

## THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHARLES DICKENS'S ART

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The work of art is the product of the artist's creative mind which is affected and shaped by various factors. In Dickens's case, these factors are closely related to the biographical and the historical backgrounds as well as to the conventions of the Victorian novel. It is essential that each of these factors should be considered for a better understanding of his art.

C. Dickens (1812-1870) was the son of a clerk from the lower middle class. When his father was imprisoned for debt Charles, as a little boy, was sent out to work in a blacking factory. As will be seen later, this was a bitter experience which wounded him psychologically and the traces of which can be observed in the frequent appearance of lost, neglected or maltreated children in his novels. Years later in *David Copperfield*, for instance, he told the story of his sufferings by recounting David's early life in London in the warehouse of Murdstone and Grinby. The immortal Mr. and Mrs. Micawber with whom David stayed, were most probably portraits of the writer's ineffectual father and mother. The childhood years filled with poverty and shame were to supply a rich source of inspiration for the author. The mingled pathos and humour, the vivid characters and incidents with which the London scenes are crowded spring from his own childhood experiences of life.

Dickens spent two years at a school in Hampstead before entering a solicitor's office as a junior clerk at the age of fifteen. Afterwards he became a parliamentary reporter and then a newspaper reporter on *The Morning Chronicle*. When he later became a writer he drew on his experience of London slums and poverty; and his knowledge of lawyers and legislators, acquired during the years when he worked as a reporter, provided him with material for the great novels lying ahead. In 1833 he began writing sketches for this and other newspapers, and these were collected

and published in volume under the title of *Sketches By Boz* (1835-36). It was at this time that he married Catherine Hogarth and also wrote *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), an early novel loose in plot structure and crowded with comic figures, which brought him fame and financial ease at the age of twenty-four.

From then onwards Dickens produced one book after another. *Oliver Twist* (1837-38), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* (1840-41), all appeared in serial form and established Dickens's reputation as England's leading writer. In 1842 Dickens made his first tour of the United States, where his books were widely read. The result of the tour was *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843). During the next few years he travelled extensively on the Continent, spending a great deal of time in Italy and Switzerland followed by *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Chimes* (1844) and *Dombey and Son* (1848). Between 1848 and 1856 he wrote *David Copperfield* (1849), with which he reached the peak of his literary fame, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit*. In 1849 he started the weekly periodical *Household Words*, which he replaced by *All The Year Round* in 1859. He continued this periodical until his death. Many of his later works including *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend* were published in these periodicals. Soon after his separation from his wife in 1859, he wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*, which reflects the sad loneliness of this time as well as the tragic events with which the book deals.

Dickens was passionately interested in the theatre and he had seriously thought of becoming an actor before the success of *Pickwick* settled his career. Years later he partly found a way to satisfy this passion for the stage through his semi-dramatic readings from his own work, which took him once again to the United States (1867) and Paris. These readings were highly successful, but exhausting and led to a breakdown in his health. In 1870 while writing *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* he died as a man who had enjoyed a great literary fame and success during his lifetime.

**As for the historical background :** Dickens's literary career covers the years between 1836 and 1864. It was a time when the so-called Industrial Revolution was still in progress, reshaping and modifying England from a rural to an industrial country. 'The Industrial Revolution' is a label given to a social-political-economic struggle which characterized life in England for about a hundred years or more, but which intensified particularly in the last quarter of the eighteenth and the first quarter of the nineteenth centuries. Invention, scientific discovery, changing economic, political and social ideas and ideals : all contributed, in the long run, to the formation of this event. Among them, the invention of the blast furnace and the perfection of the steam engine in the late eighteenth century have a vital importance: the former helped to promote the manufacture of iron and thus supplied machine manufacturers with wrought iron; the latter was indispensable for the steaming transportation as well as for the development of the textile industry. The making of roads, canals and railways together with the use of vehicles working with steam power increased transportation facilities. The Victorians witnessed a rapid shift from a way of life based on the ownership of land to a modern urban economy based on trade and industry. England, the first country in the world to become industrialized, grew more and more prosperous through her trade. She exported cotton and manufactured products to overseas countries through her merchant fleet of immense size. Large amounts of money gained from the trade were invested in all continents. Thus England became first the world's workshop, and in the late Victorian period (from 1870 on) the world's banker.

The Industrial Revolution brought, in the long run, obvious advantages to England and to other countries. But it also brought, especially at its early stage, harm and lots of troubles to many of the people who lived through it: Agriculture was almost deserted and the majority of the people formerly living in rural areas moved to bigger industrial centres to work at factories and workshops where underpaid workers were employed. On the other hand,

hundreds of thousands of unemployed people wandered through the country, many dying impoverished and diseased. The master craftsman found his trade taken from him by the machine. Home work gave way to factory work. Industry and commerce flourished in big cities which grew rapidly, and a middle-class capitalistic group developed in a short time and prospered at the expense of men, women and children whom they overworked in their mills or factories. All England turned her attention to making money.

As a result of the immigration from villages to cities, the Industrial Revolution brought England, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century including the Early Victorian Period (1832-1848) usually called 'the time of troubles', a number of social and political problems such as appalling overcrowding in big cities, housing, slum dwellings, widespread unemployment, poverty, a severe depression, unhealthy living conditions in the new industrial cities and coal mining areas, too low wages for labour, the employment of women and little children for long hours at coal mines and workhouses, environmental pollution, sewage, illness, etc. They were all newly born problems and each required a solution. The government, through a series of Reform and Factory Acts as well as through the building of roads, canals, railways, sewers, houses, etc. gradually improved the social conditions, but failed to abolish poverty, inequality, the gap between the rich and the poor.

