

AN ANALYTICAL SURVEY OF THE CRITICAL APPROACHES
TO DICKENS' FICTION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Arthur David Kerby Eaton
June 1965

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With the possible exception of Shakespeare, no English literary figure has elicited the critical response that Dickens has. The tide began in 1836 and has continued in a virtually uninterrupted stream ever since. Even during those periods when highbrow critics looked askance at his novels and consequently wrote few critiques upon them, his fantastically loyal followers took up the slack with the result that there was hardly any appreciable diminution in the literature written about him. The purpose of my thesis is to examine a representative selection of this mass of material and to show that running through it there are discernible patterns.

The earliest critical responses to Dickens' fiction were coloured by the fact that in the early eighteen-hundreds the novel had not yet been accepted as an art form. Furthermore, the Victorians' concern with the various shades of propriety tended to make the early criticism very concerned with morals. Beginning in 1850 Dickens began to show in his novels a most overt hostility to both Church and State. This, combined with the growth of realistic theories of fiction that were inimical to his own imaginative style of writing, tended to lower his stature amongst critics.

Criticism of the moral content of Dickens' novels

only began to disappear in the 1880's; the probable reason for its disappearance was that the novels of Moore and Hardy being published at that time were considered to be much worse than Dickens', and hence they attracted the displeasure that had hitherto been directed at him. Also accounting for the dearth of moral criticism was the Aesthetic Movement. With their insistence on the right of the novelist to depict whatsoever he wished in his work, the Aesthetes did much to banish the moral approach to Dickens' fiction.

One important feature of the Dickensian criticism written between 1880 and 1940 was the scholars' continued concern with realism in fiction. With few exceptions, most critics of the period preferred the down-to-earth characters of Thackeray to Dickens' more imaginative creations. Yet at the same time these readers were also aware that somehow or other Dickens' characters were just as "real" as were Thackeray's. All of the critics of this period tried to discover why his work had the undeniable power that it did. Prior to 1940, the only aspect of his work that was unanimously and unequivocally praised was his humour. This was Dickens' passport to fame in these years.

Starting with John Forster, all biographers up to

1934 depicted only one facet of the novelist in their studies, the cheery, good natured extrovert who was primarily noted for his humanitarian concerns. The first scholar to depart from this lionizing approach was Thomas Wright, whose work appeared in 1934. The general tendency of all biographies subsequent to Wright's has been to correct the notoriously one-sided portrait painted by the earlier scholars. Modern biographies such as that by Edgar Johnson stress both aspects of the novelist's character and life; his triumph and his tragedy.

The disclosure about Ellen Ternan is probably the most important fact about Dickens that has come to light in the ninety-five years since his death. His own mania for privacy, coupled with the family's desire to see his wishes carried out, prevented publication of the details about Ellen until 1934. Readers who were not inclined to accept the proof that Wright offered to link Dickens and Ellen changed their minds when in 1939 appeared the posthumous memoirs of Dickens' second daughter, Kate Perugini. These corroborated Wright's earlier statements and with few exceptions most critics regard the Ellen Ternan affair as a closed book.

During his lifetime and up to approximately 1940,

Dickens' post-Copperfield novels were largely treated as works of his decadence. Because critics continued to think of him primarily as a humorist (a conception that gained credence by the similar picture of him in the pre-1934 biographies) and as a good natured social reformer, they were unable to understand the bitterness, the satire and the symbolic structure of his later novels. In 1940 Edmund Wilson, in what is probably the most important essay on Dickens in the present century, showed that Dickens had good reason to display the bitterness against society that he did in his post-Copperfield novels. He felt that society was responsible for his stunted childhood. Wilson further showed that Dickens was a first-rate artist and that many of his works could be rated among the best in the English language.

