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Exposing the Harsh Realities of Society: A Comparative Study of Charles Dickens and George Orwell

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores how literature can serve as a powerful tool to expose and critique the harsh realities of society. Charles Dickens and George Orwell, literary giants separated by a century, both wielded their pens as powerful tools for social critique. By examining their works, we gain a profound understanding of how literature acts as a mirror to the inequalities, corruption, and oppression present in its historical context. Dickens, through novels like "Oliver Twist," exposes the brutal realities of poverty and exploitation within Victorian England's class system. Orwell, in works like "Nineteen Eighty-Four," paints a chilling portrait of a totalitarian state, highlighting the dangers of unchecked power and manipulation. By dissecting their narratives, we not only delve into the social ills of their respective eras, but also gain valuable insights into the timeless human struggles for justice and equality. Through the works of Charles Dickens and George Orwell, two authors known for their critical depictions of social injustice, we examine how literature can reflect the inequalities, corruption, and oppression inherent in different historical contexts. We focus on key works such as "Oliver Twist" and "Hard Times" by Dickens and "1984" and "Animal Farm" by Orwell. By comparing these authors' approaches to social critique, we aim to understand how literature can inspire social change and challenge oppressive systems.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, George Orwell, social critique, literature, society, social injustice, oppression, inequality

Introduction:

Literature has always been a mirror reflecting society's complexities, injustices, and challenges. Authors like Charles Dickens and George Orwell have used their works to expose the harsh realities of their times, shining a light on societal flaws and injustices. Dickens, writing in the Victorian era, often highlighted the plight of the poor and the inequities within the industrial age. Orwell, a 20th-century author, focused on the dangers of totalitarianism and the erosion of personal freedoms. Both authors used their unique perspectives to criticize society and inspire change.

Charles Dickens and the Victorian Society:

Charles Dickens, one of the most prominent Victorian authors, is known for his vivid depictions of social injustices. His novels often portray the struggles of the poor and working class, emphasizing the harsh conditions they endured. In "Oliver Twist," Dickens exposes the brutal treatment of orphans and the cruelty of workhouses. The character of Oliver, a young orphan, represents the vulnerability of the destitute, and his journey through a society filled with crime and corruption reveals the systemic issues that plague Victorian England.

Similarly, in "Hard Times," Dickens critiques the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. The setting of Coketown, a grim industrial city, symbolizes the soulless and mechanized nature of the industrial age. Characters like Thomas Gradgrind, who prioritizes facts over imagination, embody the rigidity and lack of empathy prevalent in this society. The novel is set in the fictional industrial town of Coketown, a representation of many northern English cities where the rise of factories and utilitarian principles transformed society.

At the heart of Dickens's critique is the notion that industrialization reduces people to mere cogs in a vast machine. The character of Thomas Gradgrind epitomizes this mechanistic mindset. Gradgrind, a staunch advocate of facts and utilitarianism, raises his children in a rigid environment that values numbers and efficiency over imagination and empathy. His educational philosophy is harsh and pragmatic, emphasizing rote learning and suppressing creativity. This approach exemplifies how industrialization's focus on productivity can strip individuals of their humanity.

The town of Coketown itself is a powerful symbol of the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Dickens describes it as a dreary and monotonous place, where factory chimneys spew smoke and the air is thick with pollution. The town's uniformity reflects the lack of diversity and creativity that industrialization fosters. Workers in Coketown lead monotonous lives, with little room for leisure or personal fulfillment. The repetitive nature of factory work further underscores how industrialization can reduce people to mere laborers with no autonomy.

Through the character of Stephen Blackpool, Dickens portrays the harsh reality faced by the working class in an industrialized society. Stephen is a hardworking factory worker who struggles to make ends meet and finds himself at the mercy of the factory system. His personal life is marred by the same rigid structures that define Coketown—his unhappy marriage and the constraints of his job reflect the limitations imposed on workers by industrialization. Stephen's story highlights the lack of social mobility and the bleak prospects for those caught in the factory system.

