



**THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES**  
**THE FACULTY OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS**  
**2nd International Conference: Synergies in Communication**  
**RETHINKING EDUCATION - RESHAPING THE WORLD.**  
**LANGUAGES, BUSINESS AND COMMUNITIES**  
**Bucharest, 28-29 November 2013**

**THE REPRESENTATION OF VICTORIAN EDUCATION  
IN CONTEMPORARY NOVELS**

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**Abstract**

*The paper analyses several Victorian novels written by Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte and W.M. Thackeray which mirrored the education of all social classes in an age of industrialization and change, in order to demonstrate that they influenced the course of English education, which has come to be renowned all over the world. Victorian education required a rethinking from a new outlook and the literature of the time played a very important role in reflecting the conditions in which education was provided. Thus, **Great Expectations**, **Jane Eyre** and **The Newcomes** succeeded in changing the educational prospects of the new social classes.*

**Key words:** rethinking education, Victorian novels, industrialization, writers

***Introduction***

My paper will try to demonstrate that Victorian writers like Charles Dickens, W.M. Thackeray and Charlotte Bronte played a very important role in spreading English education through their didactic novels, in a time when Great Britain was enjoying an amazing development, as a result of the industrialization.

In effect, industrialization refers to the replacement of man by the machine in the economic process and the mass production of consumption goods. It is the core of the capitalist

society and the premise of a long series of social, cultural, economic, and psychological transformations of the human community (Cutitaru 6).

The industrial revolution led to the development of the novel, a literary genre which reflected the transformations of the time. The traditional English society concentrated its absolute power in the symbolic *persona* of the king or the queen. In the Victorian Age, Great Britain's symbolic *persona* was Queen Victoria, the heiress of the throne, and the dominant ruling class was the aristocracy. With the beginning of industrialization, competition arose among the rules of socio-economic organization of the system. Authority was no longer inherited by birth, but conquered through personal merits. The reshaping of the society occurred when the lower classes started to develop by means of their work (7). Therefore, the education of all classes: new and old, required a rethinking from a new outlook and the literature of the time played a very important role in reflecting the conditions in which education was provided.

The transition from the age of the manufacture to the age of the industrialization was very painful, with many individual sacrifices and even tragedies (8). Edward Bulwer-Lytton, a renowned writer and politician of the nineteenth century observed these changes and wrote *England and the English* in 1833, the same year in which The Factory Act decided to improve the conditions of the young people working in factories.

*We live in an age of visible transition – an age of disquietude and doubt – of the removal of time-worn land-marks, and the breaking up of the hereditary elements of society – old opinions, feelings – ancestral customs and institutions are crumbling away, and both the spiritual and temporal worlds are darkened by the shadows of change. (Bulwer-Lytton 318)*

The literature of the Victorian Age shaped the new social relations through reading and education. Writers from the first half of the nineteenth century, like Dickens, reflected this gloomy atmosphere of change in their novels. Socially, the industrialization marked the birth of a new and powerful class: *the bourgeoisie* (*'les nouveaux riches'*). The representatives of this new social category were the direct beneficiaries of the industrial progress and they used their financial power to alter the authority of the *traditional aristocracy*. The struggle between the bourgeoisie, which bought its titles of nobility, and the aristocracy which inherited its titles,

represented a favourite topic in the Victorian novel, being explored by many authors from W.M. Thackeray and Dickens, to Eliot and Hardy (Cutitaru 9).

The Victorian age also represented a fundamental moment in the long process of the emancipation of women, both in culture and in society. The novels written by Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte, George Eliot and the poetry created by Elizabeth Browning stand out in the history of English literature (43).

Reading is not confined to novels, poetry, of course, having its role. Yet, the aim of my research is to examine three contemporary didactic novels which include the education of different social classes: the author of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte, is preoccupied with the education of the lower class girls. Dickens describes the educational background of a complex social hierarchy which tries to move to a new dimension after the emergence of the Industrial Revolution that changed radically the English Victorian society. In addition, W.M. Thackeray portrays the education of the old and new social classes, and the protagonist of the novel, Clive Newcome is described as a young man whose main desire is to study to become a painter. Clive travels from England to India, the author reminding the readers that Great Britain had developed vastly in the Victorian Age and had expanded all the way to India.