With his emphasis on Dickens' subjective development, Wilson's criticism was predominantly Freudian, and following his lead, scholars have written a considerable body of criticism in this vein. Much modern emphasis, however, has also been placed on a Jungian interpretation of Dickens' works. These critics insist that the most evocative passages in his novels and the general atmosphere that permeates his latter novels cannot be accounted for by Dickens' personal experiences. Instead, said these

critics, the experience that gave rise to his better works was a collective one. The vision that he had was really a glimpse into what Jung had called the collective unconscious of man's mind. We respond to Dickens' works because we directly participate in the same vision that he saw.

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CHAPTER I

A survey of the critical approaches to Dickens' fiction during the period ca. 1836-ca. 1880 may be divided into two more or less well defined periods. The first of these covers the interval between the publication of Dickens' first novel, The Pickwick Papers (1836), and the publication of the last of his picaresque novels, David Copperfield (1850). The second period begins with the first of what are now commonly called Dickens' "dark" novels, Bleak House (1852), and extends beyond the author's lifetime to the 1880's.

A survey of the first of these two intervals indicates that the Dickens' criticism written between 1836 and 1850 was characterized by a conspicuous absence of any theories of fiction. Instead, the criticism emphasized the "moral" aspects of the author's fiction, and it was only during the second period (1850-ca. 1880) that critics began to busy themselves with the actual form of the novel and technique of novel-writing. This second period also witnessed an ever increasing concern with politico-social questions in Dickens' later novels. The solutions propounded by the author, and indeed the very questioning of the established laws and institutions of society did not find a wholly sympathetic audience among his critics.

For this reason, the criticism written after the publication of David Copperfield (1850) was decidedly more caustic and virulent than was the criticism that preceded that novel.

This, in brief, was the thesis set forth by George H. Ford in his book Dickens and His Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism Since 1836.¹ Because of the relative inaccessibility of primary source material even remotely equivalent to that available to Dr. Ford, I have used his argument as the basis for this first chapter of my own thesis. Nevertheless, in order to observe some semblance of independence, I have endeavoured wherever possible to use examples drawn from the limited source material at my disposal. The reader can easily determine by glancing at the format of the footnotes what material has been drawn from my own researches, and what has been taken from Dr. Ford's work.

The conspicuous absence of any theories of fiction during the first phase of Dickens' literary career can partially be explained by the general nonchalance with which early Victorian critics tended to treat fiction.

¹George H. Ford, Dickens and His Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism Since 1836 (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1965). Referred to afterwards as Ford.

Not recognizing the parity of the novel with such time-hallowed genres as poetry and the drama, they expended no effort in formulating laws governing the art of fiction. A critique such as Hugh Blair's Rhetoric abruptly dismissed the novel in a scant three pages. He considered it as a form of writing more conducive "to dissipation and idleness, than to any good purpose." Blair even apologized for mentioning such an "insignificant class of writings" in a serious discussion.² The opinion of De Quincey in 1848 was also similar to that expressed by many educated readers. He spoke disparagingly of the "story teller . . . a function of literature neither very noble in itself, nor, secondly, tending to permanence." His opinion was that:

. . . all novels . . . have faded with the generation that produced them. . . . How coarse are the ideals of Fielding! - his odious Squire Westerns, his odious Tom Jones.³

John Stuart Mill, writing in 1833, was just as disdainful about fiction as was De Quincey. According to Mill one would never confuse the respective intelligences of

²Hugh Blair, Rhetoric, (1833), pp. 417-420, cited by Ford, p. 24.

³De Quincey, "Oliver Goldsmith," North British Review, IX (1848), 193-194, cited by Ford, p. 24.

readers of poetry and novels. He claimed that

the minds and hearts of greatest depth and elevation are commonly those which take greatest delight in poetry; the shallowest and emptiest, on the contrary, are, at all events, not those least addicted to novel-reading.⁴

With these opinions in mind, one can better understand the rather frivolous tone with which John Wilson Croker introduced a discussion of Dickens' American Notes. "Mr. Dickens is, as everybody knows, the author of some popular stories, published originally in periodical parts."⁵ The critic Francis Jeffrey, writing in 1846 and reminiscing on his youth, said:

It may be worth while to inform the present generation that, in my youth, writings of this sort [novels] were rated very low with us . . . and generally deemed altogether unworthy of any grave critical notice . . .⁶

The immediate result, then, of this casual attitude towards fiction was apparent in the "critical anarchy" of the reviewers of the thirties and the forties. This was especially true with regard to the aesthetic aspects

⁴John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties," English Critical Essays: Nineteenth Century (in The World's Classics Series, ed. Edmund D. Jones, London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 401.