The Victorian writers showed various reactions to the Industrial Revolution and its effects. Some had a strong confidence in the blessings of progress and some were nostalgic about the past and felt that leadership in commerce and industry was being paid for at an incredibly high price in human happiness. They believed that the so-called progress had been gained only by giving up the traditional pattern of human relationships which had held people together for centuries. Despite the industrial and political greatness of England during the Victorian Period, the most perceptive Victorians felt that they were living in a world made alien by technological changes.

The Victorian society and its problems permeated Dickens's novels in varying degrees. Dickens, like many of his contemporaries, was sensitive to the social wrongs and abuses he observed in his society. All his novels, with the exception of *Pickwick Papers*, which is predominantly a gay-spirited novel, show Dickens's growing dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of the Victorian life. As a humanitarian, he denounced the new Poor Law of 1843, which provided for a public system of relief; the workhouse; the rigours of the penal code; the slowness of justice; the neglect of children; the carelessness and cruelty of a great number of private school masters; the bad state of sanitation in the poor quarters of cities; the excesses of the workers' unions and of the egoism of employers; the economic principle of 'laissez-faire' (the policy based upon the idea that governments should not interfere with business and finance); the social indifference which had been set up as a principle, etc., and he turned his attention to the relief of the poor and the helpless making a passionate plea for reform of such things as the law (*Bleak House*), the prison system (*Little Dorrit*), or the Poor Law (*Oliver Twist*). No doubt, at the root of his zeal for reform was the bitter memory of his childhood. The persistence of an indignant social criticism even in a late novel like *Our Mutual Friend* (1864), written in a time of relative prosperity when the challenging difficulties of the 1840s had been considerably surmounted, indicates that Dickens's mind was still under the effect of the appalling social conditions of the previous period.

It should be noted that the problems Dickens touches upon in the course of his novels do not concern the industrial crowds which had recently developed, but rather the middle class of settled and traditional values. Instead of bringing us into direct contact with the age of machinery he leads us back towards the past. As a conservative member of the middle class, he is nostalgic about the world of archaic customs and habits, slightly altered, but not invaded and upset by a modern life. For instance, in *Hard Times* (1864), which is concerned with industrial life in a new industrial

city, he makes us feel that he was happier with the London he loved and knew; in *Bleak House* (1852-53), in which the old and the new stand in contrast to each other, Dickens shows more affection for the old nobility. Railways mean just a sensational wonder for him. It is the jingling of stage-coach harness that stimulates his imagination.

Dickens and some other novelists such as W.M. Thackeray, C.Bronte, E.Bronte and A.Trollope represent the Early Victorian Novel with its defects and merits. No doubt, it was not a conscious school of the novel with consciously common style and subject matter; but the fact is that there are certain qualities common to this group of novels. One novel can be different from the other, yet the differences are much less than the likenesses. The defects can be outlined as follows :

These novels are generally constructed on the same lines: the stories consist of a large variety of character and incident clustering round the figure of a hero, bound together loosely or less loosely by an intrigue and ending with a happy marriage. The effect is usually spoilt by the irrelevant use of false sentiment, melodramatic scenes and wooden characters. The Early Victorian novelists have little or no conception of the story as an organic whole of which every incident and character is necessary for the main action. Their range of subject-matter is limited; e.g. sex and any detailed treatment of the animal side of human nature as well as any deep interest in the intellectual issues of human life such as art, religion, philosophy, politics, etc. have no place in these novels, and as a result, they fail to arouse those profounder emotions similar to those found in tragedies and epics.

However, the above-mentioned defects of the Early Victorian Novel are counterbalanced by extraordinary merits which are all the more dazzling to us as they are absent from most of the novels of our contemporaries. First of all, the early Victorian novelists are entertainers. They tell their stories superbly. They know how to make their stories immediately interesting for the reader. The plot may be improbable, but it is very exciting: the

reader turns the page impatiently to see what is going to happen next. It should be noted that the creation of suspense is an achievement on the part of these novelists since the reader's attention cannot be drawn to the deeper meanings of the novel unless his interest is thoroughly engaged.

Although from one aspect these novelists' range is limited, from another it is very large. Such novels as *Vanity Fair* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* do not only tell us the fortunes of a handful of individuals; they are also panoramas of whole societies filled with kings, statesmen, schoolboys, footmen, soldiers, clerks, thieves, etc. All this host of people from different types and classes jostle each other through the pages of the novels. The Victorian novelist knew how to hold and retain the reader's interest by offering him a rich variety of scenes, incidents, moods and characters besides other things such as realism, fantasy, thrills, theories, knockabout farce, effects of pure aesthetic beauty, etc.; one following the other.

However, it is not only their power to tell a story admirably that makes these novelists so remarkable. What distinguishes them from many other novelists is the quality of the creative imagination they possess in a supreme degree. The material of the novelist is the world of human beings and their relations to each other. He selects them in such a way as to create a new world. The result is the work of art which has an identity of its own, though founded upon the real world. Unlike the modern realist whose imagination never gets to work on the facts, these Victorian novelists did not just reproduce the real world, they used the real world to create their own worlds. Thus we have Dickensland, Thackerayland, Bronteland. The great Victorian novels provide us with the pictures, not the photographs of the human life in the Victorian Period. The supreme power of the creative imagination shows itself in the unforgettable settings and incidents of these novels. They stir the heart and stick in the memory not because they are especially true to life, nor because of the characters (the picture remains in our minds when the very names involved in it are long forgotten), but because in themselves they are dramatic and

picturesque. As a picture is an 'invention' of line and colour, so are these brilliant 'inventions' of scene and action.

