

DOROTHY HARE – WEAK IN CHARACTER OR VICTIM OF HER TIME?

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*Abstract: George Orwell's thirties novels are mainly based on the experience he sought by deeply getting involved in the economic, social, political and historical problems of his time. **A Clergyman's Daughter** has significant ideological meaning when dealing with subjects such as class distinction, gender inequality, poverty or personal freedom.*

*Dorothy Hare, the main character from **A Clergyman's Daughter**, despite being an educated young woman and having, theoretically, a relatively better social position she is still economically pressed to work hard in her father's parish. George Orwell follows his character by documenting every move that she makes until her poverty level reaches unimaginable low limits.*

By focusing on Dorothy's wanderings, we gradually realise that she always ends up being trapped in embarrassing situations for a clergyman's daughter and seems to become the victim of the circumstances and environment. Unfortunately, for her wits and potential, Dorothy is unable to direct her own life and she can only be saved (or not) by exterior intervention. She is successively dependent on several people, especially men, who influence her life one way or the other without her having a word to say about it.

Keywords: Dorothy Hare, dependant, class distinction, clergyman's daughter, poverty

George Orwell's thirties novels have a significant ideological load merging ideas such as class prejudice, gender inequality, imperialism and personal freedom. He was deeply immersed in the social, political and historical problems of the age experiencing, voluntarily, poverty, war and work as a police officer for the British Empire. He challenged the social identification and spoke for the unemployed and deprived of the thirties. He also did not forget the British suburbia with all its respectable constraints and limitations. The mixture of autobiography, documentary and fiction in his works outlined Orwell's social observation talent and his different perspective on writing novels.

A Clergyman's Daughter was published in 1935 and the author's interests, at that time, were directed towards social themes like class distinctions, prejudice, poverty, aspects of real life and social observation.

The five long chapters of *A Clergyman's Daughter*, each divided into short, sketch-like scenes, trace eight months in Dorothy Hare's life. Her various experiences represent, actually, Orwell's own past and describe Britain's traditional class system as he lived it and the damages it inflicted to the poor individuals struggling to survive in the thirties. In *A Clergyman's Daughter* his experience as a hop-picker, tramp and teacher is mainly reported, using Dorothy (a woman, strangely enough) as the main character, into a coherent novel. In this context it is worth mentioning that Orwell tended to consider his own personal experience and feelings as the human norm.

Dorothy is an educated, clergyman's daughter having a higher status in society but, because of her father's poor money management, she is still condemned to a life of unpaid physical work in housekeeping and also in the parish just like any other low-class woman. She is running the household having no help from her father. On the contrary, he tends to do as little as possible for his congregation. Consequently, Dorothy is the one doing parish work for free just because she is the clergyman's daughter. She spends her days taking care of the old and sick, giving advice to young housewives and playing games with "sour-smelling"

children of poor families. She is also the captain of the Girl Guides and honorary secretary of the Mothers' Union.

Orwell is very accurate in documenting his heroine's progressive impoverishment below the breadline, a proof that he, himself, had been through that kind of struggle before in his life. Every price and transaction is recorded as her experience brought home to her the mysterious power of money: "It was a bill — for certain it was a bill! Moreover, as soon as she set eyes on it she 'knew' that it was that horrible bill from Cargill's, the butcher's. A sinking feeling passed through her entrails. (...) 'To account rendered: L21 7S. 9d.'

This was written in the innocuous handwriting of Mr Cargill's accountant. But underneath, in thick, accusing-looking letters, was added and heavily underlined: 'Shd. like to bring to your notice that this bill has been owing a VERY LONG TIME. The EARLIEST POSSIBLE settlement will oblige, S. Cargill.'"¹

The first chapter of the novel resembles the structure of *Ulysses* by tracing the flow of events in a single day. Dorothy, considered an old maid, according to the common thinking of the era, although she was only in her late twenties, has a dull but tiring life. She devotes or simply, has to devote her time to "good works" in the small town where her father is Rector of St. Athelstan's. At 28, she is still being portrayed as a vulnerable and inexperienced being, a reflection of her low esteem. She has never married and vows that she never will, despite the fact that over the years she has attracted her share of attention from men despite being a quiet, reserved woman in her late twenties: "For the rest, she was a girl of middle height, rather thin, but strong and shapely, and her face was her weak point. It was a thin, blonde, unremarkable kind of face, with pale eyes and a nose just a shade too long; if you looked closely you could see crow's feet round the eyes, and the mouth, when it was in repose, looked tired. Not definitely a spinsterish face as yet, but it certainly would be so in a few years' time."²

