

The poor relation's
story by charles
dickens and the life of
ma parker by
katheri...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The literature of social reform is a very different to other areas of literature in that it concentrates on one particular message ignoring all others, whilst other literature is generally aimed at providing a topic which can be interpreted in many ways. The message dispensed by the literature of social reform is one of social improvement. Its aim is to make people stop and think about the bigger picture for a change instead of their own personal affairs. Once that has been achieved, perhaps they will be motivated enough to take action and so raise society's moral level. This idea of public motivation is achieved by a number of methods.

Both of the stories are told using a narrative platform of just a few hours. It is no coincidence that the same technique has been deployed in both stories. Both Katherine Mansfield and Charles Dickens are trying to make a point. If someone can tell you of their routine day in, day out, and so describe their whole lives in just a few hours, then their lives are seriously lacking in variety. A person needs to go on holiday, have a night out etc. If these variations are missing from a person's life, then it is a clear indication that they lack either the resources or the will to afford these variations.

In the case of the main characters, i. e. Michael and Ma Parker, we can see it is a little bit of both. Neither of these characters are wealthy for various reasons, but at the same time, they are resigned to their poverty. Neither Michael nor Ma Parker are angry at their current state of affairs. In fact Michael actually goes so far as to thank John Spatter who is responsible for his poverty. " John our esteemed host to whom we are so much indebted for the great hospitality" (PRS p114) Ma Parker goes even further by telling us

that she feels sorry for her employer, the literary gentleman. But Ma Parker bore him no grudge.

She pitied the poor young gentleman for having no one to look after him. " (LMP p1 column 2 paragraph 2) They have no desire to change their lives whether because of a lack of will or for fear of change. Consequentially, they will never be able to escape their poverty. Whilst both authors show the main characters, the victims, to be docile and resigned to their poverty, the middle class characters are depicted as being cruel, malicious, selfish and greedy in their affairs.

" Eat your last under this roof, you feeble wretch, and may it choke you! (PRS Uncle Chill; p120) Bearing in mind that this was brought about because Michael was marrying someone whom Uncle Chill considered to be too poor. " You simply dirty everything you've got, get a hag in once a week to clean up, and the thing's done. " (LMP The literary gentleman; p1 column 2 paragraph 2) The middle class characters are made out to be the oppressors of the poverty stricken lower society who desperately need help but who are too beaten down and repressed to ask for it or even to realise that they need it.

Uncle Chill's main vice is avarice whereas Michael is described as being nobody's enemy but his own. The contrast is striking and it is clear that the literature of social reform is aimed at motivating the middle classes, who would be the likely readers of the stories, to stand up and say, " We're not like that. We do feel a certain responsibility for the lower classes and we are prepared to do something about it. " Having read society's view of them,

they will be eager to prove that view wrong and that is what the literature of social reform is relying on. Both of these stories use a dual narrative structure.

We are not just shown how they live their lives; we are also shown their most intimate thoughts so that we can understand how they feel. This is especially true of the "Poor Relations" story which takes place both in the real world and Michael's thought world, slipping in and out between them seamlessly. This is also true of the "Life of Ma Parker" but not to the same extent. There it only occurs once and the boundaries between real life and Ma Parker's thought world are well defined. "A rich man, the dirt from whose carriage wheels is often, in these changed times, thrown upon me as she rides by.

No, no. She married me. (PRS pp120 - 121) Where the italics show the events of the real world and the underlined words switch to the dream world. "Gran! Gran! , her little grandson stood on her lap in his button boots. " (LMP p1 column 1 paragraph 6) Both characters use their thought world as a form of escapism, as people might use novels nowadays, from the harsh realities of their daily routine. They clutch at their dream world because that is the only thing that means anything to them. So empty are their lives that perhaps it is the only thing keeping them going.

This is also another way of attaining the reader's sympathy for the characters and so for the poverty that exists in society. So we can see that the literature of social reform plays on people's sense of right and wrong and the stories show poverty as a wrong that must be corrected by the educated, wealthy people in the community, i. e. the people who would be reading the

stories. Both stories make use of generic terms to amplify their purpose. The Poor Relation story uses the term “ poor relation” and the Life of Ma Parker uses the term “ literary gentleman”.

These terms do not just refer to Michael and the literary gentleman. They are used for comparative purposes with the rest of society. Michael is representative of all the poor people in the city and the literary gentleman is representative of all middle class people in the city. These characters are there to give us an insight into the lives of the average, poverty stricken individual or wealthy, educated gentleman. When we read through these two stories we feel sympathy for Michael and contempt for the literary gentleman.

However it is not just Michael whom we feel sympathy for or the literary gentleman whom we feel contempt for. Michael will generate sympathy for an entire class within society. The literary gentleman will make the readers think, “ Is this what I am like? ” Nobody likes to be seen in a negative light and so once again we see that it is the purpose of the literature of social reform to motivate the upper classes. There are a number of parallels between the characters from PRS and the characters from LMP. The most obvious one is between Michael and Ma Parker.

Both of these characters are forced to rely on another individual for their livelihoods, both are able to relate easily to children and both live partly in a dream world. Michael is forced to rely on John Spatter and Ma Parker is forced to rely on the literary gentleman. It seems that they have both fallen from grace in that Michael used to be the owner of a prosperous business

but is now nothing more than a tramp. Ma Parker once had a loving husband to earn the money and a house full of children but now her husband is dead, her children have almost all gone and even her grandchild has died.

This shows the need for a level of sympathy within the literature of social reform because two authors, who have each written their own story without any reference to the other, have both created such a character. This sympathy is strengthened by the inclusion of a child in their lives. Children are often representative of innocence. Michael and Ma Parker can both easily relate to children demonstrating that they themselves are like children. With this in mind the reader is likely to see the Michael and Ma Parker as victims and so feel sorry for them.

One could also say that Lennie and Little Frank are literary cousins. They both play the part of the child with whom the main characters can relate. The same can be said for Betsy Snap and the cruel cook because they both are shown to be cruel hard characters, particularly concerning Michael and Ma Parker respectively. Furthermore, both John Spatter and the literary gentleman are the source of the main character's financial income. There is a slightly different relationship between Little Frank and Michael and Lennie and his grandfather, the baker.

From these relationships we can see the cycle of poverty in action. " I have a fancy that the poor child will in time succeed to my peculiar position in the family. " (PRS Michael; p116) We can see that Little Frank will eventually emulate Michael. History has a habit of repeating itself and it seems he will make the same mistakes as Michael and eventually end up in the same

predicament. Perhaps he too will have a young cousin to befriend and who will eventually succeed Little Frank. The cycle of poverty will continue.

The same situation occurs in LMP. We are told that the baker died of a disease of the lungs and similarly, Lennie too died of a disease of the lungs. Without the money to do something about this disease it will continue throughout the family and perhaps another generation down the line it will kill another family member. The only way to attain this money is to acquire an education but to do that would require money so it is a vicious circle and because of this the cycle of poverty and disease will continue.

This is what Charles Dickens and Katherine Mansfield are trying to illustrate with their literature of social reform. At the end of the day, authors such as Charles Dickens and Katherine Mansfield could only do so much. They wrote these stories in the hope that action would result from words. In these stories, they endeavoured to show us, the readers, how things could change, but they could only take the first steps. The people at the time, sitting at home reading these stories must have taken the action necessary to bring about change. They only showed us the door; we had to walk through it.