The power of the creative imagination shows itself more in the humour these novelists possess. Indeed, the fact that they have humour shows that they are creative; for humour is not a record of facts, but a comment on them. To make a joke of something means to make something new of it, not just to leave it where it is. All the great Victorian novelists are humourists, and each has a style of his own.

The most important expression of the creative imagination also lies in the characters. The Victorian novelists are all able to make their characters live. However they do not always do it, and when they do the result is the creation of the characters who are alive with their words and gestures and tricks of speech which are their own and no one else's. These novelists have an extensive range of character, and their novels are crowded with breathing, crying, laughing, living people. As long as they live, the books that contain them will never die.

The Early Victorian Novel, as explained above, is a mixture of defects and merits for which various factors are responsible. For one thing the form was new; the broad conception of the novel did not change for about a century from Fielding and Smollett, the creators of the English novel, to Dickens and Thackeray. None of these novelists had his own theory of the novel. The Early Victorian Novel still belonged to the early stage of the English novel. Secondly, the novel was regarded at that time as light reading, as a frivolity, a relaxation, an entertainment. This meant it had to be written with a special regard to the taste of its audience. The Victorian novelists lived to please that great middle class which, between 1750 and 1850, gradually became the predominating force in England. In parallel to the progress of social legislation, transportation, commerce and scientific developments, the middle class grew in size, wealth and importance. However the increasing power of the middle class people made them less cultivated and more puritanical or conservative than their

predecessors. Their narrow-mindedness in moral matters made any detailed treatment of the physical aspect of love impossible. Their taste and thought being unrefined, the middle class people read a novel to entertain themselves; they were seriously interested in life, but not in art, and held strongly moral views about life. In such circumstances the Victorian novelist, in order to entertain his readers, had to learn to tell the story very well and to cover a wide range of subject and mood.

C. Dickens is the most famous of the Victorian novelists and also the most typical. If we are to see the distinguishing virtues and defects of the Early Victorian Novel at their clearest we should examine Dickens's art.

**Dickens's Creative Imagination :** What is most remarkable about Dickens's art is the existence to the highest degree possible of creative imagination, which is an essential quality of the artist. A good novel is a work of art born of the union of the novelist's experiences and his creative imagination. However, in every artist or novelist creative imagination has its own limitations, its range; in other words, in every writer there is a certain part of what he has seen, felt and heard that makes a deep impression upon his personality to fire his imagination. He may write of other places and subjects, but it is only when he is writing of these that his work is living -- these are his range.

The limit of this range is usually determined by the circumstances of an author's life, and especially of his youthful life. His imagination is stimulated by what he himself experienced at the age when he was most susceptible to impression. This is true for Dickens. He was the child of poor middle-class parents living mainly in London, and the range of his creative ability is, in the first place, limited to the world of his youth, which is full of such circumstances as the poverty, struggle for livelihood, his father's imprisonment for debt, the association with various kinds of people in the lower and middle classes. All the vital part of his work is about it, and all his living characters are members of it. Lower and

middle-class life in nineteenth century London inspires Dickens. But it does not inspire him to give a realistic picture of it. It is rather a jumping-off place for his fancy. It stimulates him to create, just as a model may stimulate a painter to paint a picture which, though beautiful, is not an exact copy of the model. Dickens's stories may have the most realistic settings; their central figures are butchers and bakers and candle-stick makers in contemporary London. But all this material from real life is modified by his fantastic imagination.

Dickens, indeed, had a fantastic imagination. He was fascinated by strange figures and objects such as dwarfs and giants, by houses made of boats and bride-cakes full of spiders, by strange names like "Pumblechook" and "Gradgrind" and "Chuzzlewit", and by the grotesque, which is a term with wide implications, but as far as Dickens's fiction is concerned it conveys the idea that the familiar world is frequently seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange or abnormal, and this strangeness or abnormality is not only comic but also fearful and sometimes disgusting in its effects. Therefore at the sight of such abnormality we experience both amusement and disgust, or laughter and horror at the same time. To make familiar things or persons grotesque Dickens emphasized their distinctive qualities to a fantastic degree. London and its butchers and bakers look transformed and distorted so that eyes gleam from black caverns, noses are made grotesquely enormous, and legs longer. For instance, Mr. Wackford Squeers, the formidable school master, is such a grotesque figure as described through the eyes of the little Nicholas :

*Mr. Squeer's appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental: being of a greenish grey, and in shape resembling the fan-light of a street door.*

*The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and puckered up, which gave him a very sinister appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous. His hair was very flat and shiny, save at the ends, where it was brushed stiffly up from a low protruding forehead, which assorted well with his harsh voice and coarse manner. He was about two or three and fifty, and a trifle below the middle size; he wore a white neckerchief with long ends, and a suit of scholastic black; but his coat sleeves being a great deal too long, and his trousers a great deal too short, he appeared ill at ease in his clothes, and as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable.*

*Nicholas Nickleby, Chapter IV.*

Some aspects of life could not be modified in this way, and Dickens could not write about them. His range is confined to those aspects of life which are suitable for fantastic treatment. Such a distortion of life is the result of exaggeration, which is the condition of his achievement. If he describes a character in a plain straightforward style, a virtuous girl like Agnes Wicklefield, for example, his imagination stops working, and the result is a dull and lifeless character. It is a fantastic world that stimulates Dickens's fantastic imagination. However, Dickens's world is not dreamlike. His London may be different from actual London, but it is just as real; its streets are made of firm brick and its inhabitants are flesh and blood. It does not matter that Dickens's world is not life-like, it is alive. In short, the lower and middle-class life in nineteenth-century London as seen from the angle of fantasy: this is Dickens's range.

