

Why are cities so often used as a backdrop in writing after 1830 for the debate of modernity's mixed blessings?

As stated by Edward. L Glasser, "The city is humanity's laboratory, where people flock to dream, create and rebuild" (Law.J, p.69). The city is a location which has featured prominently in post-Victorian literature, and as such there have been numerous different depictions of both city life, as well as the societal implications of mass urbanisation. Two prominent pieces of literature in which the city plays a pivotal role are "Man of the Crowd" by Edgar Allen Poe, and "Bleak House" by Charles Dickens, together the two depict a resonant picture of Victorian city life, highlighting both its follies and its innovations.

As stated by Deborah Parsons, "a city should be analysed demographically, economically and architecturally" (Parsons.D, p.12) and perhaps it is on these criteria that one should analyse literary representations of city life also in order to glean the most accurate representation. In the case of the narrator in "man of the crowd" it is made abundantly evident that in terms of demographics the city is a plethora different livelihoods and walks of life, however, the narrator seems dreary and disheartened by this, stating, "my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations." From this quote it can be summarised the narrator finds living in the city a monotonous affair, certainly the fact he is able to so easily categorise passers-by on the street would attest to this.

From his position in the café the narrator is afforded a window into the ebb and flow of life in microcosm whilst surveying the crowds the narrator paints the city in almost primal fashion a food chain like hierarchy, based upon social standing seems to emerge. The narrator notes dapper gentry folk taking priority over others on the street, their high standing and apparent high worth is immediately recognised by other patrons, described as "gesticulating masses". Below the affluent gentry men are the older tribe of "steady, dull clerks" the cast off graces of the gentry", though they themselves are facing competition from "flashier, younger clerks" encroaching on their territory, and beneath these are the gamblers, peddlers and vagrants. The emphasis placed upon financial standing and the social privileges it affords are marked, in order to have any kind of sway in this concrete world money is essential, the need to eke out the most out of one's situation rings true from the gamblers and peddlers looking to make a profit straight down to the beggars trying to get by. The narrator's description of the intricacies of city life show that despite a high population, the city is at something of a cultural dead end, with the hierchal status of each individual firmly established, with the wealthy firmly on top and the less wealthy firmly below. It appears that the great prosperity afforded by the city has diminished the need for any further sort of innovation.

The trend suggested by Poe, that urbanisation leads to a kind of cultural and spiritual dehumanisation is also seen in Charles Dickens novel, "Bleak House", and is most prominently displayed in the character of Jo. Jo is an illiterate orphan, who sweeps streets for a living and survives on the handouts of strangers to survive, Jo's lack of formal education or wealth seems to remove from all things that are considered "proper" and "civilised" in Victorian society. Dickens summarises Jo's desperation and aimlessness thusly " it must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows!" (Dickens, C, Bleak House, p.296). Dickens highlights the almost