In time we find out that she actually has an aversion to sex, referring to it as "all that". This is one of the explanations why she is not considering marriage as her future, as a woman in her own time. She likes men as friends, but she cannot stand their physical closeness: "If only they would leave you ALONE! she thought as she walked onwards a little more slowly. That was how she put it to herself habitually — 'If only they would leave you ALONE!' For it was not that in other ways she disliked men. On the contrary, she liked them better than women. Part of Mr Warburton's hold over her was in the fact that he was a man and had the careless good humour and the intellectual largeness that women so seldom have. But why couldn't they leave you ALONE? Why did they always have to kiss you and maul you about? They were dreadful when they kissed you — dreadful and a little disgusting, like some large, furry beast that rubs itself against you, all too friendly and yet liable to turn dangerous at any moment. And beyond their kissing and mauling there lay always the suggestion of those other, monstrous things ('ALL THAT' was her name for them) of which she could hardly even bear to think."³

Then, all of a sudden, without any warning, Dorothy finds herself far from the security of her home and village, wandering dressed in dirty, shabby clothes in London in the company of three homeless youngsters. The author does not give any clue but we understand that Dorothy has suffered an amnesia attack. She has no recollection of how she got there, and

¹Orwell, G., "*A Clergyman's Daughter*", Penguin Classics, London, 2000, p. 10

²Orwell, G., "*A Clergyman's Daughter*", Penguin Classics, London, 2000, p. 2

³ Ibid., p. 45

what is even more alarming is that she had been robbed as well and thrown out in the streets. An appalling life follows rendered in minute details. Eventually, starving and in rags she gets to hop picking in the fields in exchange for some food - something unheard of for a woman in her position. But, in order to have even that means of survival she was helped by a chatty young thief Nobby. Unfortunately, her partner in work is arrested and the hop-picking ends. Eventually, Dorothy will recover her memory by recognising a photograph of herself in a newspaper which has made a huge scandal of her disappearance insinuating that she eloped with a man, without being married. And taking into consideration her religious upbringing this constituted an outrageous behaviour coming from a clergyman's daughter. Despite all these and not hoping for much Dorothy decides to write to her father. There is no reply. As she cannot go home and face the scandal she decides to go to London to find a job. Here she is not that lucky either. She will quickly sink to the level of starving beggars who sleep out on the streets. She will end up by spending a cold night among the tramps in Trafalgar Square. This scene, which is presented as an experimental scene consisting mainly of dialogue in the manner of Joyce's "nighttown" section in *Ulysses*, shows Orwell's immense knowledge of low life, its miseries, humour and talk. Finally, she does get a sort of indirect answer from her father. Being helped by her father's cousin, she is rescued from this life only to sink into a terrible period of teaching in a fourth rate girls' day school in a filthy London suburb where the headmistress, Miss Creevy has never read an entire book and she was proud about it. In the end, helped by Mr. Warburton, she comes back home only to return to her old daily routine and prison-like rectory in Suffolk.

Orwell used many of his own experiences in this novel by transferring them onto Dorothy. However, what we notice in the end is that his protagonist seemed unable to learn or profit from hers. Dorothy's incapacitating security results from her pre-birth determining factors. Her parents' unpleasant personalities, their tenuous position in the British class system and their precarious financial situation, all matter beyond Dorothy's control. As the product of a miserable marriage and all the more vicious for being hidden because a clergyman could never openly quarrel with his wife, no wonder Dorothy grew up loathing the very thought of "all that", the thought of being with a man in more than a friendly relationship. The memories of the terrible scenes she had witnessed as a young girl determined her fatal frigidity, a condition, according to Orwell, "too common nowadays, among educated women to occasion any kind of surprise."⁴

Dorothy Hare: Dependent on a Man's Position

By placing the focus solely on Dorothy's wanderings, we discover that she always ends up being trapped in different difficult situations and becomes the victim of the circumstances and environment. The clergyman's daughter is unable to direct her own life and she can only be saved (or not) by exterior intervention. She is successively dependent on several men in order to help her survive or find her way in life.