**Plot Structure** : Dickens's novels, in regards to plot, are not remarkable. They are, for the most part, full of the popular

romantic material of the day. In most of them we begin with the hero in childhood and follow his adventures into a complicated plot involving such romantic material as kidnapping, murder, mob-justice and other incidents of criminal life.

Dickens's novels, especially his early novels, are marked by a loose structure. For instance, *The Pickwick Papers*, his first major novel, is actually a collection of short stories and anecdotes rather than a complete novel. Dickens began as a picturesque novelist. His favourite writers were Smollet and Le Sage, and he built his novels like theirs on the picturesque plan, which means a slight plot consisting of a series of episodes loosely connected by the hero. Nicholas Nickleby and Martin Chuzzlewit are young men seeking their fortunes; they take to the road precisely as Tom Jones or Roderick Random did; we are not interested in them; we are rather interested in the people they meet in their travels. So we read *Nicholas Nickleby* for the pleasure of meeting the Crummies, the Mantalins and Mrs. Nickleby; and we read *Martin Chuzzlewit* for the sake of Mr. Pecksniff, Mrs. Gamp and the American Scenes; and all these characters are not necessary for the action of these novels. Indeed, most of his novels have no organic unity. In general they are full of detachable episodes and characters who have no function in developing the plot. For instance, Mr Micawber, Mrs Gamp, Flora Finching, Mr. Crummies are among Dickens's most brilliant figures, but they are given hardly anything to do. They are almost irrelevant to the action of the books in which they appear. We remember the story for them; but the story could perfectly well go on without them. In reality, Dickens's novels have too much plot. But he cannot present his material in a coherent way. As a slave of the formal conventions imposed upon the novel by Fielding and Richardson he cannot write, for instance, a Christmas entertainment without introducing such elements as artificial intrigue, disguised lover, mistaken identity, long-lost heir etc. After pages of humorous conversation Dickens will remember that there should be a plot and will go on with a new intrigue. Very often he leaves many threads loose till the last chapter and then finds there

is not enough time to tie them up neatly. The main strands are knotted roughly together; the minor ones are left hanging loosely.

When considering the plot technique of Dickens's novels we should never forget the fact that his novels were all issued serially, generally in monthly parts. This alone may explain many of the structural deficiencies of his work. Every instalment had to end on a climax of suspense, and consist of a specified number of words and the fluctuations of public demand tended to dictate the course of the future action. Success was determined by sales. When circulation dropped, something was clearly wrong with the author-public relationship, and had to be corrected. He often invented an incident or a character to revive the reader's interest.

However, it should be noted that in his later novels (*Dombey and Son*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *Our Mutual Friend*) we observe a change from the old loose, episodic, picturesque form towards formal plot and the subordination of everything in the book to the working out of plot. Under the influence of Mrs Gaskell and later of Wilkie Collins, who was the greatest master of plot of the time, Dickens thought the whole thing out before he started to write.

**Setting :** Dickens's novels, in plot structure, are often imperfect, but the scenery is always admirable. Wherever they may take place the setting of his stories are usually extraordinarily vivid. They are most frequently London -- London of the 1820s and 30s--with its squares, its shops, its offices, its prisons, its slums, its peeling wharves, its crowded and noisy streets, its blind alleys all the more silent by contrast with the streets, its churches striped with soot, its suburbs with their nice cottages and tidy spaces of open country. They all move in an atmosphere of London fog and London smoke and pale dusty London sunshine.

Dickens is a keen observer and he presents a place in its most impressive features. While he is describing, the place passes through his imagination and gains a new colour. The slums of *Oliver Twist*, the law-courts of *Bleak House*, the West End of *Little*

Dorrit the waterside of *Our Mutual Friend* etc.; all these form part of the same world which is not London, but which London has stimulated Dickens's fancy to create.

Let's take, for example, the description of the fog with which the first chapter of *Bleak House* opens and which creates a suitable atmosphere for the gloomy story of this novel:

*Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.*

*Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongey fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time—as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.*

*The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old*

*obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.*

*Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth.*

*Bleak House, Chapter I.*

How effective this description is, how exact in its details and how poetic! Yes, it is not only an exact representation of reality, but also a poetic description reflecting the fantastic aspect of Dickens's genius. Poetry, is the expression of the imagination at its most intense activity; and such an intense imagination as that of Dickens cannot fail to produce it. Dickens's poetry is a fantastic type of poetry. It is partly comic, partly grim and partly beautiful; and it is this poetry which gives its force to Dickens's descriptions. So the fog in *Bleak House* is a sort of poetic fantasy on a London fog. We also remember very well the sinister waterside of *Our Mutual Friend* with its black shadows and murderous places hidden from the eye, and the desolate marsh which terrifies the boy Pip at the beginning of *Great Expectations*; each of these is a poetic fantasy on its subject. It may be noticed that all these passages deal with the gloomy, the sordid, and the sinister. Dickens's poetic imagination is not stimulated by the sweet and the sunshiny. When he writes about them he is as unsuccessful as when he writes about sweet and sunshiny characters; he becomes sentimental and a little vulgar. For example, the cottages where Oliver Twist finds rest, and Davit meets Dora are altogether too pleasant. The Christmas festivities of *The Cricket on the Hearth* and *Picwick*



*Papers* are simple Christmas cards complete with snow and robins and commonplace benevolence. Dickens's genius needed something unusual or extraordinary; tender and delicate things were not for his genius.

