Society Depicted By Victorian Era Books

The Victorian era was a time of social reform with laws that are still incorporated in today's society. It took place during the reign of Queen Victoria and lasted for 63 years; from 1837 and ended with her death in 1901. In England, many of the laws and ways of life were different than in other countries. While Queen Victoria was in reign, she upheld laws and ran the country as she wished. During this time period, a lot had happened within social classes. Readers are educated on what happened during this time by reading the works of two authors who lived during this period. Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde are two Victorian authors who have shown through their books what people struggled with and went through during this time period. Generally women were seen as much lower than men, money was the priority, and children were expected to work at unreasonably young ages. A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens showed the realities of poverty in towns and the harsh child labor laws, as well as the role of women in society. The protagonist Scrooge was someone who hated the poor and did not care to donate because he was rich. Scrooge goes through the harsh adventures with three ghosts but one specifically shows him the conditions families like the Cratchit's went through. The Cratchit family was poor and did not have much money to get treatment for their crippled son, Tiny Tim. Dickens shows the reader that people of the upper class never knew what the lower class went through and their struggles. Charles Dickens successfully displays these issues in his works, as does Oscar Wilde. Although Wilde does not go into as much detail about poverty; The Importance of Being Earnest is a book that focuses mostly on the realities of social class and gender roles, as well as marriage and love. This book is about two wealthy men, Jack and Algernon. They have double identities both with the name Ernest that are known to be husband material. Women of the upper class like Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew are both madly in love with the ideas of such men, especially their wealth and family name. These two authors were able to inform new generations about old societal customs. Both authors grew up in the Victorian years so they were knowledgeable on the customs and laws in Britain during this time. Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde portray the realities of critical poverty laws related to social class, marriage and the pursuit of love, and the role of women in society to depict the Victorian Era through their widely famous and influential works A Christmas Carol and The Importance of Being Earnest.

Social class and poverty were an essential part of both authors' writing. In A Christmas Carol, Dickens tends to talk about the poor and the workhouses that poor children were often put in to labor. During this time period, children of poor families were expected to work as early as the ages of 4 or 5. In his book, the main character Scrooge asks repeatedly, "'Are there no prisons?' 'And the Union workhouses?'" (Dickens 13). Scrooge says this to the two clerks that show up to his office asking him to donate to the poor. Scrooge was an unappreciative, disrespectful, coldhearted, character who hated to donate and help the poor as he continued to ask if they were working in the workhouses. Bl.uk, a article states how Dickens includes all of this in his writing: "Dickens dwelt on the terrible sights he had seen among the juvenile population in London's jails and doss-houses and stressed the desperate need for educating the poor" (Sutherland). This just exemplifies that Dickens was trying to show the audience the struggles many people had to go through in this time period. Oscar Wilde also talks about social class in his work The Importance of Being Earnest. An example of this is how the upper class valued money over nearly everything else and saw themselves above everyone else. Owning

land was another essential part of being considered the upper class. Many of the characters in The Importance of Being Earnest only wanted to marry those who were wealthy. An article written by Ayu Noviati states that, “The ownership of land was still the basis of status and social acceptance. That was the thing that made the differences of people or even a community” (Noviati 14). It is evident that money and land ownership was such a big part in social class ranking. We see this in the book as Lady Bracknell is a great example of the negativity and arrogance the upper class normally displayed. She shows actions of arrogance in Act III when saying, “Never speak disrespectfully of society, Algernon. Only people who can´t get into it do that” (Wilde 79). In this quote, Lady Bracknell is showing her unacceptance of the lower class and shallowness. She acts this way; but it is a bit odd because she was never born into the upper class, she had married into it. For Lady Bracknell to judge and be disapproving of the lower class shows the audience that she only cares about money and what material things a potential husband can offer. This explains that the Victorian society was the same way; letting wealth influence the type of decisions people made.