Dickens also addresses the impact of industrialization on relationships and human connections. The emphasis on efficiency and productivity leads to a society where people are valued for their labor rather than their character. This is evident in the strained relationships among the characters in "Hard Times." Gradgrind's children, raised in a utilitarian environment, struggle to form meaningful connections. Louisa, his daughter, marries the wealthy but callous businessman Josiah Bounderby, illustrating how relationships become transactional in an industrialized world.

Despite the bleakness of Coketown, Dickens provides glimpses of hope through characters who challenge the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Sissy Jupe, a young girl from a circus, represents imagination and compassion in stark contrast to Gradgrind's rigid worldview. Her presence in the Gradgrind household injects warmth and empathy into an otherwise cold and utilitarian environment. Sissy's influence on Louisa and others suggests that human values and compassion can resist the dehumanizing forces of industrialization.

In summary, "Hard Times" by Charles Dickens is a powerful critique of the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Through the setting of Coketown, the characters' struggles, and the overarching themes of utilitarianism, Dickens illustrates how industrialization can strip people of their humanity. Yet, he also suggests that imagination and empathy can offer a counterpoint to the harsh realities of an industrialized society, providing a path toward reclaiming what makes us truly human. Through his portrayal of these characters and settings, Dickens underscores the need for compassion and social reform.

George Orwell and the Totalitarian Regimes:

George Orwell, writing in the aftermath of World War II, focused on the dangers of totalitarianism and the loss of personal freedoms. His dystopian novel "1984" presents a society under constant surveillance and control, where the state manipulates truth and history to maintain power. The character of Winston Smith, who struggles against the oppressive regime of Big Brother, symbolizes the individual's fight for freedom and autonomy. Orwell's depiction of this nightmarish world serves as a warning against the unchecked power of authoritarian governments.

In "Animal Farm," Orwell uses allegory to critique the corruption and betrayal of revolutionary ideals. The farm animals' rebellion against their human oppressors initially symbolizes the promise of equality and justice. However, as the pigs gain power, they become as oppressive as the humans they replaced. This allegory reflects the disillusionment with the Soviet Union and the betrayal of socialist ideals. Through these works, Orwell exposes the harsh realities of political oppression and the dangers of absolute power. Absolute power, when concentrated in the hands of a single entity or group, carries profound risks for society. George Orwell's literary works, especially "1984," serve as vivid examinations of these dangers. The story is set in a dystopian future where the Party, led by the figurehead Big Brother, controls every aspect of life, illustrating the consequences of unchecked power.

One of the most pervasive dangers depicted by Orwell is **total surveillance**. In "1984," the Party uses tele-screens, hidden microphones, and other surveillance methods to monitor citizens' every move, word, and even thought. This constant observation creates a climate of fear and paranoia, where individuals have no expectation of privacy. The threat of being watched at all times is used to maintain control and suppress any hint of dissent.

In addition to surveillance, the Party exerts its control through the **manipulation of information and history**. Orwell describes how historical records are constantly rewritten to align with the Party's shifting narrative. This control over information ensures that citizens cannot trust their memories or seek the truth, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation. By altering the past, the Party maintains its grip on power and prevents the rise of alternative narratives that could challenge its authority.

Orwell also illustrates the dangers of absolute power through the concept of **Newspeak**, a language designed to limit the range of thought. The Party introduces new terms and eliminates others to restrict the ability of individuals to articulate dissenting ideas. This linguistic control creates a society where independent thought becomes nearly impossible, further entrenching the Party's power.

Another key aspect of Orwell's exploration of absolute power is the **erasure of individuality**. In "1984," the Party demands absolute conformity, suppressing personal identity and uniqueness. This erasure makes it easier to control the populace, as individuals are absorbed into the collective and any sense of self is diminished. This collective mentality is crucial for maintaining the Party's dominance and preventing any form of rebellion.