⁵J. W. Croker, Quarterly Review, LXXI (1843), 504, cited by Ford, pp. 24-25.

⁶Francis Jeffrey, Contributions to the Edinburgh Review, (1846) III, p. 2., cited by Ford, p. 27.

of the novel. Reviewers of those decades spoke of "critical laws" for plot and character, but they were feeling their way with uncertainty.⁷ The predominant mood of the early Victorian novel critics was that expressed by the Edinburgh Review in 1837. It was too much to hope for good plotting, said that magazine, "If the incidents be separately good, and tend to develop character, it seems all that we are . . . entitled to expect."⁸

Although there might have been uncertainty about the aesthetic aspects of fiction, the early Victorian reviewers were unanimous about the moral content of the novel. Very definite laws and conventions were established, all of them emphasizing the necessity for "purity in the genre."⁹ The net result was that the novel came to be defined, not in terms of technical considerations, but in terms of moral considerations. To ascertain if any particular novel was suitable, one merely had to ask the question--could it be read aloud to all members of the family? A very represent-

⁷"D'Israeli's Novels," Edinburgh Review, LXVI (1837), 62, cited by Ford, p. 28.

⁸"Recent English Romances," Edinburgh Review, LXV (April, 1837), 186, cited by Ford, p. 28.

⁹This convention was peculiar not only to the period now under discussion (1836-1850), but extended through until at least the end of the century.

ative definition of good fiction was that which appeared in the Athenaeum in 1850:

The novel is a work of polite literature, to be read aloud in the family circle while the members are pursuing some graceful or fanciful work after the severer duties and studies of the day are closed.¹⁰

With such a definition in mind, one can at least partially account for the sentiments expressed in the following excerpt from an essay in Blackwoods in 1867:

English novels have for a long time--from the days of Sir Walter Scott at least--held a very high reputation in the world, not so much perhaps for what critics would call the highest development of art, as for a certain sanity, wholesomeness, and cleanliness unknown to other literature of the same class The novel . . . has been kept . . . pure from all noxious topics Men did not snatch the guilty volume out of sight when any innocent creature drew nigh, or mature women lock up the book with which they condescended to amuse themselves, as they do in France. Our novels were family reading.¹¹

The insistence of the Victorian critics that the novel be kept free from sexual allusions is too well known to be examined here, but what is perhaps not as well known

¹⁰ Athenaeum, VII (September, 1850), cited by J. D. Jump, "Weekly Reviewing in the Eighteen-fifties," Review of English Studies, XXIV (January, 1948), 51.

¹¹ Blackwoods's Edinburgh Magazine, CII (1867), 257-258, cited by Ford, p. 29.

is that the same reviewers also insisted that the characters of the novels be "elevating." In other words, characters should never be drawn from the lower echelons of society. In numerous reviews, one finds that Dickens was taken to task for the proliferation of low personages in his fiction. For example, despite the almost unbelievably triumphant reception of Pickwick, many critics said disdainfully of that novel: "His [Dickens'] class of subjects are such as to expose him at the outset to the fatal objections of vulgarity."¹² The Examiner, of September 4th, 1836, similarly noted that:

Where this author places himself under the imputation of coarseness, it is only by that amount of sympathy with some portion of his subject, without which he could not enter into, or describe, as he does so thoroughly, the ludicrous eccentricities of life.¹³

In a rather avant garde manner, quite unlike most of the criticism of the day, the reviewer concluded: "Humour cannot always be refined."¹⁴

Nicholas Nickleby (1838-39), a novel that (except for Arthur Gride and Peg Sliderskew) the modern reader

¹² J. W. Croker, "Pickwick Papers," Quarterly Review, LIX (July, 1837), 484.