Marriage was one thing the Victorian Age saw as important to society; especially the upper class. Women married men who were wealthy and not always because of love. Women wanted to be married to a man in the upper class because of their wealth. From an article by Ayu Noviati, it states that “Marriage was a business deal containing wealth, status, family names, and bloodlines are more important than love” (Noviati 18). In The Importance of Being Earnest, this issue is evident throughout the entire storyline. Gwendolen Fairfax, a prominent female character of the upper class, wants a perfect proposal by a man with the name Ernest since she likes what the name means. As long as she has these two things in a marriage, a perfect proposal and a man with the name Ernest, Gwendolen does not care for anything more. In act I, Jack brings up the idea of proposing to Gwendolen but she tells him he has no experience in proposing. “I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose...men often propose for practice…” (Wilde 22). This explains perfectly how Gwendolen only wants a man who has experience in proposing and will be able to give her a perfect day. In this same act, Gwendolen's mother, Lady Bracknell says that she must approve of Jack to see that he is the right husband for her daughter. She finds it important to ask him questions about his family, wealth, and his background. This explains perfectly how in the Victorian Era, women usually married men based on specific standards. For example, Lady Bracknell states, “‘I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men…’”(Wilde 24). She continues with questions like “‘What is your income?’” (Wilde 24). “‘Are your parents living?’” (Wilde 26). She continues to have a sitdown conversation with Jack to become educated on the type of man he is and if he is right for her daughter. This is not unusual for mothers (of the upper class especially), to do this because they want their daughters to marry into wealth. Social class was a big part of life, it showed the importance and depicted the value of someone. As unfair as it was to be seen and labeled as unworthy if someone was from the lower class, unfortunately that was how it worked. Wilde depicted the Victorian era in this aspect of the book because in old Britain, wealth and family names were a huge part of marriage.

The role of women in society is depicted in both A Christmas Carol and The Importance of Being Earnest through the life of Mrs. Cratchit, Lady Bracknell and countless other characters. In the Victorian era, women were not allowed to own land and usually were housewives. This was the exact situation with Mrs. Cratchit; her family was not wealthy. Mr. Cratchit worked as a clerk for Ebenezer Scrooge, and Mrs. Cratchit stayed inside looking after her children. Women of the lower class usually stayed at home cooking and looking after the family while the husband earned the salary. “In half a minute Mrs. Cratchit entered--flushed, but smiling

proudly--with the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quartern of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top" (Dickens 87). This just explains that women in this time period were expected to have dinner ready for their husbands and families since that was a big part of their role. Oscar Wilde uses the idea of women in a society in his works as well. Generally, lower class women would work but be paid a lower amount as a man would be paid. Whereas the upper class, which is included in Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, women were married to wealthy men and did not need to work; their jobs were to find the right husband. If a woman was born and raised in the upper class, it was expected of her to find a wealthy husband and keep her social class. This happened in order to have generations of children who were able to maintain class status and wealth. In the story, Cecily is talking to Algernon saying that she once broke off their engagement but she would never again. "'I don't think I could break it off now that I have actually met you. Besides, of course, there is the question of your name'"(Wilde 55). This explains that Cecily has been searching for the right husband with the right qualities and she was able to be engaged to the man before actually meeting him. This goes to show that wealth and family names are a big part in choosing a husband. She was willing to be engaged to a man with these qualities, before even knowing if they had a romantic connection or not. In an article written by Marwa Sami Hussein, she says that "Victorian women, whether married or single, were dependent, that is to say they were weak, fragile, and delicate as roses, and unable to take any decision except teaching their children moral values" (Hussein 24). The reader sees this idea of women in both books as it was a very big part of society. It is very evident in The Importance of Being Earnest that the women were indeed weak and dependent on their husbands. Although women were not exposed to the same opportunities as men, women like Lady Bracknell in The Importance of Being Earnest who were not born in the upper class, were able to marry into it and pass it down onto offspring. In that time, family name and worth was very important. Both authors show the opportunities men had over women and how women were able to adapt to this by taking care of families while the men did the business. Men did not always have better options because those of the lower class would have lower incomes than that of the upper class; so it was difficult for men of the lower class to always provide for their family. As the reader knows, salary earnings differed among classes and therefore did not help the poor to afford many things for their families as the upper classes did.

As shown, Dickens and Wilde use the realities of the Victorian Era to depict what it was like in the time period of their works. They both inspired many people with their stories and books in old Victorian England. While Dickens talked more about the poor in a society; Wilde talked about the upper class in the society. It is easy to be able to compare the different ways the upper and lower class treated each other, the workload, and their children. It is obvious that children who were born into the upper class were treated differently than children raised in the lower class. This is evident in most cultures but the difference is that children in the lower class of the Victorian age were forced to work and put in labor. The Victorian age laws were not just about children though, it is very evident that marriage was handled in a very different way than it is handled today. For the upper class, women chose their wealthy husbands. For the lower class and poor; women generally married men and it was required for them to learn basic housekeeping skills so they were able to take care of the house and children. These skills included that of sewing, cooking, washing, etc. Lastly, as mentioned above, women were not able to have careers like men; and being housewives was really the only opportunity they had in that aspect. Although there are other topics these authors may have touched on in their books that relate to the Victorian age, these three topics: social class, marriage, and women in a society are the most relating and obvious in the two books discussed. After reading on the

customs shown throughout both stories, it is quite evident that society from then until present has changed dramatically. Through their writings and pieces, Oscar Wilde and Charles Dickens were able to show new generations how much the world has changed.

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