### ***Jane Eyre - A heroine of a new age / Pip (Philip) Pirrip – A hero of great expectations***

In her novel, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë describes the conditions in which education was provided at Lowood Institution, a charity school for orphans. At Lowood the fees were paid by friends and relatives, but fifty pounds a year was not enough for board and teaching, therefore benevolent-minded ladies and gentlemen were subscribing. The teachers were trying to offer a good education to girls, even though the conditions in which they were living were far from being good. The curriculum of Lowood Institution was centred on history, geography, grammar, arithmetic, music, knitting and French with a teacher who came from France:

*The superintendent of Lowood commenced giving a lesson in geography; the lower classes were called by the teacher. Repetitions in history, grammar, &c., went on for an hour; more writing and arithmetic succeeded, and music lessons were given by Miss Temple to some of the elder girls. Madame Pierrot comes from Lisle, in France, teaches French. (Brontë Jane Eyre 50 - 53)*

Jane spent six years as a student at Lowood and two years as a teacher there. The educational conditions at Lowood improved in time, and Jane being a teacher there, contributed as well. Charlotte Brontë did not write the book only with the intention to show us the dramatic part of the education given in Victorian schools, she also wanted to show us, the readers that, in time, the educational process can be improved. Jane was created as a proof that women can have a career, that they can be financially and socially independent. Jane accepted Rochester's proposal of marriage only after she was convinced that he saw her as his intellectual equal. In a patriarchal society, where women were dependent on their husbands' financial situation, Charlotte Brontë managed to prove that a woman could live without the constraints of a marriage. In the Victorian Age women were supposed to get married and take care of their household. They didn't have a job, because men didn't approve. Nowadays, men and women are equal at home and at work. By the end of the novel, once again, Charlotte proves that an educated intelligent woman can live by herself: Jane runs a charity school for girls in the town of Norton and lives alone in a plain house. Her cousins Diana and Mary are also educated women and they are put in the same position as Jane, working as governesses. Their salary is low, but it is a means of earning a living and having a social status. A governess in the Victorian Age was an educated woman, superior to other servants. Although she wasn't rich, she was respected and belonged to the middle classes.

Jane inherited a huge fortune only after she completed her education. Thus, the writer wants to emphasise the fact that girls can have a good education and a decent job without wealth.

Dickens, in his novel *Great Expectations*, offers Pip the opportunity to receive a higher education, in order to become a gentleman, learning from a private tutor, just like the upper classes, at the same time stressing the importance of self-improvement. But the real self-improvement is connected only to a good soul. In *Great Expectations* the upper classes aren't kind-hearted, although they receive the best education. The author reflects their education, and at the same time, their souls. Pip was happier, kinder and more honest when he was a simple poor boy living in the countryside with his sister and Joe, the blacksmith. Before receiving a great amount of money from his secret benefactor, the orphan Pip begins to read and write at Mrs. Wopsle's evening school, in the marsh country in southeast England. Being a low-class boy, Pip becomes Joe's apprentice in his blacksmith shop. The opportunities for a good job were limited

to the lower classes, but as the author suggests in the pages of the novel, the poor were better people than the rich. Maybe this is the reason why Pip loses his wealth at the end of the novel. In Dickens's opinion, a good heart values more than wealth and class in a world full of prejudices of all kinds. Class consciousness was present everywhere in the Victorian Age. Dickens tried to cross this barrier in his novels, writing about the education of all social classes and advocating the spread of mass education together with the educationists of the time. The aristocracy representing the old social class, and the bourgeoisie representing the new social class in the Industrial Revolution, are less important than the lower classes, in this novel. Characters belonging to the old aristocracy are scarcely presented in this novel, Dickens focusing more on the new changing classes: the newly rich, the bourgeoisie. In *Great Expectations* the bourgeoisie is represented by Miss Havisham, whose fortune was earned through commerce: it wasn't inherited; also, the young gentleman Herbert Pocket is an aspiring future bourgeois, and Pip is rich only because a secret benefactor offered him a lot of money. Bentley Drummle, a snobbish young gentleman, is a member of the old aristocracy, who, in the eyes of Dickens, reflects the superiority of the nobility.

