

From *Penguin Critical Anthologies: Charles Dickens*, ed. Stephen Wall (1970)

Introduction (pp. 25 – 35)

Dickens became a fact of life very early in his career, and he has remained one ever since. The usual implications of the adjective 'Dickensian' indicate only a limited part of Dickens's effect on the popular imagination—an effect probably more radical than that made by any other English writer of comparable literary calibre. Some of his characters and some of the situations in the novels soon became and have remained universally available references, a kind of shorthand of the common imagination. A mention of Scrooge, Pickwick or Micawber, or a scene in which Oliver asks for more, is immediately intelligible to an extremely wide public. Our conception of Christmas, our images of towns and cities (London in particular), our understanding of the way children feel—these are the kinds of area in which Dickens's influence has been so profound that, paradoxically, it has become almost imperceptible, so completely has his way of seeing the world been assimilated into everyday life. This may partly be because, as Humphrey House put it at the end of *The Dickens World* (1941), 'He is still the only one of the great English novelists who is read at all widely [among all classes]. . .'

However, an awareness of Dickens is not dependent on having read him. Henry Crawford, in chapter 33 of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, says of Shakespeare that

one gets acquainted with [him] without knowing how. It is part of an Englishman's constitution. His thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them everywhere, one is intimate with him by instinct.

His words can be applied with even more force and appropriateness to Dickens, whose stories and characters have been the subject of endless dramatization, imitation and adaptation. From the days when crude plagiarisms of *The Pickwick Papers* attempted to cash in on the success of Dickens's first novel and when versions of *Oliver Twist* were playing at three London theatres simultaneously, to the present period when his books are filmed, televised, made the subject of musicals and cannibalized in comic books, the products of his imagination have been constantly before the public. It is curious that an author whom F. R. Leavis has justly said 'in ease

and range there is surely no greater master of English except Shakespeare' should circulate so persistently in forms which either select from or even misrepresent what he actually wrote. On the other hand, there could hardly be a more conclusive demonstration of the vitality and indestructibility of the world that Dickens created.

Dicken's first success came with his first book. *Sketches by Boz*, a collection of descriptive pieces he had written for periodicals, appeared when he was just twenty-four and attracted some extremely favourable reviews. The 'sketch' was then a familiar journalistic convention, but Dickens transformed it by what one notice called the 'startling fidelity' of his observation. The *Sketches* were felt to deal with the world as it recognizably was, and yet to reveal it in an entirely new way; the Dickensian balance between reassurance and originality was already forming. The *Sketches* also manifested the vigour and warmth of their author's personality, so that when *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* was announced as *Edited by 'Boz'* and began to appear shortly afterwards, the public already had some idea of what to expect.

In fact the first instalments seem to have disappointed them, but after the fourth number the book began to make its way more forcefully; by the fifteenth number sales exceeded forty thousand; and by the time the book was completed it was clear it had completely outdistanced the previous successes of Scott. *Pickwick* was to remain the most continuously popular of all Dickens's books to the readers of his time, and later on there were moments when its persistent appeal seemed to him something of a liability.

Dickens's life was at all times marked by an extreme expenditure of energy, and this was particularly true of the years immediately after the success of *Pickwick*. *Oliver Twist* began to appear in February 1837, while the last instalments of *Pickwick* were still being written. Dickens finished writing *Oliver Twist* in September 1838, having already begun to publish *Nicholas Nickleby* the previous April. The first number of *Nickleby* sold fifty thousand copies. The sales of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) reached the then astonishing figure of a hundred thousand. With the appearance of *Barnaby Rudge* in 1841, Dickens had completed and published five novels in five years.

Although the writing of his fiction never ceased to be central to Dickens's life, his interests became more diversified, and he never again wrote so

much so quickly. Although Dickens was criticized for writing too fast, there is little doubt that these rapidly produced early books, taken together, established a large and loyal public who became committed to 'the Dickens world' and not just to individual novels. Dickens's awareness of the audience that he had thus created remained with him both as a powerful stimulant and as a serious responsibility. The reality and intensity of Dickens's relationship with his audience can be seen at its most extreme (and for many modern readers at its most inexplicable) in the extravagant reception of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The death of Little Nell, which Landor and Jeffrey thought worthy of Shakespeare, was followed in 1847 by the death of Paul Dombey, which some judges including Thackeray thought unsurpassed. The pathos of these child-deaths, like the warm-heartedness of the early Christmas stories, and the domestic sentiment to be found everywhere in Dickens, may well have been as instrumental as the unequalled humour and high spirits of the earlier novels in creating between Dickens and his public an unprecedented community of feeling.

This bond was created not only by what was in these books, but also by the way in which they appeared. *Pickwick* was published at monthly intervals in 20 parts of 32 pages each (the last two parts being published together in an issue of 48 pages), each part costing a shilling except the last which cost two shillings. All Dickens's novels were subsequently published either in monthly parts on this pattern, or in weekly instalments in periodicals edited by Dickens. Serialization, in fact, was an essential part of the creative method.

