

The Essential Dickens: A Critical Observation

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Abstract

This article intends to delineate the meaning of Dickens in the contemporary world and for contemporary novelist. As the aspiring novelist would look at Dickens, as well as the art of fiction, his/her mind is likely to see that Dickens' art is imbued with a sense of comprehensiveness. David Cecil has noted that for from being a specialist Dickens has almost every kind of fictional technique and content in his work. This is in fine contrast to most novelist of the 20th century and later, who tend to be specialists – choosing to write only one or the kinds of fiction. Thus there are mystery novels, historical novels, social novels, psychological novels, magical realism novels, autobiographical novels, crime novels and so on. Dickens' vision incorporated all these and more because of which he had something for everyone. He was thoroughly aware of the heterogeneity of the Victorian public and therefore his novels were aimed at including as many categories of readers as possible. He could provide a rather complete picture of life and thus a complete kind of satisfaction for the reader. New Historicists believe that Dickens's novels "have functioned and can still function as interactive social discourse."

Keywords- *Interactive Social Discourse, Autobiographical Novels, Exploratory Enigma*

Angus Wilson pointed out that the Dickens World is larger than just the imagination of his readers which he helped to shape. The relationship between the author (who has endured) and the reader (who is still living) is an exploratory enigma. The reader attempts almost unconsciously but also endlessly to locate himself in the fictional world; what appeals in authors of great repute is that they find a miraculous acceptance among readers of far-fetched regions and distant ages. This plainly manifests that they have been able to document the irreducible minimum of human nature which is unchangeable and also interminable. Jane Smiley wrote that "The literary sensibility of Charles Dickens is possibly the most amply documented literary sensibility in history."

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Of course he was and still is an immensely popular writer whose books had never gone out of print. This has endeared him ever more to his readers. He was a master story teller and could keep the reader guessing about what was to follow. If today Dickens' readers have reduced to students in English Literature Dept. and those interested in literary history, particularly the one's wanting to know about Victorian England, this is so because times have changed and today's reader naturally wants to read about the contemporary world. However, there are still a great number of readers, particularly children who are interested in literary classics. Among these classics, Dickens' novels are definitely the most read.

His writing appeals because he taps some very basic qualities of human experience, qualities that capture the imagination, mind and heart of the reader, leaving them gripped by the narrative art. "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature."

Dickens's novels contain a kind of formula that has always appealed down the ages. This formula includes capturing childhood experiences, using humour and pathos side by side, providing moments of great tension which then gradually ease out, showing sympathy for the underdog and weaker sections of the society. These characteristics serve as instruction manuals for belated writers, who adapt it keeping in mind the purpose and proportion.

Keeping these facts in mind, it is now pertinent to come directly to the question of what constitutes Dickens, and his work. Although it is no easy task to downsize the Dickensian Phenomenon into some *reductio ad absurdum*, yet there is a certain basic minimum which will always be associated with Dickens' name. An effort has been made to chalk out what this basic minimum is. The characteristics that can be numbered:

- (a) The first and foremost of what constitutes the meaning of Charles Dickens is exaggeration. His work has been said to contain exaggeration both in his descriptions of people, places and things as well as his portrayal of reality through situation or episodes. The tendency to exaggerate earned him the derogatory title "Mr. Popular Sentiment" (Thackeray) and the hardcore realists like Henry James called him "the greatest of superficial novelists" for not capturing life in all its complexities. However, Dickens himself was conscious of this quality in his writing. He even came out with a defence of his frequent return to exaggeration, saying that it is a part of his journalistic creed and even illustrated the relative nature of the term (Preface to *Martin Chuzzlewit*- 1844)

John Lucas calls Dickens a greater mimetic novelist than George Eliot, and dismisses the negative criticism of Henry James by asserting that Dickens's "method of showing human probabilities" is simply inconsistent with his "calculations or judgements of the probable". For Dickens, exaggeration serves a moral purpose as it is employed to shake off the complacency and outrage the decadent

Victorian bourgeoisie indifference towards the grim reality of life. According to George Santayana (1921), people have no eyes and no ears when they say that Dickens exaggerates. “The polite world is lying when it refuses to believe that individuals like Quilp, or Squeers, or Sergeant Buzfur exist.”

In fact, exaggeration is so much a part of Dickens’s makeup that when he does not exaggerate, as he indeed does at times, one wonders whether it is Dickens or someone else who is doing the writing.

