

## LECTURE 14

### **Theme. Realism in English literature and its peculiarities**

Plan: Realism in English literature

Charles Dickens. His life and work.

Criticism of the bourgeois society in “Dombey and Son”

Having won the victory over the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie betrayed the interests of the working class. The reform bill of 1832 gave the vote neither to factory workers nor to agricultural labourers. It was the merchants, the bankers and the manufacturers who profited by it. The attempts of the bourgeoisie to solve social contradictions and to turn aside the attention of the workers from political struggle ended in failure. The workers fought for their rights. Their political demands were expressed in the People's Charter in 1833. The Chartist movement was a revolutionary movement of the English workers, which lasted till 1848. It shook the foundation of capitalist England. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by sharp contradictions. In many ways it was an age of progress: railways and steamships were built, great scientific discoveries were made, education became more widespread; but at the same time it was an age of profound social unrest, because there was too much poverty, too much injustice, too much ugliness; and above all, fierce exploitation of man by man. The growth of scientific inventions mechanized industry and increased wealth, but this progress only enriched the few at the expense of the many. Dirty factories, inhumanly long hours of work, child labour, exploitation of both men and women workers, low wages, slums and frequent unemployment,—these were the conditions of life for the workers in the growing industries of England, which became the richest country in the world towards the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the thirties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century English capitalism had entered a new stage of development. England had become a classical capitalist country, a country of industrial capitalism.

The ideas of Chartism attracted the attention of many progressive-minded people of the time. Many prominent writers became aware of the social injustice around them and tried to picture them in their works. Thus this period of fierce class struggle was introduced in literature by the appearance of a new trend, that of Critical Realism. The greatest novelists of the age are Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Charlotte Bronte etc...

These writers used the novel as a means to protest against the evils in contemporary social and economic life and to picture the world in a realistic way. The critical realists introduced new characters into literature: they described the new social force in modern history—the working class. They expressed deep sympathy for the working people; they described the unbearable conditions of their life and work; they voiced a passionate protest against exploitation and described their persistent struggle for their rights.

The contribution of these writers to world literature is enormous. They created a broad panorama of social life, exposed and attacked the vices of aristocratic and bourgeois

society, sided with the common people in their passionate protest against unbearable exploitation, and expressed their hopes for a better future.

### Charles Dickens (1812-1870) His Life and Work

Charles Dickens began to write at the time when the labour movement, known as the Chartist movement was at its height. Continuous demonstrations in defence of workers' rights took place in many manufacturing towns and in London as well. The actions of the Chartists had a considerable effect on Dickens. Though he did not believe in revolutionary action, he was on the side of the people with all his heart. Dickens wrote about the poorest, the most unprivileged sections of the population. He looked into the darkest corners of the large cities and there found the victims of capitalism.

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 near Portsmouth on the southern coast of England. His father was a clerk at the office of a large naval station there, and the family lived on his small salary. They belonged to the lower middle class. Charles was very young when the family moved to the naval port of Chatham, which is near the ancient town Rochester. There Charles and his eldest sister went to school. After school Charles loved to run to the docks where ships went for repairs. There he saw sailors and brave old sea-captains at work. Charles's first teacher was a kind young man from Oxford, under whose influence Charles grew fond of books. At ten he read Defoe, Fielding, Smollett, Goldsmith and translations of some European and other authors. His favourite books were *Don Quixote* and the *Arabian Nights*.

The happy days at Chatham came to an end in 1822 when the father was moved to London. The Dickenses rented a house in one of the poorest parts of London. Charles was not sent to school any more. The father made no plans for the education of his children. He was an easy-going man who always spent more money than he could afford. Soon he lost his job and was imprisoned for debt. All the property the family had was sold, even Charles' favourite books and the boy was put to work at a factory. The long working hours at the factory, the poor food, the rough boys and their treatment of him he could never forget. He later described this unhappy time in *David Copperfield*. Dickens visited his parents in the prison on Sundays. There he saw many other prisoners, and learned their stories. The debtors' prison is described in the *Pickwick Papers* and in the novel *Little Dorrit*. In about a year the Dickenses received a small sum of money after the death of a relative, so all the debts were paid. Charles got a chance to go to school again. This time he was sent to a very old-fashioned school called *Wellington House Academy*.