Dickens's power of description is closely related with his power of creating pathetic atmosphere. He had a natural gift for pathos. In a pathetic situation, he never lets it speak for itself. He overstates the emotion in order to draw an extra tear from the situation. For instance, the death of an innocent and virtuous child is pathetic, and it should be allowed to carry its emotion; but Little Nell's departure from the world in *Little Dorrit* is accompanied by church bells and falling snow at the window. The church-yard and the dark peaceful cottage are described in pages so vividly that we feel as if we were there.

Dickens is especially marked by his talent for the macabre. The macabre is a sub-form of the grotesque, and it means something horrifying tinged with the comic; in other words, it is something gruesome, yet funny. But in the macabre the gruesome element considerably outweighs the comic, and the strange comic tinge is used to increase sensitivity to gruesomeness. In Dickens's novels the macabre does not arise from character or situation; his figures of terror such as Fagin, Bill Sykes, Jonas Chuzzlewit and Mr. Tulkinghorn are involved in situations as melodramatic and conventional as they are themselves. But they are shrouded in an atmosphere part sordidly realistic, part imaginatively strange, and this atmosphere has such sinister force as to shock the strongest nerves. Fagin, for example, is ludicrously considered as a real character. He is actually a giant of a fairy-tale out to entrap little boys. But the horror inspired by his trial scene is very terrifying indeed. When reading this scene we see that Dickens, by the careful use of common details of everyday life, is able to convince us of the concrete reality of some horror outside common experience. The scenes in which Fagin appears are so real that we feel him to be real too. Another example for macabre can be given from *A Tale of Two Cities* :

*A large cask of wine had been dropped and broken, in the street. The accident had happened in getting it out of a cart; the cask had tumbled out with a run, the hoops had burst, and it lay on the stones just outside the door of the wine-shop, shattered like a walnut-shell.*

*All the people within reach had suspended their business, or their idleness, to run to the spot and drink the wine. The rough, irregular stones of the street, pointing every way, and designed, one might have thought, expressly to lame all living creatures that approached them, had dammed it into little pools; these were surrounded, each by its own jostling group or crowd, according to its size. Some men kneeled down, made scoops of their two hands joined, and sipped, or tried to help women, who bent over their shoulders, to sip, before the wine had all run out between their fingers. Others, men and women, dipped in the puddles with little mugs of mutilated earthenware, or even with handkerchiefs from women's heads, which were squeezed dry into infants' mouths; others made small mud embankments, to stem the wine as it ran; others, directed by lookers on up at high windows, darted here and there, to cut off little streams of wine that started away in new directions; others devoted themselves to the sodden and lee-dyed pieces of the cask, licking, and even champing the moister wine-rotted fragments with eager relish. There was no drainage to carry off the wine, and not only did it all get taken up, but so much mud got taken up along with it, that there might have been a scavenger in the street, if anybody acquainted*

with it could have believed in such a miraculous presence.

A shrill sound of laughter and of amused voices - voices of men, women, and children - resounded in the street while this wine game lasted. There was little roughness in the sport, and much playfulness. There was a special companionship in it, an observable inclination on the part of every one to join some other one, which led, especially among the luckier or lighter-hearted, to frolicsome embraces, drinking of healths, shaking of hands, and even joining of hands and dancing, a dozen together. When the wine was gone, and the places where it had been most abundant were raked into a gridiron-pattern by fingers, these demonstrations ceased, as suddenly as they had broken out. The man who had left his saw sticking in the firewood he was cutting, set it in motion again; the women who had left on a door-step the little pot of hot ashes, at which she had been trying to soften the pain in her own starved fingers and toes, or in those of her child, returned to it; men with bare arms, matted locks, and cadaverous faces, who had emerged into the winter light from cellars, moved away, to descend again; and a gloom gathered on the scene that appeared more natural to it than sunshine.

The wine was red wine, and had stained the ground of the narrow street in the suburb of Saint Antoine, in Paris, where it was spilled. It had stained many hands, too, and many faces, and many naked feet, and many wooden shoes. The hands of the man who sawed the wood, left red marks on the billets; and the forehead of the

woman who nursed her baby, was stained with the stain of the old rag she wound about her head again. Those who had been greedy with the staves of the cask, had acquired a tigerish smear about the mouth; and one tall joker so besmirched, his head more out of a long squalid bag of a night-cap than in it, scrawled upon a wall with his finger dipped in muddy wine-lees -- Blood.

The time was to come, when that wine too would be spilled on the street-stones, and when the stain of it would be red upon many there.

*A Tale of Two Cities, Chapter V.*

This is a vivid picture of the degradation and misery of the inhabitants of Saint Antoine. The incident of the spilt wine stresses both their poverty and the dangerous passions that injustice is breeding in them, for the colour of the spilt wine is the colour of spilt blood, and it is "Blood" that the fantastic "joker" scrawls on the wall. This scene, mixed with comic details, is sombre and terrifying rather than comic, and as such is powerful in maintaining the atmosphere of brooding destiny which hangs over the whole book.