The first man she is directly connected with is her father. He is in complete control of her life. By having his name and being called "the clergyman's daughter" – a direct reference to his job and not her name - that gives her an identity and, consequently, a purpose in life. In order to better understand Dorothy's character we need to see what her struggle means in everyday domestic grounds. Despite her position, supposedly higher among the other villagers, she is still forced to work physically as hard as any poor woman due to her father's vain aristocratic refusal to bother himself about every day bills. Dorothy is helplessly trying to run the household on a miserly eighteen pounds a month. Despite making all these efforts

⁴ Ibid., p. 94

to keep up the appearances and being the only one that is actually working in that family, she is still the “clergyman’s daughter” thus, through her father’s job she is being offered a place in the society by the society.

The second man in her life she has to rely on is Nobby, a vagrant. She is forced by the circumstances to rely on this homeless young man for means of survival and direction in the new, hard life she was living in the streets of London. He is the first friendly face she sees after finding herself wandering in this new environment. Nobby offers her some kind of guidance and initiates her in the life in the streets of London and then in hop picking. If it had not been for him she, as a single young lady in the city, could have ended up much worse than working in the fields. Once again she is saved from a social disaster by a man who is showing her, in his own way, what it is to be done in order to survive in a completely new environment.

Later she depends on her father’s cousin to find her a job and take her out of the miserable life she was having among people that had nothing in common with her. But this happens only because, her father-in-law, intervenes indirectly into saving Dorothy. She was in an impossible situation without any way out that she could see at that point: alone, among strangers, Nobby was not with her anymore and no direction to go to. Luckily, her father’s cousin manages to employ her as a teacher in a London fourth hand school. Again, the life’s direction and salvation comes from a man.

In the end, it is Mr. Warburton, her friend from the village, who brings her home, saving her, this time from the outrageous Miss Creevy, the owner of the school she was working in. But, on the other hand, the same Mr. Warburton lays out the hopeless future that awaits her when going back home, unless she accepts to marry him “It’s the same future that lies before any woman of your class with no husband and no money. Let us say your father will live another ten years. By the end of that time the last penny of his money will have gone down the sink. The desire to squander it will keep him alive just as long as it lasts, and probably no longer. All that time he will be growing more senile, more tiresome, more impossible to live with; he will tyrannize over you more and more, keep you shorter and shorter of money, make more and more trouble for you with the neighbours and the tradesmen. And you will go on with that slavish, worrying life that you have lived, struggling to make both ends meet (...) she thinks of herself as a young girl still and never realizes that behind her back everyone laughs at her for a poor, disappointed old maid? That’s what you’ll become, what you must become, however much you foresee it and try to avoid it. There’s no other future possible to you unless you marry. Women who don’t marry wither up — they wither up like aspidistras in back-parlour windows; and the devilish thing is that they don’t even know that they’re withering.”⁵

CONCLUSIONS

Dorothy Hare, the clergyman’s daughter, is trapped by environment and circumstance. She DOES make an attempt, partly involuntarily, to break out by unconsciously escaping to London. Her wanderings and later loss of faith, her willingly return to her father’s home as a permanent slave to her environment, could also be interpreted as a manifestation of her subconscious identity that is trying to surface. These are arguments in the favour of that “room of one’s own” as Virginia Woolf calls it, in a society where the woman inevitably depends on the “identity” of a man but sometimes finds ways to manifest her own, hidden from the outer world, personality.

⁵Orwell, G., “*A Clergyman’s Daughter*”, Penguin Classics, London, 2000, p. 155

Despite all these, she fails; partly through her own weakness, partly through the insidious nature of the environment. Dorothy is quite weak in her responses, in most of the circumstances she finds herself she has no strong reaction. She is accepting all the circumstances and her reaction is reduced to merely observing what she is subjected to in her daily life. She is a passive victim of the social ills she is going through, she cannot and will not change. And as class has made her what she is, she can almost be excused all responsibility for failure.

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