Dickens left school when he was twelve. He had to continue his education by himself. At his father's suggestion he was sent to a lawyer's office to study law. He did not stay there long, but he learned the ways and manners of lawyers, as many of his books show. *Bleak House* in particular shows how legal decisions were made and delayed. Instead of law he studied shorthand and found a job as a newspaper reporter. In 1832 Dickens became a parliamentary reporter. Soon he came to understand that the House of Commons had nothing to do with true democracy.

Dickens's first efforts at writing were little stories about the ordinary Londoners he saw. The stories were funny street sketches.

At the age of twenty-four Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of his editor at the *Evening Chronicle*.

Not yet thirty, Dickens was the most popular writer in England. In 1842 he and his wife paid a visit to the United States. He also visited Italy, France and Switzerland, as he found it easier to concentrate on English problems from afar. There he worked at the novel *Dombey and Son*. In Paris Dickens met the writer Victor Hugo. When back in England, Dickens organized an amateur theatrical company, giving all the money they got from the performances to the poor. Though engaged in these activities, Dickens continued writing novels without a break. His genius was at its height; his best novels were written at this time. Dickens was very emotional: he lived with the characters he created; he suffered with them in their tragic moments, he laughed at the humorous side of their lives. With great energy he began to give dramatic readings from his own works in various towns all over Britain. His reading was so wonderful that people came in thousands to hear the warm-hearted beloved writer. Dickens read some of his Christmas stories exceptionally well. These were *The Cricket on the Hearth* and *A Christmas Carol*.

Dickens is remembered for having invented the theatre for one actor.

Dickens died suddenly on June 9, 1870.

### *The Four Periods in Dickens's Creative Work*

Dickens was the greatest novelist of his age. He wrote a tremendous number of works. He created a new type of novel — the social novel.

Dickens put all his hopes in the good qualities of human nature. To the end of his life he hoped to find means to better the world he lived in. But while painting hard reality in its true colours, Dickens changed his attitude as years went by, as to the causes of poverty and exploitation. Therefore his creative work has been divided into four periods.

1. The works written between the years 1833-1841 belong to the first period. They are: *Sketches by Boz* (1833-1836), *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*(1837), *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Nickolas Nicklbey* (1839), *Barnaby Rudge* (1840), *The Old Curiosity Shop*(1841).

In these novels Dickens observes the individual in bourgeois surroundings: how should man behave when he finds himself in difficulties, or in awkward circumstances or in danger? He has to choose which way to take. If he doesn't want to become a villain, he must, for the sake of honesty, come into conflict with the capitalist system. In these novels Dickens's heroes and heroines are remarkable for their fortitude. They never hesitate to take the wisest way and remain true to the principles of honour. They are willing to live in poverty and work hard. Finally virtue conquers evil. Dickens believed such a thing possible and that it was an easy thing to reform the wicked exploiters. Humour and optimism are characteristic of the first period in Dickens's writings.

2. To the second period belong the following books

American Notes (1842), Martin Chuzzlewit (1844), The Christmas Books (1843-1848), Dombey and Son (1846-1848).

In the works of the second period Dickens begins to describe the crimes that arise from the bourgeois system itself. In his Christmas Books Dickens showed the heartless cruelty of masters towards their workers. But he also wished to awaken kind and loving thoughts in the hearts of the employers.

3. The following novels written in the fifties are probably the strongest for the social criticism expressed in them. They are David Copperfield (1850), Bleak House, Hard Times, Little Dorrit, A Tale of Two Cities.

In all the novels of the third period the tone of Dickens changes: he grows indignant at all injustice, and he becomes sarcastic.

4. The fourth period in Dickens's creative work was the sixties, the years when the labour movement was going down. He wrote only two novels:

Great Expectations (1861), Our Mutual Friend (1864-1865). These works are written in a spirit of disillusionment. Dickens has lost all faith in those people who ruled Britain. He understands that the exploiters are a hostile class. The writer has faith in the people who are under rule, but he feels that a better future is too far off and he only allows himself, as a writer, to dream of that future. His heroes show the moral strength and patience of the common people.