**Characterization :** Dickens's affair was with characters, not with character. His aim was to portray the infinite diversity of mankind, not to analyse the individual. His novels are full of various kinds of people drawn, in most cases, from his own experiences of life. So they are not geniuses or kings or saints or great criminals. They are charwomen and schoolmasters and shopkeepers and tramps. Dickens had a remarkable power to perceive the spark of individuality that is found in everybody. He is concerned only with those physical qualities which divide one man from the others; in other words, he is concerned not with the internal, but with the external qualities of men. So he dwells upon such outward characteristics as meaningless gestures, nervous tricks,

obsessional talks on a single theme, repetitions of favourite words and phrases, the habits of speech; and he accentuates them for greater effect. Thus each character, whether major or minor, has a style of speech as distinct from anyone else's.

As Dickens is a man of little education, he often fails to grasp the psychological essentials of his characters. They are extraordinarily vivid, but they lack the organic principles that underlie personality. So they often act out of character. For instance, Mr. Montague Tigg, who is a harmless good fellow, turns without a word of warning into a sinister conspirator; Mr. Pickwick is brought into the Fleet Prison and is transformed from a comic figure into a saintly one. Sir Leicester Dedlock in *Bleak House* is shown to have virtues at the end of the novel that the reader was largely in ignorance of; and Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend* develops from a spoilt and selfish young fop into a deep and wholly admirable young man. Dickens understands them so little that he does not see why they should not. But in *Little Dorrit* and in the following novels Dickens develops a more realistic style. He tries to combine a more carefully organized plot with a more consistent outlook of his characters. He makes them develop more without doing violence to their nature. There is no longer a place for surprises like Mr. Micawber's suddenly becoming a respectable magistrate. Dorrit, Pip and Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, for instance, are drawn true to life. But we should note that truth to life is not what we normally expect from a Dickens novel.

It is often said that Dickens's characters are caricatures, either caricatures of comedy or monstrous puppets of melodrama. He presents his characters in the way children see grown-ups. Actually Dickens does best when he writes from a child's point of view. Children are instinctive, they have strong imaginations, vivid sensations; they see life as black and white, and bigger than reality; their enemies seem demons, their friends angels, their joys and sorrows absolute and eternal. They do not look at life with the eye of the intellect or of the instructed observer. As children are inexperienced in life they cannot accept people conventionally.

According to them people are odd, arbitrary and impossible to understand; sometimes absurdly comic, sometimes terrifying, sometimes both at once. They are scarcely ordinary. According to the child everyone encountered is unique. In fact they see life very like Dickens. And Dickens has an extraordinary understanding of them. He fails over them when he is describing them from the outside, or when he is exploiting their pathos and charm; but he is very successful when he is surveying the world from their point of view. *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* are among the greatest pictures of childhood in English literature. Especially the first one hundred and sixty pages of *David Copperfield* are the best that Dickens ever wrote. Here the world is revealed through the eyes of a child. So it is more exaggerated than that of grown-up people. For instance, Mr. and Mrs. Murdstone are ogres, and to an adult they would have seemed less fearful. But they are not seen by an adult; they are seen by a terrified child and to a terrified child they would have seemed ogres.

When Dickens attempts to draw character not as the child sees it, but as the adult does, as neither comic nor melodramatic; in other words, when he tries to present the "normal" view of human beings he fails badly. Rose Maylie, Mr. Brownlow, Agnes Wicklefield and her father, Little Em'ly, all of the good women etc. fall into this category of his characters. He fails again when he brings in all sorts of types outside his range; e.g. aristocrats like Sir Mulberry Hawk and Sir Leicester Dedlock, French revolutionaries like Madame Defarge. On the other hand, the conventions of his time taught him that some types, like the hero and heroine, for instance, were essential to a novel. One, if not both, of these waxwork, dull and faultless dummies deforms his novels. All of these characters scarcely come to life at all. It is only when writing more or less in his own person as David or as Pip that he succeeds in presenting character, but then he is writing as an adult remembering his childhood.

Indeed there is nothing surprising in Dickens's keeping this childlike vision, because he was exposed to the full horrors of life in

nineteenth-century London in the cruelest possible way at the most impressionable period of his life. At the age of twelve Dickens was sent out to work at a blacking factory near Charing Cross and six months later he was taken away because his father had quarrelled with the manager. But his mother did her best to end the quarrel so that Charles could return to his job. That was the wound that did not heal. He never forgot, and he never forgave, and he put his mother in *Nicholas Nickleby* as the exquisitely ridiculous Mrs. Nickleby. It seems certain that the abandonment by his family, the feeling that he was no longer loved or wanted set up in him a neurotic condition from which he was never able to free himself.

As indicated before, the blacking factory episode may explain why we so often find at the centre of his novels the figure of the lost, persecuted or helpless child : Oliver Twist, Little Nell, David Copperfield, Paul Dombey, Pip, and their near relations Smike and Jo in *Bleak House*. It also explains, too, why their rescue, when there is rescue, so often has the appearance of a fairy story ending. It may be taken as the result of the author's wishful thinking. In the same way, the deaths of Little Nell, Paul Dombey and Jo can be regarded as dramatizations of the author's self-pity. It may also explain the various moods of his novels: sometimes he accepts things with good humour; sometimes a mood of nightmare combining melodrama and savage comedy predominates everything; and this heavy atmosphere is occasionally relieved by a feeling of pure joy in the absurd and the comic for their own sakes.

Dickens mostly created one-dimensional characters, linking them to one dominant feature and providing only superficial details (often physical) about them. His skill in portraying these characters is unsurpassed. A huge gallery of minor characters in his novels provides a major source of delight. Dickens's characterization is marked by a great energy and vitality, a keen eye for effective detail, and a rich sense of the comic and the hateful elements in human nature. His minor characters may sometimes lack depth, but they are vivid. Dickens often invents a character to illustrate one

particular theme or human weakness, and his novels are impressive for the huge range and scope of characters they contain.

