COMPLEX FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

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Abstract: Charles Dickens's novel is about the journey of Nicholas Nickleby, that loses his father and finds himself in the challenging situation to make a living as a teacher at Dotheboys Hall, fighting his uncle Ralph Nickleby with courage and dignity. We analyze the cold relationship between Kate and Nicholas and their uncle, but also the complex father-son relationship between Ralph and Smike and Nicholas and Smike. The novel presents Dotheboys Hall, a terrifying place where abandoned and orphan boys were badly treated by Mr and Mrs Squeers that call themselves their father and mother. The paper helps us better understand the delicate situation of Victorian children, but also how the lack of a secure attachment and affection during early childhood tremendously affects the life and future of children.

Keywords: parental connection, secure attachment, mental health, family, Victorian children

At the end of the 18th century and in the first part of the 19th century the British literature goes through some changes because of the social and historical transformations. During the Enlightenment, its representatives take part in an intellectual, philosophical movement that has had the purpose to put reason above anything else. They described the contexts around them concisely without adding any imaginative elements to their reality. The first signs of change can be seen in the 19th century poetry where the Romantics bring fresh principles through which they try to understand all the complex changes within society. Thanks to this new literary period we discover more than the world of emotions and feelings and we get much more than just the conflict created between the heroes and the obstacles presented by society; we also notice the inner conflicts created by the impulsive passions inside human beings. Besides talking about nature, the Romantics also talk about surreal elements and about complex feelings. Throughout lyrics, poems present different serious issues like philosophy, religion, ethics, art, politics.

In the first three decades of the 19th century, Romanticism occupied literature and succeeded in bringing a fresh and quite distinct perspective upon life. "Nicholas Nickleby is Dickens's first romantic novel because it is his first novel with a proper and dignified romantic hero...Nicholas Nickleby is a proper, formal and ceremonial hero" (Human Relationships in Charles Dickens's Nicholas Nickleby, K. Shantikumar Sharma, M.A. Dr. H. Shumreingam, Language in India, vol.18:6 June 2018). It is remarkably interesting how Nicholas Nickelby is a real hero with the absolute qualities of a friend, father, brother. Dickens presents evil in a fight with good, there are Richard Nickelby and Squeers that represent the lack of humanity, love, and affection and Smike and Nicholas, kind, loving and gentle to everyone. So, Dickens cannot be described only as a social critic of his time, but also an exceptionally talented and deep analyst of the human soul.

The presented themes are wider and more complex than during Enlightenment when writers respected the boundaries when it came to reality. The place for Romanticism was taken by realism thanks to the incredibly interesting work of: Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, George Meredith, Hardy or Samuel Butler. "Karl Marx wrote in 1854 that these writers presented through their novels the social and political issues of that time even more than publishers or politicians really succeeded" (Anixt,

A:426). Writers really love human beings in their complexity, and they feel pity for them because the middle class took advantage of all the tricky situations they encountered. They believed in their moral virtues, and they underlined the pain and suffering that the main character had to face. Even if writers can be described as social critics, they also have a certain level of faith in the capacity of human beings to become better.

Victorian fiction can be described as presenting the social issues of the time, the desperate situation of children, the pain and poverty of workers within a system where they were used just for the profit, but also a window towards higher moral virtues. The Romantic literature from the beginning of 19th century described different foreign countries or the past and tried to escape the faulty present, the realistic writers described daily life in cities and presented simple people that had high moral virtues and fought against a sick society. Describing a period where private property has all the benefits, literature presents the fight between all the social classes and the tough situation of the poor in contrast with the arrogant tyrant of the upper class.

The fiction writers of this period not only describe in detail the society and its issues, but also show moral features of the main characters that are not stained by an immoral society. Dickens presents repeatedly the inhuman situation of children coming from poor families and shows the cruelties happening in private schools like Mr and Mrs Squeers's Dotheboys Hall. It is true that his own life was very difficult with a father in prison and with his mother pushing him to work in a factory against his will, when all he wanted to do was to educate himself and become better, but taking into consideration only the biographic point of view is limiting the artistic perspective upon Dickens's novels.