Pip and Jane are two characters who can lead a decent life with their salary earned through their hard work, after they completed their education: Jane is a teacher and Pip a clerk in a mercantile firm. *'I work pretty hard for a sufficient living, and therefore – Yes, I do well!'* (Dickens *Great Expectations* 442), said Pip in the last chapter of the novel. Mr. Rivers, the minister at Morton village who wants to open a school for girls after he had already opened a school for boys, is willing to offer Jane a teaching position to run the new school:

*I established a school for boys: I mean now to open a second school for girls. I have hired a building for the purpose, with a cottage of two rooms attached to it for the mistress's house. Her salary will be thirty pounds a year: her house is already furnished, by the kindness of a lady, Miss Oliver; the daughter of the sole rich man in my parish - Mr. Oliver, the proprietor of a needle-factory and iron-foundry in the valley. The same lady pays for the education and clothing of an orphan from the workhouse. Will you be this schoolmistress? It is a village school: your scholars will be only poor girls - cottagers' children - at the best, farmers' daughters. Knitting, sewing, reading, writing, ciphering, will be all you will have to teach. (Bronte *Jane Eyre* 351).*

After comparing the work of a governess, who had to obey the masters of a rich house, to that of an independent teacher who could run a school by herself, Jane decided to accept his offer: *'I made my decision. I thank you for the proposal, Mr. Rivers, and I accept it with all my heart'* (Bronte *Jane Eyre* 351). Like Jane, Charlotte was a governess dissatisfied with the behaviour of her rich masters. Thus, she tried to open a school for girls together with her sisters. However, they didn't succeed. For that purpose she and Emily went to Brussels to learn two foreign languages: French and German.

The two writers created these two leading characters to suggest that the future of the lower classes will be brighter if they struggle for education. The Industrial Revolution created new opportunities of newer jobs for the lower classes. The worst part was the work in factories in inconceivable conditions, and the best part was the spread of the new inventions: the typing machine, the telephone, the telegraph, the steam engine, the railway. With the help of his education and the spread of trade, Pip became a member of the middle class, being able to financially support himself, but he couldn't become a gentleman if it wasn't the help of his secret benefactor. The difficult financial situation of the lower classes had led to a strong desire of the Victorian writers and educationists to improve their condition. Dickens needed to invent a secret benefactor in order to give Pip the opportunity to a higher education, because a boy who belonged to the working class had no chance to become a gentleman through his own hands, since education was far too expensive in the Victorian Age, mainly at the beginning of the century. The working class children were in Pip's situation in the early Victorian period. However, the Forster's Education Act of 1870 favoured the education of the lower classes, this decision changing the situation of all the children aged 5 -12, who, from now on were provided with elementary education, regardless of their social status or gender.

Dickens died in June 1870 after Forster introduced The Elementary Education Act in February, the same year. We can say that he lived only to envision the beginnings of the changes which occurred in the newly-born Victorian state education system. He helped the educationists of the time as much as he could. He struggled for these changes, and he succeeded in offering a helping hand to the education of the impoverished children.

***Past - Present and Future visions: educated heroes***

W.M. Thackeray studied Art in Paris, being as talented as his favourite character Clive Newcome, who travelled to Rome to study Art. Clive spent precious time at the Art Academy surrounded by other painters, doing what he liked most: to paint in the pleasant company of his colleagues and friends:

*WHEN CLIVE NEWCOME comes to be old, no doubt he will remember his Roman days as amongst the happiest which fate ever awarded him. The simplicity of the student's life there, the greatness and friendly splendor of the scenes surrounding him, the delightful nature of the occupation in which he is engaged, the pleasant company of comrades, inspired by a like pleasure over a similar calling, the labour, the meditation, the holiday and the kindly feast afterwards, should make the Art-students the happiest of youth, did they but know their good fortune. (Thackeray *The Newcomes* 401)*