**Humour** : Dickens's novels are full of humour. He is perhaps the greatest comic novelist among the English novelists. His humour is of two kinds: a) satiric humour, b) pure humour. Both are highly characteristic. His satire has reference to reality: The absurdity of Mrs. Lee Hunter, of the Circumlocution Office as a type of all government offices, of the cultured society who entertained Martin Chuzzlewit on his visit to America, of Bumble and Buzfuz and Chadband is wildly exaggerated. This exaggeration is effective, too. Dickens always hits the weak point in order to make it as ridiculous as possible. The caricaturist drawing a man with a big nose, makes it as big as his foot; that is the convention of his art, and it is the convention of Dickens's art. These qualities of Dickens's satiric art can be found in the following passage in which the Veneering family rising with great effort in the social scale is humorously described :

*Mr. and Mrs. Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new, they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great grandfather, he would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon, without a scratch upon him, French-polished to the crown of his head.*

*For, in the Veneering establishment, from the hall chairs with the new coat of arms, to the grand pianoforte with the new action, and upstairs again to the new fire-escape, all things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veerings-the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky.*

*Our Mutual Friend, Chapter II.*

Satire is only one half of Dickens's humour, but not the most characteristic half. After all, there have been other satirists. Dickens's unique position as a humourist lies in his mastery of pure humour. His novels are full of jokes and humorous talks that do not explain anything or tell us anything, but are just funny in themselves. His comic characters such as Mrs. Nickleby, Mrs. Gamp, Mr. Crummles, Mr. Mantalini and Mr. Micawber are among the memorable representatives of pure humour in the English novel.

It should be noted that Dickens's use of satiric humour in the form of macabre and grotesque elements in his novels is balanced by pure humour; in other words, by a full awareness of the brighter side of life, and this is something that can be linked to the Victorian tendency to mingle the sentimental with the grotesque, the pure with the horrific. The following passage in which Pip is taught table manners by Herbert Pocket can be given as example for pure humour:

*We had made some progress in the dinner, when I reminded Herbert of his promise to tell me about Miss Havisham.*

*"True," he replied. "I'll redeem it at once. Let me introduce the topic, Handel, by mentioning that in London it is not the custom to put the*

*knife in the mouth-for fear of accidents and that while the fork is reserved for that use, it is not put further in than necessary. It is scarcely worth mentioning, only it's as well to do as other people do. Also, the spoon is not generally used overhand, but under. This has two advantages. You get at your mouth better (which after all is the object), and you save a good deal of the attitude of opening oysters, on the part of the right elbow.*

*He offered these friendly suggestions in such a lively way, that we both laughed and I scarcely blushed.*

*Great Expectations, Chapter XXII.*

**Dickens's Moral Outlook and Social Criticism :**  
Dickens's novels are remarkable for the view of life they contain. He has his own moral outlook, his own gospel, which comes from conviction born in experience, not in abstract thought. So its appeal is to the heart rather than to the intellect. It is a very simple gospel : "People should be nicer to each other." But it has its own force. This gospel is based upon a simple belief in the great value of man's natural affections for home, and mother and wife and children, his impulsive gestures of charity, his instinctive wish to love and laugh and give and share. If anything encouraged these primary impulses he thought it good, and if anything discouraged them he thought it bad. There is a continual conflict of good and evil in Dickens's novels. It is the basis of their philosophy, if they have one, and also of their aesthetics-the beauty of good and the ugliness of evil. Charity and intelligence were weapons to be used since half the evil, according to Dickens, is the result of mere stupidity and lack of feeling.

In all Dickens's novels the focus is on his protest against social injustice. The indifference of society towards the suffering of

its members, the venality, brutishness or inefficiency of its public servants, its substitution of the virtues of the head for those of the heart, the hopeless inadequacy of its political and philanthropic institutions: these are the recurring motifs of Dickens's novels from the scenes in the Fleet Prison in *Pickwick* to the symbolic dust heap in *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens tended to suspect all institutions, churches, charitable societies, government offices, laws, reformatories because he felt that they were attempting to do by mechanical ways the good which could come only from the spontaneous actions of the individual. He hated class distinctions as they checked the natural flow of benevolence which should flow from one man to another. He was not in favour of thrift, stern justice and the public spirit when they were severe and self-regarding and when they sacrificed the individual for a cause. By the way, Dickens's hatred of social institutions and class distinctions should not be understood in the sense that he was a radical who wanted to break the society down into pieces and rebuilt it according to his own principles. He was not an intellectual and never really questioned the basic class structure of the English society as Bernard Shaw and some other dramatists of the realistic school were to do in the late nineteenth century.

This is Dickens's philosophy, and it underlies everything he wrote. In each we see natural human kindness set against the cruelty of an impersonal institution, an inhuman theory or simply individual selfishness. In each there is an attack upon some legal or social evil. We can never forget his attacks upon the workhouse, or the injustices of the Poor Law in *Oliver Twist*, upon the imprisonment for debt in *Little Dorrit*, upon the corrupt legal system in *Bleak House*, upon the terrible state of things existing in the private schools of Yorkshire in *Nicholas Nickleby*, upon the caste system of the ancient regime in *A Tale of Two Cities*. He also satirized the selfish devotion to pleasure of Harold Skimpole, the avarice of Ralph Nickleby and Scrooge, the hypocrisy of Mr. Pecksniff etc.