He does more than present the situation of different social categories, he tries through his characters to show a high ethical pattern that all societies should have. The reader feels he/she knows the hero of Dickens's fiction because the author presents in a detailed way the inner life and the emotional atmosphere. He describes his characters in such an obvious way that we get the feeling that we are there in the middle of the action with his hero, adoring or hating him. Because of the natural elements present in his work, but also thanks to all the feelings that his characters must face, Dickens's realism has strong romantic features. He uses a lot of expressions and metaphors for describing his characters, a fact that helps us get involved in his written creation. His rich vocabulary creates a clear picture of the plot and characters and helps us better understand Victorian society and all the struggles of the time.

Dotheboys Hall is the place we meet at the beginning of the novel, where the main character of the book teaches for a couple of months. Mr and Mrs Squeers run this place where only boys "live" and "study" because most of them are abandoned or orphans. When we say "live" it means survive, because this place is absolutely terrifying for the children:" I used to say when I was in London that for these boys Mrs Squeers is like a mother. But she is more than a mother, she does things for these boys, that not even half of the mothers could do for their children" (Dickens, Charles:122). The boys were badly treated, their faces looked ill, pale, and old. Their bodies and minds suffered seriously because of the lack of a healthy diet and an appropriate connection to their care givers. Mr and Mrs Squeers kept this place for the money, and they could not be called "mother" and "father" under any circumstances. "Mrs Squeers is as always, a mother for the children, the blessing and joy for everyone who knows her...what a member of society this lady is" (Dcikens, Charles:27). She treated the boys in a horrible way, giving them meat from dead animals or sending them into the fields to eat raw vegetables. They were both traumatizing the boys, many of them died or were extremely ill because these harsh conditions: "They had faces that could have been beautiful, but they were gloomy because of all the suffering...children that were crying for their nannies, children abandoned in their loneliness" (Dickens, Charles:123).

This orphanage where Nicholas comes as a teacher can be described as hell on earth: "some bore more the aspect of dead bodies than of living creatures; and there were others coiled up into strange and fantastic postures, such as might have been taken as the uneasy efforts of pain to gain some temporary relief" (Dickens's Vision in "Nicholas Nickleby," I: What the Wayfarer Sees (victorianweb.org). . The basic physical needs are food, shelter, sleep, but the most important needs are the emotional ones that must always be respected: unconditional love and connection. Children were lonely, sick, and hungry. It is essential for the children's well-being to be loved, appreciated exactly as they are, unique human beings. Children were not respected, loved, or kindly treated as any human being should be.

Being physically aggressive with children, makes them feel unsafe and little by little these children lose their self-esteem entirely and forever." What kind of hell was here where any feeling of kindness or sparkle of love were frozen from birth "(Dickens, Charles:123). These are Nicholas's words when he notices all the terror happening there with the children and no authorities knew anything about this. He observed that children in the classroom were sad and quiet, they were not playing or talking to one another, and the place was more like a grave than a school with children. They did not look alive or happy, they looked as if they were old and sad without any enthusiastic movement in their bodies. They were not only disrespected, but seriously bitten and humiliated.

It is unbelievable how Ralph Nickleby, Nicholas's uncle, can treat his family in this incredibly cold and rude way. He perfectly knows Mr Squeers and waht he is capable of and still sends Nicholas to work at Dotheboys Hall. Nicholas runs away with Smike and Ralph says that he knew that he was not capable of anything, and anyone would be more than happy to work with a man like Mr Squeers. Even if Ralph is his father's brother, he treats his family badly and wants to win money from illegal businesses. He treats Nicholas exactly as an enemy and wants to destroy him. Nicholas tells the stories seen at Dotheboys Hall. All the violence and cruelty and lack of youth and compassion are known not only by Nicholas but also by Ralph that hides the truth. Mr Squeers narcissistic and mean intentions destroy the life and future of children.

Smike gets attached to Nicholas who loves him like his own child. The truth that we discover at the end of the novel helps us better understand Ralph's personality: "A rich and miserly moneylender who feigns to help his late brother's family but tries to humiliate Nicholas and use Kate to his own advantage. His evil plans and schemes prove his ultimate undoing, and he eventually hangs himself" (Charles Dickens Characters List N-Q (charlesdickenspage.com)). We found out that Smike is his abandoned son and because Ralph hates Nicholas so much, he also cannot stand the fact that his son receives so much love from his nephew and so his hate grows bigger. People who have children cannot be called true parents unless they really take care of their babies, spend quality time with them, give them love and affection. Smike feels seen, loved, and accepted by Nicholas and not even in a million years would he think about leaving him for his real father or for another human being. Every child need one person that loves him/her unconditionally because we develop a healthy mental life in a safe relationship. This relationship is what he needed to feel like a whole human being. We get hurt in relationships and we also heal in relationships. Smike is traumatized by all the bad experiences at Dotheboys Hall, but also because of the first four years spent with his unbalanced, cruel, selfish father, Ralph Nickleby. Children are very vulnerable when they are small and all the negative things that happen to them have a powerful impact upon their future mental state.

