transference of love and truth from father to husband in Little Dorrit".



---

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, it may be said, on the basis of the observations made in this paper that Dickens was a true social reformer. A humanitarian, and a novelist with a purpose, he always portrayed the pain, humiliation and 'wretchedness' of orphan children, or children who had suffered at the hands of their selfish and self centered parents.

Through Mr. Dorrit and his family Dickens reflects the social and economic evils of Victorian Society. His purpose in this novel is also to show how children deprived of parental care due to their egoistic parents suffer captivity, dependence and servility. There is a powerful ambiguity in the novel of home and prison and Dickens points an accusing finger at society.

## **Reference**

- Walter Allen The English Novel (London : Penguin Bks, 1957)
- G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature (London : Oxford University Press, 1966)
- A.E Dyson,. Dickens Modern Judgments (London : Macmillan, 1968)
- George Gissing, Charles Dickens A Critical Study (London : Blackie and Co., 1920)
- Philip Hobsbaum, A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens
- W.W.Crotch, Charles Dickens : Social Reformer (London : Jonathan , 1968)
- A.E Dyson,. The Inimitable Dickens (London : 1970)
- H.M Burton, Dickens and His Works (London : Methuen, 1968 )
- Rickett Compton A History of English Literature (New Delhi : UBS Publications, 2001)