(b) Dickens was an outstanding inventor of characters. His mind created traits in human behaviour when he did not find very realistic human modes. The variety and quantum of characters created by him is greater than those created by George Eliot, W.M. Thackeray, Henry James and Walter Scott. According to the Dictionary of British Literary Characters, between the later 17th century and 1890, 11663 figures were created. Approximately 8 percent or 989 figures were a product of Dickens’s imagination – a large sum – although the lead was taken by Trollope, whose 1289 characters take the first place. Dickens’s prowess of characterisation is closely linked to his fascination for theatre. His intimacy with the theatrical world fostered two significant natural gifts: “his exceptionally acute powers of aural and visual observation, which combined, produced something that is possibly unique in the English novel”. The characters created by him embodied a living spirit and had an existence which forced the author to write about them, not as he liked, but as dictated by them. Dickens once remarked that every word said by his characters was distinctly heard by him. In fact, he also acknowledged the visual presence of his characters, once he began to write about them.

Another aspect of Dickens’s art of characterisation is that all of his most memorable characters have an individualized language and define themselves through their private speech. This method of characterization, it should be noted, is profoundly related to his love for dramatic art. It serves as an effective way to distinguish one person from another in a plethora of characters. Dickens employed the device of a speech tag, a word or expression, a peculiar phrase which privileged the speech of a single character. This trait has been exemplified in Miss Knag’s dry ‘hem’ (Nicholas Nickleby), hangman’ Dennis’s sinister wish ‘to work people off (Barnaby Rudge), Wemmicks ‘portable property’ and Joe Gargery’s ‘old chap’ [Great Expectations] etc. These idiolects are clear signs of Dickens’s genius, a test of virtue on which his fiction stands or falls.

(c) Stylistically, Dickens’s mind looks for rhythmic, cadenced and deeply pronounced sentences that invite attention to their structures. He balances the sentences not only with pauses but also with other sound related words and phrases. James Joyce claimed that Dickens has entered into the language more than any writer since Shakespeare.

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It has been pointed out that, Dickens forces himself as a presence, into the unconscious mind of readers through the kind of language he generally employs. He also possesses the art of making the ordinary appear extraordinary through a style that includes exaggeration and repetition along with immediacy and excitement that is rarely found in other writers. Dickens has a gift for exploiting the distinctive modes of speech – his irregular syntax, verbal eccentricities, frequent use of portmanteau, idiosyncratic dialect; assonance and consonance etc aid him to craft a style which is patently Dickensian.

A verbal exchange between characters is another technique Dickens uses to imply complexity and inner life. Critics have identified four distinct styles in his fiction: the high comic, the satiric, the lyrical, and the neurotic. All of these are employed with great skill to demonstrate how those with imagination must struggle in a grim world.

Dickens' exaggerated expressiveness has imprinted upon the English language something that has taken some generations of British writers to free it from, if at all they have succeeded in doing that.

(d) Like the above features of Dickens' writing that relate to exaggeration is his hyperbolic manner of creating people. His characters border on caricatures. Their actions are exaggerated to the point of seeming unreal. They may seem unreal but there is a certain paradox about them – they begin in a mode that makes them unreal but soon reach a point when they are highly convincing and real. Dickens' characters have this double – pronged existence, on the one hand they seem unreal while on the other they are as real as they could be. It is difficult to come across another writer who has this double – pronged strategy in the creation of characters. The things they say are far from what one is usually likely to see. However, impressive literature often provides models that people take after in their behaviour and actions. People in England and outside have often developed after Dickensian models. One who visits Britain is likely to find some who speak with Dickensian exaggeration and rhetoric even now. Writers have the power to influence people into taking up particular ways and manners. For example Shakespeare's women like Portia, Cleopatra, Rosalind and others could have been responsible for influencing the English woman after Shakespeare's times. There is a big difference between the roles women were expected to play before the Elizabethan age and after. Dickens's characters similarly seem to have added to what the Britons are today. It is not that people like the ones in Dickens did not exist before him. They definitely did and when he transmuted them into his fiction they acquired better visibility for others to see and learn from.

The creation of caricatures was a necessary part of a larger design which Dickens had in his mind. Caricatures were a symbol for the combination of industrial mechanization and mechanistic thought and Dickens employed it not with an objective of description but with an acerbic intent to satire upon the degradation of Victorian values and sensibility.