In classical antiquity the liberal arts or *artes liberales* were considered extremely important for a free person. The Latin word *liber* means "free" (Curtius 37). The liberal arts, renamed humanistic education by the Italian humanists in the Renaissance, included classical languages, literature, philosophy, history and art. Thereby, in the sixteenth century they became the educational foundation for the schooling of European elites, the functionaries of political administration, the clergy of the various legally recognized churches, and the learned professions of law and medicine (Nauert 172-3), and persisted until the middle of the twentieth century.

Having been sent to Monsieur de Blois to learn French, the young Thomas Newcome fell in love with his daughter, Mademoiselle Leonore. He wanted to marry her, but M. De Blois, a French cadet of a very ancient family who had fled from his country at the period of revolution and emigration, had already decided to marry her to a Count. Thomas's father didn't belong to an old aristocratic family, though he was a banker and had enough money to give his son a higher education:

*Mr. Newcome thought fit to send his son to a tutor for military instruction, and removed him from the London school. The lad was placed with a professor who prepared young men for the army, and received rather a better professional education than fell to the lot of most young soldiers of his day. He cultivated the mathematics and fortification with more assiduity than he had ever bestowed on Greek and Latin, and especially made such a progress in the French tongue as was very uncommon among the British youth his*

*contemporaries.* (Thackeray *The Newcomes* 24)

This was the beginning of a new era where the old and new social classes collided and failed to join together, the author sending his hero to India and making his heroine accept her situation without saying a word:

*M. de Blois determined that his daughter should instantly marry the Count. The poor girl yielded without a word, as became her; and it was with this marriage effected almost before his eyes, and frantic with wrath and despair, that young Newcome embarked for India, and quitted the parents whom he was never more to see. Tom's name was no more mentioned at Clapham.* (Thackeray *The Newcomes* 27)

Any Englishman would have made the same decision, because that was the thinking of the nineteenth century, when the patriarchal society had the absolute power to decide for the future of women, who were taught to become obedient wives. Thackeray introduced French characters like Monsieur de Blois and his family, because the writer had travelled to Paris and had met the French society. Therefore, he was sure that the French had similar ideas to the English, although the French education system was much more modernised and updated, as inspector Arnold had described in his special reports on education written after he had gone to France to investigate its educational institutions.

### ***Conclusions***

Queen Victoria had an important role in the decisions made for a better education. She was an extremely educated woman herself, being able to speak French, Italian and Latin. She used to read a lot of books and, although she didn't attend a university, she was very well prepared in many subjects. It is very important to mention the fact that Queen Victoria approved of educating all the people of her country. Bedford College for Women was open in 1849 with the express approval of Queen Victoria. Charlotte Bronte was one of the feminists with a modern thinking, hardly accepted in that time, but normal for our century. In contemporary times, British education is open to boys and girls alike, and their rights are equal, as a result of the feminist movement of the nineteenth century. In fact, women started teaching for the first time in the Victorian Age. If in the past there were few women teachers and a lot of male teachers, in Great



Britain and in other countries, currently the number of men in this profession is decreasing more and more, leaving room to women to occupy a position in the education system. Men have concluded that, at present, there are other professions more attractive and more appropriate for their expectations.

The three novels *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations* and *The Newcomes* were written to reflect the conditions of the education received by many Victorian children from different social classes, and at the same time, the authors tried to offer solutions to better the situation of an outdated system of learning. Victorian education owes a lot to these skilled writers, who over time came to be famous for their didactic novels in a lot of countries. Nowadays, Dickens's novels *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, etc., have been broadcasted on the big screen. *Jane Eyre* is a famous movie stemmed from the original novel, as well. People from a lot of countries, not only the English, can watch them and can learn many things from them. Therefore, these novels succeeded in changing the educational prospects of the new changing social classes of the Victorian Age.

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