¹³ Examiner, (September 4, 1836), cited by J. W. T. Ley, "Some Early Reviews of Pickwick," The Dickensian, XXXII (1936), p. 282.

¹⁴ Ibid.

would consider relatively free from "coarse" characters, also received its share of criticism. Living Age, in 1845, complained:

There is sometimes, however, a little prolixity, and the mere dull vulgarity of the Kenwigs family, Miss Petowker, and Mr. Lillyvick, . . . are blemishes on the work.¹⁵

Needless to say, Sairey Gamp (Martin Chuzzlewit, 1843-45), was also greeted with sniffs of disdain from highbrow readers.

Revolting as Jonas is, he is not so offensive and intolerable a personage as Sarah Gamp, a midwife . . . She seems such a favourite of the author that we meet her at every turn, even in the preface, till we are almost provoked to laugh in spite of our disgust.¹⁶

Sometimes the reluctance of the reviewer to wholeheartedly accept Dickens' "low life" led to silly extremes. Two such examples will suffice to show what is meant. In Living Age in 1848, a reviewer, speaking of the marriage of Mr. Toots and Susan Nipper (the reader will recall that blood flowing in Mr. Toots' veins was an aristocratic blue) pontificated that "his Toots' union with 'Miss Susan Nipper,' despite her comparatively low origin, *italics* not in the original⁷, is highly satisfactory."¹⁷ The next

¹⁵"Charles Dickens," Living Age, V (June, 1845), 602.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷"Humorists--Dickens and Thackeray," Living Age, XXI (May, 1849), 231.

example comes from a review of Oliver Twist that appeared in the Dublin University Magazine in 1838. In recapitulating a portion of the novel, the critic noted how Mrs. Maylie accepted into her house "the housebreakers' boy, the confessed comrade of thieves and pickpockets" and even induced the servants to call him "Master Oliver." The critic then breaks into the discussion and demands: "Is not this rather an overstepping of the legitimate licence of novel-writers, Mr. Dickens?"¹⁸

When one reads the essays and reviews written by those critics who unreservedly accepted those of Dickens' characters that were drawn from the lower socio-economic class, one gets the impression that the acceptance of the characters was, in many cases, conditioned by the fact that the characters were new; that they were replacing a character-type that the reviewers found tedious.¹⁹ The North American Review for 1849 noted:

The immediate and almost unprecedented popularity he [Dickens] attained was owing not more to his own genius than to the general contempt for the school he supplanted. After ten years of

¹⁸"Oliver Twist," Dublin University Magazine, XII (December, 1838), 708.

¹⁹I.e., the aristocratic characters depicted in the "Silver Fork" or "Society" novels.

conventional frippery and foppery, it was a relief to have once more a view of the earth and firmament. . . . Here was a man, at last, with none of the daintiness of genteel society in his manner, belonging to no clique or sect, with sympathies embracing²⁰ widely varying conditions of humanity . . .

On the other side of the Atlantic, the British Quarterly Review for 1862 said substantially the same thing. This review claimed that Dickens appeared on the literary scene

. . . just at the time when even professed novel readers were beginning to weary of the silly, fashionable novels, when Mayfair had done duty so long that even Saffron Hill *[italics not in the original]* was welcomed as a change, and even Fagin, with his rusty toasting-fork and frying-pan, was considered as a relief.²¹

Obviously, not all critics shared the opinion that the social status of the Gamps and Petowkers or even the Fagins was a blemish on Dickens' work. In many instances those characters were accepted unreservedly. Nevertheless, up to and past the novelist's death there was a very vocal section of his critics who echoed the

²⁰"Novels and Novelists; Charles Dickens," North American Review, LXIX (October, 1849), 392.

²¹"Works of Dickens," British Quarterly Review, XXXV (January, 1862), 137. See also "Modern Novelists: Charles Dickens," The Westminster Review, LXXXI (October, 1864), 195.