(e) The meteoric rise of Dickens's social and financial status is emblematic of the social mobility of bourgeoisie class in the Victorian era. Dickens was essentially a social – realist but the kind of socialism, he preached, was entirely different from what Bentham, Mill or Marx professed. Like Bentham, he was contemptuous of the wisdom of ancestors – the ideals of the past set a legitimate precedent for posterity to follow – and at the same time so unlike Bentham, Dickens denounced all the modern creeds- the ideals of utilitarianism, laissez-faire, organised charity, trade unionism, militant patriotism. He even despaired of democracy, mistrusted power and dreaded violence in individuals and in the mob. Thomas Carlyle was the major influence in shaping and sharpening his beliefs and ideologies. [Michael Goldberg – Carlyle and Dickens -1972]

George Bernard Shaw claimed that Dickens's novels can be read as social documents which are a realistic representation of Victorian society. He declared that Dickens rose up “against civilization itself as against a disease” and found “that it is not our disorder but our order which is horrible”. His novels like his journalism were meant for the family; the effort was to stir the conscience of his readers without disgusting them and to present social evils vividly and truthfully. Dickens was thoroughly conscious of the social injustices meted out to the poor and disenfranchised but unlike Wordsworth he did not romanticize the idea of poverty and deprivation. He launched a crusade against the invidious social and political institutions and campaigned all his life for reforms in education, sanitation and public health, child labour and penal and legal institutions.

Although scornful of social constraints, yet, while portraying the evils of society, Dickens allows his characters to transcend the limitation of social order. In this way he is “a celebrator of life and individual possibilities”. This remarkable optimism of Dickens stands in opposition to novelists such as George Eliot, Henry James, or Thomas Hardy, all of whom insist that “the hampering thread like entanglements of social existence” determine character and morality. It must be mentioned here that Dickens' penchant for social reforms and revaluation has made him a great favourite in Russia under the Soviets especially. Most other communist countries find him congenial, including China, where his ideas are consistent with those of Mao-tse-tung.

(f) Another conspicuous characteristic of Charles Dickens is his remarkable empathy for the poor and underdog. This resounding trait is inextricably linked with the agonizing experience of his childhood. It also has grounding in his struggle for the ethical and

humane causes. Dickens believed that society as an institution has set up goals like affluence, political authority, entrepreneurship etc. for individuals to aspire and reach but has failed to consecrate the legitimate means to achieve them. As a result of this discrepancy, people adopt illegal and deviant methods to accomplish them; thus inviting the horrors of legal machinery. For Dickens, the prevailing legal system of England was anti-poor - symbolised in the Court of Chancery and the Circumlocution Office – because the legal code was framed by the rich and prosperous who were apathetic to the miserable life of the general public. Law and social norms reinforced the oppression of the underprivileged.

Dickens's portrayal of the underdog, the downtrodden is undoubtedly phenomenal. He doggedly adhered to exposing the evils of social order and targeted his anger not on "industrialization itself" but on "the production of social discourse about it". He saw the tendency of the powerless to be unjust towards powerless and therefore his novels are documents that make an art of social and political injustice. Also visible in the Dickens world is the human tendency to manipulate everything towards selfish ends. Through his novels, he demonstrated the parasitic nature of the affluent class which exploits the weak and helpless interminably. This can be a reason for the success of Dickens's novels during his times and for times to come.

It is to be noted here that Dickens was never in favour of a violent revolution wherein the proletariats would displace the capitalists from political and social authority. He reposed his faith in the nobility of mankind and advocated enthusiastically for progressive reforms which he believed will alleviate the condition of the poor. Moreover having glimpsed the hardship associated with dispossession in his own life, Dickens aimed at mitigating the suffering of the disinherited throughout his writing life. Dickens seem to have a soft corner for the looser in life; this could be the have- not, the orphaned child or simply that weak specimen of humanity who stands alone conscious of losses, sorrows and pains.

(g) As the experiences of childhood dominate the adult life of Charles Dickens, his world of fiction is immersed with child characters be it Pip, Oliver Twist, Sissy Jukes or David Copperfield. The way in which adults handle children, and Dickens's understanding of this phenomenon, makes Dickens a master of fiction. Child psychology, looking at the world through the eyes of the child, the fears of children and the cruelty of older people towards them form the subject matter of a number of Dickens' masterpiece.