The Party's control also relies heavily on **fear and violence**. The use of force and intimidation is a common tool in totalitarian regimes, and Orwell illustrates this through the brutal practices employed by the Party. Torture and violent punishment are used to break the spirit of those who might resist, with Room 101 symbolizing the ultimate in fear-based control. This coercion reinforces the Party's power and discourages any attempts at rebellion.

Finally, Orwell shows how absolute power uses **propaganda and ideological control** to maintain its grip. The Party employs constant propaganda to indoctrinate citizens, promoting its ideology as the only truth. This relentless stream of misinformation creates a society where critical thinking is suppressed, and loyalty to the Party is enforced.

In summary, George Orwell's "1984" provides a stark depiction of the dangers inherent in absolute power. Through total surveillance, control of information, linguistic manipulation, erasure of individuality, fear and violence, and propaganda, Orwell demonstrates how a totalitarian regime can strip away freedom, truth, and humanity. The novel stands as a warning about the perils of unchecked authority and the importance of safeguarding democratic principles and civil liberties.

Comparing Dickens and Orwell:

While Dickens and Orwell wrote in different historical contexts, their works share common themes of social critique and the exposure of harsh realities. Dickens's focus on Victorian society's inequalities and industrialization parallels Orwell's critique of totalitarian regimes and political corruption. Both authors use vivid imagery and compelling characters to convey their messages, urging readers to question the status quo and advocate for change. Through their works, Dickens and Orwell challenge readers to question societal norms and consider the impact of injustice. Their writings continue to resonate because they address fundamental human concerns: the desire for freedom, the need for compassion, and the pursuit of a more equitable society. Dickens, writing in the 19th century, focused on the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and the class system in Victorian England. His novels, such as "Oliver Twist," "Great Expectations," and "Hard Times," expose the harsh realities of poverty, child labor, and class discrimination. Through vivid characters and intricate plots, Dickens illustrates how societal structures can perpetuate injustice and harm vulnerable groups. For example, in "Oliver Twist," the depiction of workhouses and street crime reveals the harsh conditions that many poor and orphaned children faced. Dickens's work advocates for compassion and social reform, encouraging readers to empathize with those who suffer from society's inequities.

Similarly, George Orwell's work challenges readers to confront the dangers of totalitarianism and political oppression. Writing in the mid-20th century, Orwell's novels like "1984" and "Animal Farm" explore the consequences of absolute power, propaganda, and the erosion of personal freedoms. "1984" presents a dystopian world where the government controls every aspect of life, using surveillance and manipulation to maintain its grip on power. This stark portrayal of totalitarianism serves as a warning about the dangers of unchecked authority, resonating with readers who value democratic ideals and personal freedom.

Both Dickens and Orwell explore the theme of compassion and its role in fostering a more equitable society. In Dickens's works, characters who demonstrate kindness and empathy often serve as counterpoints to those driven by greed and power. Sissy Jupe in "Hard Times" and Joe Gargery in "Great Expectations" represent the compassionate side of humanity, suggesting that even in harsh environments, human decency can prevail. Orwell, on the other hand, emphasizes the need for resistance and courage in the face of oppression. In "1984," Winston Smith's small acts of rebellion and desire for truth reflect the enduring human spirit that seeks freedom and justice.

Conclusion:

Literature has the power to reveal the darker aspects of society and inspire social change. Through the works of Charles Dickens and George Orwell, we gain insights into the harsh realities of their respective times. Dickens's portrayal of Victorian England's social inequalities and Orwell's dystopian visions of totalitarianism serve as cautionary tales, reminding us of the importance of compassion, justice, and individual freedoms. By examining these authors' works, we are encouraged to confront societal flaws and work towards a more equitable and just world. By confronting the flaws reflected in these works, we are called to fight for a more just and equitable world, a world where the horrors of Dickensian poverty and Orwellian oppression remain cautionary tales, not chilling realities.

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