



## COMPARISON OF DICKENSIAN CONCEPTS OF CHILDHOOD AND CONCEPTS OF CHILDHOOD IN THE WORKS OF DOSTOEVSKY

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### ABSTRACT

*In this article the comparison of Dickensian concepts of childhood and concepts of childhood in the works of Dostoevsky.*

### Introduction

The theme of childhood is central in the works of many 19th-century writers, including Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoevsky. These authors use images of children and childhood to explore a broad spectrum of social, ethical, and philosophical issues, reflecting the public sentiments of their time. This article attempts to compare and analyze how each of these writers presents the theme of childhood, the meanings and ideas they incorporate into the images of their young heroes, and how these images influence the development of the plot and the overall themes of their works.

Charles Dickens, one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian era, is known for his detailed social panoramas and deep sympathy for the oppressed layers of society, especially children. In his works, children often become victims of social injustice, poverty, and adult cruelty. For example, in "Oliver Twist," Dickens depicts the lives of orphans and poor children in London, condemning the heartlessness and hypocrisy of a society that allows such conditions to exist.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, on the other hand, explores the theme of childhood through the prism of internal experiences, emotional turmoil, and moral dilemmas of his characters. In his works, children often appear as symbols of innocence, purity, and sincerity, contrasting with the adult world full of lies, selfishness, and evil. For example, in "Crime and Punishment," a little girl, drunk on the street, becomes a catalyst for internal changes in the main character, Raskolnikov, prompting him to rethink his actions and worldview.

Comparing Dickens' and Dostoevsky's approaches to depicting childhood allows for a deeper understanding of both the general trends of the era and the unique authorial strategies through which they sought to illuminate the complex issues of their time. Both authors attached great importance to the image of the child, seeing in it not only a victim of circumstances but also a bearer of a moral ideal capable of bringing about changes in the adult world. This article conducts a detailed analysis of key works by Dickens and Dostoevsky to identify the



characteristics of their views on the theme of childhood and the influence of these views on the literary development of public thought in the 19th century.

The following research methods are used in this article to achieve the goal of comparative analysis of the depiction of the theme of childhood in the works of Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoevsky:

**Literary analysis:** The main method is a detailed analysis of the texts of both authors' works, focusing on the depiction of child characters, their characteristics, roles in the plot, and influence on the development of the theme of childhood. This method allows for the exploration of how authors use images of children to convey social, ethical, and philosophical ideas.

**Comparative analysis:** Works by Dickens and Dostoevsky are compared to identify similarities and differences in approaches to depicting childhood, which helps understand unique authorial strategies and the broader cultural context of the era.

**Historical-cultural context:** The study includes an analysis of the socio-historical context of the 19th century in which Dickens and Dostoevsky created, to better understand how the realities of that time are reflected in literary images of children.

**Critical review:** Previous studies on this topic are considered and analyzed, allowing reliance on existing theoretical frameworks while identifying new aspects for discussion.

In 1849, alongside Dostoevsky's "Netochka Nezvanova" and "The Little Hero," Goncharov's "Oblomov's Dream," Polonsky's "The Statue of Spring" was also published. Researchers have noted its similarity to Charles Dickens's "Dombey and Son," which was printed a year earlier, pointing out that Polonsky's story is a "direct imitation" and belongs to "popular literature," and should not be judged for its representation of the child's soul in Russian literature.

Is this a fair assessment? The similarities with Dickens's novel are evident in the plot—a story about a boy whose father does not pay enough attention to him—and even the ages of the characters (Ilusha is six and a half, his father is forty-eight). Both Dickens's and Polonsky's main characters are marked by their "strangeness," neglect of typical activities for their age, and an unchildlike habit of deep reflection. For example, sometimes the child would sit in his little chair and ponder deeply, appearing like one of those eerie fairy tale creatures who, at the age of one hundred fifty or two hundred years, play the strange role of children they replace...

In contrast to Dickens, who does not delve deeply into Paul's reflections or fantasies, Polonsky's main narrative focus is on exploring the inner world of the child. Ilusha, naturally observant, finds his imagination sparked by every household detail, every book read, every painting seen, creating a strange, fantastical world worthy of Hoffmann. This entire amazing world revolves around a small statuette—the statue of spring. In his imagination, Ilusha, like Pygmalion, brings it to life and falls in love with the beautiful girl. But when the boy attempts to kiss the statue, it shatters. The destruction of his imaginative world follows, and after a severe illness, Ilusha struggles to remember the statue. The story ends with the author expressing concern for his hero and the idea of treating the fragile world of childhood with care: "Where is his imagination wandering now? And what will become of him when he grows up?.. Poor boy! What if life takes revenge on you for breaking the statue?"



The publication of Leo Tolstoy's trilogy in "The Contemporary" was an epochal event for the depiction of childhood in world literature. Critics of the 19th century pointed to the resemblance of certain episodes and characters in the first story to Dickens's beloved novel "David Copperfield." The timing of the Russian translation of the novel coincided with the beginning of Tolstoy's work on the story, and there are enthusiastic comments from the Russian writer about "David Copperfield." However, it would be incorrect to speak of a direct influence; Tolstoy created his unique work about childhood. The differences between the novel and the story are indicated by their opening lines: Dickens's starts with the solemn intent to tell the hero's whole life from the very beginning, as in a traditional Enlightenment novel of education. Tolstoy's introduction, in contrast, describes a mundane incident, immediately immersing the reader in the thick of life.