Dickens employs the technique of shifting perspectives to register perceptions of characters other than the protagonist and the narrator. Through this technique, Dickens is able to probe deep into the psychology of not only women but also children whose predicaments, Dickens believed, would

appeal most to his readers. The Victorians, including Dickens, longed for the restoration of past era preceding the insensitive Victorian age. They even revelled in the act of forgetfulness which temporarily rescued them from the anguish of Victorian morbidity. The relapse to childhood memories, through the technique of detailed description provided a much needed respite for Victorian writers like George Eliot, Trollope and Dickens.

Out of the memory of an unpleasant childhood, his imagination is able to squeeze out, an element of relief and healing; the relief results from an artistic portrayal of childhood suffering. It is something like the phenomenon that from the suffering inherent in a tragedy, an author draws delight. This is how the art of writing provides a therapeutic effect.

It has been pointed out by Grahame Smith that Dickens did not have as miserable a childhood as his child characters seem to project. But it may be stated here that a sensitive child can be uncomfortable and whining even in a palace. Memories of childhood anguish can result from the inability of a child to adjust well in his surroundings and even the best of circumstances can fail to comfort a hungry soul looking for deeper kinds of fulfilment

In *Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature* (1957) Peter Coveney observes that there was “no other major novelist whose achievement was so closely regulated by a feeling for childhood”. Coveney suggests that Dickens used the child as a means of bringing home his stinging social criticism. Dickens’s continuous critique of society can best be understood when viewed through the lens of the orphan- a prominent Dickensian symbol that is frequently abandoned and abused.

(h) Right from the time of Shakespeare, down to Wordsworth and Charles Lamb, the English mind toyed with the idea of how close tears and laughter were to each other. Dickens seems to have inherited this English tradition of seeing the one in the other or at least closely connected. Humour and pathos are two blocks on which the edifice of life is built. The absence of either makes life unreal and monotonous. The best literary mind therefore always, or often, juxtaposes these two ingredients of holistic human experience. Dickens was undeniably the master of a vision that fused humour and pathos, seeing each of these going hand in hand in every situation that he built into his chapters.

The concept of the failed/dying Clown is evident of how Dickens’ mind operated in blending the two. The clown is a symbol of humour and his dying an indication of how tragic such a death is. Dickens could see clearly that humour was not as starkly real as pathos in human existence. Wherever there is humour that is at the cost of a subdued fulfilment or a suppressed anguish. In *Great Expectations* the convict, Magwitch, picks Pip up with his legs in an action that inverts the way he views the world. This act is grossly hurtful and yet for a little child a moment of viewing the world inversely is a moment of certain discoveries that are funny, though frightening.

Dickens's novels show that suffering stays on while humour is episodic. His weaker character, particularly children are thrown into a pit of fear – as Oliver Twist is, when he sleeps with the coffins in the darkness – and their escape from their fear and bleak experience generally becomes a vehicle of humour and excitement. Oliver's encounter with Charlie Bates has behind and within it the conjunction of humour and pathos.

For Dickens, the hungry child represents pathos and the adult deliberation in the matter, humour. Out of the grimmest of situations leak out a humorous moment. For Dickens as for most serious authors, there is a clear realization that weaker human beings are subjected to more trouble and anguish than presented with humour. Hence the pathos is predominant and the humour, highly fleeting. Even in a character such as Miss Havisham, who is a picture of disappointment and dejection, there is always the danger of humour peeling out of her grim situation.

(i) Dickens seems to have understood that the reader's imagination can be gripped by a sense of mystery. Hence, a number of his novels like Bleak House, Great Expectations, Mystery of Edwin Drood and others have this element, which is the saving grace of a novel that can border on boredom. E.M. Forster has pointed out the importance of "what happens next?" This is the principle of mystery and Dickens uses it better than most of his contemporaries.

It is to be noted that mystery and crime go together in a perfect blend. In any case, the reader is usually keen to look into the "seeds of time" and find out which seed will take root and which will perish. Dickens could make his readers want to see the "future in the instant". Though Dickens is not always a master of irony to the extent that Jane Austen or E.M. Forster are, his novels are imbued with the difference between appearance and reality at the level of the plot. This feature also contains a little element of mystery in Dickens' general scheme of story – telling.

To conclude the article, it is relevant to argue as to why one should read Dickens. George Orwell provides the answer: "Dickens deserves to be read, not for his message, which may be remote to modern audiences, but for his methods. He is a master at creating memorable characters and circumstances. The outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens's writing is the unnecessary detail. He is a writer whose parts are greater than his wholes. He is all fragments, all details... There are no rules in novel writing, and for any work of art there is only one test worth bothering about~ survival." And Dickens has survived triumphantly.

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