Dickens was not a pioneer in these attacks. He was only giving wider publicity to a number of social facts and social abuses that he experienced with his public. He showed his readers what they themselves thought and felt of the great social problems which confronted them. So Dickens, more than any of his contemporaries, was the expression of the conscience of his age.

In regard to the moral outlook and social criticism of his novels, Dickens's characters can be mainly classified into three groups:

a) Those on the side of the right: the humble, generous people controlled by the warm feelings of benevolence such as Gregory, Peggoty, Tom Pinch, Mr. Boffin, the brothers Cheeryble and the rest of them.

b) Those on the side of the wrong: the hypocrites, misers, selfish people like the Murdstones, Uriah Heep, Mr. Veneering, Fagin, Mr. Chadband and Mr. Gradgrind.

c) In between there is a third type of character which Dickens developed and which, in his time, made him immensely popular. This type represented the victim of society - usually a child. From *Oliver Twist* on children were expected as necessary characters in his novels. Little Nell, Florence Dombey, David Copperfield stand out in innocence and goodness in contrast to the evil characters whose persecution they suffer for some time. And these children represent clearly the complaint of the individual against society. For with Dickens the private cruelty of his evil characters is almost always connected with social wrong such as Mr. Bumble's savage blow at Oliver Twist asking for more food, Mr. Squeer's wicked exploitation of his pupils in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

In fact those evil characters are more than individual characters. They are symbolic figures. In Dickens's novels the accusation falls heavily on individuals who administer the attacked institution rather than on the institution as such. He is concerned not with actual institutions, but symbolic ones. Mr. Bumble, for instance, who is presented to us as a grotesque puppet from the point of view of the victim, is not only a workhouse master; he also

represents any dull and corrupt bureaucratic director in any system of society to whom power is given.

In his early novels Dickens believed in the impulsive power of benevolence and self-sacrifice. He relied upon the power of these natural impulses to fight against various evils of society. Pickwick is such a kind and benevolent man. But as Dickens grew older his mood became darker either because the evils grew in number, or because his faith in the humanity of ordinary people became weaker. The fierce indignation that broke out in the early novels began to turn into melancholy. The gloomy atmosphere of his later novels is occasionally relieved by acts of individual charity and self sacrifice. Thus, in these novels the criticism of the age becomes increasingly more radical, the savage comedy more savage. The single object of the later novels is money, which is itself a symbol, and the things that go with money, power, position, and so on. In *Dombey and Son* the symbol of money power is Mr. Dombey himself to whose pride of position as the British merchant everything must be sacrificed: affections, wife, and children. The money power drags classes higher or lower than their original levels. *Bleak House* represents the ambition for money through inheritance. *Great Expectations* is another variant on the theme of money or money as the agent of isolation (Pip is cut off from those most loyal to him by the expectations of money). It will be noticed that in all these novels Dickens is concerned with those cases where aspirations toward money and a higher social position could affect moral behaviour.

To sum up, Dickens's deep interest in the moral and social problems of his time mostly generated by the Industrial Revolution can be traced back to his own observations and bitter experiences of life, and particularly to his sensitive heart which had a great affection and sympathy for the poor and the helpless suffering under the oppression of institutions; or at the hand of cruel, selfish and deceitful individuals in the society. Dickens had the genius to reveal them through the presentation of character in action. His characters may not be convincing; and we may not find a deep

psychological character analysis in his novels. However we cannot deny that Dickens, like Chaucer and Shakespeare, enjoyed dealing with the varieties of human nature. His novels are very crowded, but no two of his characters are the same. He treated them in such a way that they have an individuality of their own. Dickens may not have constructed his story well, but he knew how to hold the reader's attention from the first sentence to the last one. Dickens always entertained his readers. He was, first of all, a great entertainer. He made them laugh, made them cry, made them wait. Yet in so doing he exposed their pretences, conventions and hypocrisies with almost frightening violence because he had, besides a rich sense of pure humour, an extraordinary gift for irony and caricature. These are the characteristics he shares with the other early Victorian novelists. Like theirs, his novels can be defined as sentimental melodrama, but he went far beyond its limitations through the unique power and richness of his genius.

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## A SHORT STUDY ON THE SONGS AND SONNETS OF JOHN DONNE

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John Donne (1572-1631), who is one of the most remarkable figures of English poetry, was born and brought up a Roman Catholic. In his youthful years he appears to have been rather a worldly man leading a life of gaiety, adventure and sophistication while living at the same time in a religious world. Thus he continued to be a man of double life for about forty years. But his training as a Catholic in an age of religious polemic with the scholastic element that was still the part of the university education of his day induced him to end up his life as a man of the church : In 1615, after years of persuasion and postponement, he took holy orders at the age of forty-three, and rose rapidly to be Dean of St. Paul's in 1621 and the most famous preacher of his time. As a result of his concern for religious matters, he wrote a number of prose writings of controversy and meditation, Divine Poems, Holy Sonnets, Sermons and other religious writings along with love poems, miscellaneous and occasional poems, verse letters, satire etc.; all of these works corresponding roughly, but not exactly, to the early, middle and late periods of his career. It should be noted that in the late period following his ordination in 1615, Donne abandoned secular prose and poetry; he devoted himself completely to religious literature producing most of his religious writings including the famous Sermons in this period. It is observed that in his works he tried to combine two different worlds: the physical and the aspiritual. Thus he enriched them with elements from both worlds, and this is also true for his love poetry by which

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