Throughout the novel we find out more about the reasons for Ralph's hatred towards his family. Comparing children does not bring anything good in their relationship which is going to suffer because parents prefer a certain child. This hate begins in early childhood because their parents always used to compare the two brothers and if Nicholas's father was

generous, open, and positive, he was always the black sheep of the family. Raising brothers in harmony in a balanced environment without making their lives and success a competition decides their mature relationship is going to br. Ralph hates his brother and he cannot stand Nicholas and the fact that he resembles his father when it comes to his good heart, beautiful character, and high virtues in general. We notice an interesting and obvious parallel between ralph and his brother and Nicholas and his sister, Kate. The latter are so kind, united, loving, and balanced, being raised together with love and no comparisons.

Ralph abandons Smike and gives up the chance to become a better person because being a parent sends you on a journey towards yourself and you rediscover yourself as a child and get the chance to know you better and heal yourself through awake consciousness. Nicholas on the other hand is delicate and kind with Smike, treating him affectionately:" You are my only comfort and my only support, now I would not want to lose you for anything in this world! My heart is connected to yours!" (Dickens, Charles:337). When he first sees him, he gets close to him gently: "You need not fear me" said Nicholas kindly. Are you cold?" N-n-o"." You are shivering." I am not cold "replied Smike quickly. I am used to it. There was an obvious fear of giving offence in his manner, and he was such a timid, broken-spirited creature that Nicholas could not help saying, "Poor Fellow." (Dickens, Charles:210).

In her book *A Mother's Journey into the Science of Attachment*, Bethany Saltman talks about the fact that receiving care and attention in the first years of life is essential for the child's development. The brain never forgets trauma, all the negative experiences that have happened in early childhood. Not having a secure attachment as a child brings many problems and anxieties as an adult and we can observe Smike's mental health:" lack of sleep, depression, anxiety, decrease in the interest for the ethical truth and for the chances to be seen as a born leader" (Saltman,Bethany:123) Smike is depressed, incoherent, does not remember many things and the cruel things from Dotheboys Hall keep coming up in his mind:" Do not think about that place because it is over-says Nicholas looking in his friend eyes, that had a shocked and lost look", something that was constant when he was at Dotheboys Hall and has not disappeared yet. Nicholas treats Smike with great love and understanding and the boy lives the happiest days of his life. When Squeers propose to him to go live with his father, he refuses telling him that Nicholas is the only one that he cares for.

Snawby was paid by Squeers and Ralph to act as if he was Smike's father and he tells the boy:" You are not a good son, you are not grateful or loving. You do not allow me to love you when I want. You do not want to come home, do you? (Dickens, Charles:.227. Smike gets to feel better thanks to his relationship with Nicholas that gives him reassurance, support, time, and affection. But because he does not have a secure attachment in his early childhood, he is depressed, and he lacks high self-esteem. While walking with Smike, Nicholas remembers his happy childhood and the fact that he was close to his sister Kate and their father loved them very much.

"Relationships are in the centre of our human existence and our intellectual development" (Saltman, Bethany:15). Bowlby discovered that orphans that did not have any close person to replace their mothers were extremely affected when it came to their emotional development. "Children that had family members as loving care givers were much better than the ones left in orphanages without anyone close to them" (Saltman, Bethany:94). The relationship with parents should be a warm and happy one and the child should take resources from this balanced connection. Time is essential when it comes to the relationship with our children. Nicholas was the one who replaced Smike's parents and even when Smike was extremely ill, he carried the sofa outside in the garden, where they would talk for hours. Having a secure attachment brings a lot of positive things into the future adult. Smike had the love and the support of all the family, this means that Kate and Mrs Nickleby were also remarkably close to Smike and admired his positive nature. Quality relationships bring us happiness and balance

and make us feel better and safe. Nicholas was happy to feel that Smike was happy at the end of his life after an unhappy childhood with unbalanced, absent parents and a cruel orphanage.