### *Dombey and Son*

This novel tells the story of a rich bourgeois family, the Dombey, and shows how their policy decides the destiny of the poor people dependent on them. Mr. Dombey is a merchant, a capitalist. His only interest in life lies in the prosperity of his family firm. He is a man with a heart of stone. His character has its roots in his love of money. The firm casts its shadow upon the life of certain common people and ruins them. The "honour" of the firm is the only thing that matters. For Mr. Dombey everything in the world exists only for *Dombey and Son*. Dickens brings out this idea in the following passage: "*The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and the moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre.*"

Mr. Dombey has a family, but his worship of property makes him a stranger to all natural human feeling: affection is killed for the sake of good business. Mr. Dombey considers every human being in the light of his relation to the firm. To Mr. Dombey everybody either has, or may have, or will have, or must have something to do with Dombey and Son. The vital problem for Mr. Dombey is the problem of getting an heir to the firm; for there must be a son. A daughter is born to him, but a girl cannot be made partner in the firm, so she is not wanted. Dombey hates her from the very moment of her birth. She is a false coin that cannot be invested. His gentle wife is treated with more contempt and coldness than ever. Six years later she brings a son into the world, but dies in child-birth. Dombey "forgives" his wife, he is so glad to have an heir. But Dombey's love for his son is no better

than his hatred of his daughter. The boy is part of his property, and he wants to have him for himself only.....

All the blows that have fallen upon Mr. Dombey are considered by Dickens as punishment deserved. Mr. Dombey is the symbol of all that was cruel and inhuman in the upper middle class in Dickens's time. Dickens always wanted to reconcile people with one another. So the character of Mr. Dombey changes unexpectedly at the end of the novel. The storm of misfortunes softens him and he becomes a good man. He goes to live in happy home of Florence, who is now married to Walter Gay. The love Dombey never gave his daughter he now gives to his grandchildren.

### *Dickens and the Children*

Dickens believed in the virtuous nature of man in the same way as the writers of the age of the Enlightenment did. He makes this especially clear when he writes about children. The fate of poor children caused him much alarm: no writer of the time knew better than Dickens what child labour was. He also knew how terribly a child could change in an unwholesome environment; he was too familiar with the common misery, and knew how good can turn into bad. Yet, in his works, his child heroes remain pure till the end. They pass through dirty crowded streets and keep themselves unspotted. This was Dickens's peculiar way of defending children's innocence. Hans Andersen, the Danish writer of fairy-tales, greatly admired Dickens for his child heroes.

### Oliver Twist, David Copperfield (Individual)

#### *Dickens's Contribution to World Literature*

Dickens has given a full picture of 19<sup>th</sup> century English life. He revealed all that was irrational and monstrous and through his wit and humour people began to see their time and environment in a new light. His methods of writing inspired many others to write realistically, and great works of critical realism appeared after him.

Dickens never loses his warmth of feeling and quickness of sympathy. This impresses all readers, and they follow the writer in his pilgrimage along the roads of England and witness the administration of law, the treatment of children in schools, life in workhouses and the insincerity of bourgeois philanthropy. He describes offices of large firms, factories, prisons and the slums of London. Dickens portrays people of all the types seen in the streets of great cities in his time. We meet commercial agents, manufacturers, parliamentarians, political adventurers, scoundrels of all sorts, lawyers, clerks, newspaper reporters, schoolmasters, tradesmen, factory-workers, priggish aristocrats, circus-players, homeless children, pickpockets and convicts. Dickens lived for the people.

Some social improvements in England were attributed to the influence of Dickens's works. To many European critics Dickens ranked only among the moralists and reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His works were not considered works of art, because in his writing he was not inspired by beauty but by human suffering. Such an opinion underrates the great artistic value of Dickens's works. In the fifties of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however the world democratic writers and critics gave him a place among the English critics. Maxim Gorky

said that Dickens had achieved one of the most difficult things in literature and art: he developed in his readers a love for man.

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