Since Dickens never finished a novel before it began to appear serially—indeed, he was sometimes only a few chapters ahead of the printer—the interval between creation and publication was extremely short. Dickens had a real sense of his audience accompanying him as he wrote his weekly or monthly numbers; he was able to gauge the response of the public to a book as it proceeded—partly through the evidence of sales, to which he was very attentive, and partly through the comments and the letters he received about the book in progress. The formal dangers of part-issues are obvious—once a section of a novel has appeared it cannot be revised or recast to fit in with later and perhaps unforeseen developments in the story—but from *Dombey and Son* onwards Dickens became extremely skilful at reconciling the balance and distribution of narrative interest within an instalment with the structural demands of the completed work. The

advantages of serialization of this kind to so profoundly histrionic an artist as Dickens were great, for, as Kathleen Tillotson has said,

In the serial-writer's relation to his public there is indeed something of the stimulating contact which an actor or a public speaker receives from an audience. Serial publication gave back to story-telling its original context of performance.

(*Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, 1954, p. 36)

Although Dickens often complained of the compression imposed upon him by the shorter instalments of those novels of his which were published in weekly parts, he remained faithful to serial composition and publication throughout his writing life.

Early in his career Dickens had perfected the art of public speaking at the banquets and institutional dinners of which the Victorians were so fond. Some contemporaries thought Dickens the best speaker of his time for this sort of occasion. . . . His manner of speaking—controlled, charming, sincere—were quite different from the histrionic displays he gave when reading from his own works, an occupation Dickens became increasingly addicted to in his later years. There seems little doubt that Dickens was an actor of outstanding talent. As a young man he was to have auditioned before Charles Kemble, but was prevented from doing so by illness. His performances as the rejected lover in Wilkie Collins's melodrama *The Frozen Deep* reduced even his fellow-actors to tears. In his middle years Dickens organized theatrical tours for charity, and the celebrated and, latterly, sensational readings were, from one point of view, a logical development of his gifts. The number of people who had seen as well as read Dickens must have been considerable.

To an even larger public he was familiar as an editor. Although no articles or stories in it were signed, every issue of *Household Words* had 'Conducted by Charles Dickens' prominently printed under the title, and the same words appeared (in small type) at the top of each double page. The magazine everywhere reflected Dickens's interests, causes, ideas and tasted as well as his literary and political independence. Its successor, *All the Year Round*, was also recognizably the product of its creator, and Dickens's constant supervision and meticulous editing of both periodicals kept them firmly under his control. For the last twenty years of his life he had, through them, a weekly means of contact with the public.

Dickens wrote to a correspondent that in *Household Words* he was particularly anxious to deal with 'all social evils, and all home affections and associations'. Dickens's personal contribution to the progress of social reform (he came to despair of political reform) is not easy to estimate, but his magazines reinforced the impression given by his novels of a man energetically devoted to practical improvement, reliably on the side of the people, and democratically against 'Them'. Dickens remained a middle-class writer—whatever their economic reversals, his heroes arrive at the end at a respectable prosperity—and he would not have welcomed the dictatorship of the proletariat; nevertheless, he seemed to many of the more literate working class a trustworthy ally and an accessible friend. A significant number of Dickens's speeches were made to Mechanics' Institutes and similar organizations.

The widespread conviction that Dickens was a powerful force for social progress was not universally accepted and it must remain difficult to say how justified it was. . . . In his notice of *A Tale of Two Cities* Stephen censures Dickens for arrogantly distorting the facts of history in the interests of 'working upon the feelings by the coarsest stimulants'. Others looked upon Dickens's attacks on utilitarianism and political economy (especially in *Hard Times*) as simply ignorant and obtuse. Carlyle and Ruskin remained sympathetic, but Dickens was often under attack in his latter years from other intellectual critics of his day, and he was especially liable to criticism from those connected with an administrative Establishment to which Dickens became increasingly hostile.

Some critics also found his artistic methods unsatisfactory. The originality of Dickens's language meant that he had always been criticized for vulgarity and irregularity of style. The episode in Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford* in which a genteel lady reader, after being made to listen to some of *Pickwick*, sends for Johnson's *Rasselas*, as a corrective, indicates the 'polite' response to the 'lowness' of early Dickens. . . . Later critics continued to regret that Dickens lacked education and had not formed his style on the best models. G. H. Lewes deplored Dickens's lack of culture.

The charges of exaggeration of effect and distortion of facts [as occurred with *Oliver Twist*] had been made early on, and Dickens showed some awareness of them in his Prefaces. . . .

. . . Thackeray himself emerged as a formidable rival to Dickens. . . . Thackeray's work was preferred by many genteel and educated readers as being more realistic, more refined and more correct. Thackeray's feelings about Dickens wavered, but he left several generous as well as some envious estimates of Dickens's creative fertility and stamina.

. . . The generous tributes that followed Dickens's own death stressed not so much the literary qualities narrowly considered as the effects of his work on the national life. According to Dean Stanley, he 'made Englishmen feel more as one family than they had ever felt before'. This affirmative view of Dickens's moral influence over his public is worth remembering when, in the modern period [fifty years ago], we are asked to see him as alienated and demonic.

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Edited notes: Tom Wingate, October 2020