Dickens is more interested in the adventures of his hero and his movements in the "external" world, while Tolstoy focuses on the slightest changes and movements of the soul. Dickens's novel is largely autobiographical, often Tolstoy's stories are also called an autobiographical trilogy. However, the name "The History of My Childhood," under which the story was published, was given by Nekrasov. Tolstoy's trilogy was created within the context of the novel "Four Ages of Development." The writer's goal was not to produce an autobiographical work but to create an atmosphere of childhood in general, its emotional and spiritual world through a specific hero. It would be more appropriate to call Tolstoy's stories "autopsychological" (a term by L.Ya. Ginzburg).

The influence of Charles Dickens on Fyodor Dostoevsky was significant. When Dostoevsky, during his exile, was permitted to read "secular literature," he first requested a new novel by Dickens, which was "David Copperfield." In Dostoevsky's work, the imprint of Dickens is evident in "Netochka Nezvanova" where the very image of the heroine, the themes of her joyless childhood, adventures, and the happy life of an orphan with a kind and generous prince, are marked. The influence is even more apparent in "The Insulted and Injured," with the character of the cunning and voluptuous Prince Valkovsky reminiscent of Ralph from "The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby," the downtrodden and self-loving orphan Nell, and the destitute musician Smith, among others.

From "The Old Curiosity Shop," the meeting of the hero with Nell, her grandfather's bent figure, and the girl's continual wandering around the city transitioned into Dostoevsky's novel. The scene of false accusation against Sonya Marmeladova for theft also seems to be inspired by "The Old Curiosity Shop," where a similar accusation is made against Kit. However, the influence of Dickens on Dostoevsky was temporary and partial. Dickens was an artist of the relatively stable English middle bourgeoisie, whereas Dostoevsky represented the most decadent Russian strata.

The motifs of family warmth and comfort, so abundant in Dickens's pages, are entirely absent in Dostoevsky's work; they would have sharply clashed with the existence and psychological disposition of his characters. Like Dickens, many of Dostoevsky's adult characters retain a form of childishness. However, in Dickens's characters, this manifests as eccentricity. The concept of the Russian novelist is more complex: it is either childishness in the Christian



sense, inherent in the purest people (Prince Myshkin), or the infantilism, egocentrism, and self-absorption (Alyosha Valkovsky).

This difference in portrayal reflects the deeper existential and psychological explorations in Dostoevsky's work, compared to Dickens's more social and reformatory approach. While both authors use childhood and childlike traits in their characters to explore broader themes, their methods and goals diverge significantly due to their different cultural and personal contexts.

In the works of Dickens and Dostoevsky, children play a crucial role, reflecting a deep moral and ethical significance and the connection between the innocence of childhood and the corrupt world of adults. However, the ways in which both authors approach the portrayal of children and their role in the lives of adults differ.

In Dickens' works, children often serve as a measure of the humanity of adult characters. Their positivity or negativity is often determined by their relationship with children, as seen in the characters such as Ebenezer Scrooge from "A Christmas Carol," who undergoes a change under the influence of visits from various spirits, including visions of his own lonely childhood. Children in his works are often portrayed in an idealized manner, as bearers of kindness and innocence who illuminate the dark corners of society.

While in Dickens, children are more often symbols and instruments for developing the theme of social justice, in Dostoevsky they are more actively involved in the main events of the plot and often serve as catalysts for the moral and spiritual transformations of adults. Dostoevsky uses child characters to explore the depths of the human psyche and morality. For example, in "The Brothers Karamazov," the younger brother Ilyusha plays a key role in the moral development of other characters and is a central figure in one of the most touching and philosophical sections of the book — the tale of the Grand Inquisitor.

Admiring Dickens, Dostoevsky sees children not only as victims or symbols of innocence but also as more complex personalities whose experiences and sufferings illuminate fundamental questions of human existence and morality. In his works, children often encounter cruelty and the hardships of life, allowing the author to explore themes of forgiveness, sacrifice, and salvation.

The idea that the world can be saved through "helplessness," as expressed by Fyodorov, is key to understanding how Dostoevsky sees the role of children in literature and life. He reflects on the fact that it is precisely the childlike immediacy and purity that can expose evil and provoke moral rebirth in adults. This reflects the biblical idea that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, one must become "like children," emphasizing the value of childlike sincerity and openness.

## Research Findings:

**Role and significance of child characters:** In the works of Dickens and Dostoevsky, child characters not only appear as victims of circumstances but also as bearers of moral values, often challenging established social norms and adult worldviews.

**Social critique:** Both authors use the theme of childhood as a means of social critique, albeit in different ways. Dickens focuses on external social issues such as poverty and child



exploitation, while Dostoevsky is more concentrated on the inner world of characters and moral-ethical dilemmas.

**Influence on the development of literary traditions:** The study shows how the depiction of children in the works of Dickens and Dostoevsky influenced the development of literary traditions, including realism and symbolism, and continue to inspire writers and readers today.

**Moral and philosophical explorations:** The theme of childhood in the work of both authors serves as a platform for moral and philosophical explorations, reflecting their desire to probe the nature of good and evil, justice, sincerity, and innocence.

**In conclusion,** the article emphasizes that, despite differences in approaches and contexts, both Dickens and Dostoevsky have made invaluable contributions to literature, deeply exploring the theme of childhood and leaving behind a rich legacy that is relevant for understanding not only their era but also the modern world.

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