Ralph is Nicholas and Kate's uncle, but the relationship is very distant and cold, and he treats them as pieces in his money puzzle. Kate asks him to help her get rid of the insistent men that keep chasing her to marry and even if she is scared and desperate, he does not seem understand or compassionate towards his family feelings: "I do not want, exactly because I am your brother's daughter, to be patient and accept these kind of behaviours" (Dickens, Charles:482). Dickens creates Kate and Nicholas, two wonderful characters that underline all the important values in which the writer strongly believes: honesty, love, courage, dignity. Her niece asks him for help hoping that their blood bond will change something inside him. Ralph's family cannot stand him anymore when they understand he is a cruel and selfish man. "If he had known that his son was alive, and he had been raised by him, he would have been a mean, careless, distant father" (Dickens, Charles:499). He abandons his son and becomes a lonely, traumatized orphan. When a child is born, the first experience he/she faces is the connection with his/her mother. The human brain needs relationships to function properly. As Dean Burnett explains in his book "Ignoranța emoțională", oxytocin is an important hormone involved in establishing and developing emotional connections. We need a human touch and a close care giver to be able to become well-balanced, He also explains that there are people who become parents, but only biologically, because they do not have these complex substances (oxytocin and vasopressin) active in their bodies, so they do not like these small and cute babies. But the connection between the baby and his/her mother and father is especially important for the future functioning of his/her brain: " As new-born or toddlers, the emotional connection with the people that take care of us determines very often the sensations we get and how we feel about them, fact that directly influences the way that our brain, personality and identity are built"(Burnett, Dean: 237). Mrs. Ralph Nickleby, Smike's mother, whom Ralph married only for the money, "which he could only obtain by keeping the marriage secret", was not willing to keep their son, love him and take care of him. He was put out to nurse a long way off. She constantly urged [Ralph] to avow their marriage; he peremptorily refused. She remained alone in a dull country house: seeing little or no company but riotous, drunken sportsmen. He lived in London and clung to his business. Angry quarrels and recriminations took place, and when they had been married seven years, and were within a few weeks of the time when the brother's death would have adjusted all, she eloped with a younger man, and left him" (Charles Dickens Characters List N-Q (charlesdickenspage.com)).

Galit Atlas underlines how "50 years of research shows how the early interaction between the parent and the baby has effects upon the future development, the attachment patterns, and the mental health. The lack of maternal warmth when the baby is only a couple of months makes the baby emotionally imbalanced at 1 year old, aggressive at around 3 and some other behaviour issues after 10 years old" (Atlas, Galit:113).

Presenting these scientific facts makes us understand better the behaviour of some popular children in Victorian fiction. Smike is unbalanced, anxious, depressed, having strange mood swings because he did not have a strong and warm connection to a care giver when he was just a baby, so when he grows up, he meets Nicholas who is warm, authentic, human and he discovers this need to stick to this father figure he has never had in his early childhood.

After all the beating and food deprivation that children experience at the orphanage, this place finds its ending and gets destroyed. The orphanage is an example of how cruel and easy the life and future of a child cand be destroyed. Physical punishments have a tremendous impact upon children's mental health. They are going to have post traumatic issues in their future life, managing stress quite hard. Disconnection and violence result in unbalanced human beings, that is why it is easier to raise loved and protected children than to treat adults later.

We can conclude that Victorian children had to endure a great deal of suffering within society, and they felt safe neither with their families, nor the orphanages that really wanted money and took advantage of their sad situation. The novel shows how the lack of affection, both emotional and physical presence, and secure attachment from the parents lead to serious behaviour and mental issues. Physical violence and punishment lead to a serious lack of self-confidence and well-being. Connection and love bring happiness and harmony because as we suffer in our relationships, we also get better through the connection to other people, we all need to feel loved and appreciated as we are, with our authentic personalities. Smike is an eloquent example of a child that suffers because he is beaten and has no care givers to protect him and make him feel safe, when he grows up, we meet another Smike, who has someone with whom he can share his life, someone who loves him and stands by him. When children are little, they are dependent on their care giver, but as time goes by, they become interdependent, and they learn how happiness comes through healthy relationships.

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