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THE DRAMATIC POWER OF DICKENS.

W. E. Edmonds
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"The works of Milton cannot be comprehended or enjoyed unless the mind of the reader co-operate with that of the writer." These words of Macaulay on the author of "Paradise Lost," apply quite as aptly to the creator of "David Copperfield." What then was the bent of Dicken's mind when he began to write those works of fiction which are the glory of the Victorian Age? An answer to this question is found in the Biography, where we learn that the ambitious young attorney's clerk spent most of his spare evenings at the theatre. At that time indeed Dickens had decided upon a theatrical career, and his daily drudgery in the office, was endured only in the hope of release so soon as he found his chance upon the stage. As an amateur he acted frequently, and toward the end of his life, his success as a public entertainer, owed much to his undoubted gifts in this direction.

It was in those early years when high ambition and the vague consciousness of real ability made him restless, that he applied to the manager of the Covent Garden Theatre for an opportunity of showing what it was in him to do. The accident of illness interfered with the appointment granted him, and owing to some start in journalism the application was not renewed. It is abundantly clear that Dickens came very near entering the actor's profession, and so close is his connection with the theatrical world, that ^{to} he cannot regard this incident as a mere detail in the story of his youth.

It revealed a natural inclination of mind which was destined, however, to find an outlet into a still broader channel.

And now having glanced at the man, let us look more closely at his work. In 1836 Dickens published his first book "Sketches by Boz." In these "Sketches," in the best sense of the word, we catch a glimpse of the young writer's future glory.

They contain, as one critic has said, the "germ" of all Dickens. "Here we have the Beadle and all connected with him, London streets, theatres, shows, pawn-shops, Doctors Commons, Christmas, Newgate, coaching, the

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River. Hardly a topic associated with Dickens in his maturity is missing from these earliest attempts."

In the next year "Pickwick" was published, and in that memorable year of the girl Queen's accession, Dickens may be said to have found his public.

Naturally, in such a series of etchings as these two books presented one would not expect to discover much evidence of dramatic power. Yet even in them there is one element of the drama which must by no means be overlooked. The term Manners applies to that medium or atmosphere which colours both action and characters. In some dramas and in certain species of literature, time and place are so purely imaginary and so much a matter of indifference, that the adoption of a purely conventional standard of manners is quite allowable and may even be desirable. Where, on the other hand, as more especially in that kind of comedy which directs its shafts against the ridiculous vices of a particular age or country, the likeness of the manners represented to what is more or less known, must possess the ^{highest} ~~very~~ significance.

Of this latter class was the work of Dickens. The early Victorian Age saw the rise to power of the Upper and Lower middle classes, and it is of the latter especially that the novelist principally treats. Of a lower rank of society he was perhaps as well acquainted, but it figures much less prominently in his books.

It was an age, harsh, ugly and coarse. Cruelty, brutality, drunkenness and grossness ran riot, and every-where the gallows and the debtors' prison cast their dark shadows over the land. "It was an age," says one writer, "in which the English character seemed bent on exhibiting all its grossest and meanest and most stupid characteristics. Sheer ugliness of every day life reached a limit not easily surpassed; thick headed national prejudice, in consequence of great wars and British victories, had marvellously developed; aristocracy was losing its better influence, and power passing to a well-fed multitude, remarkable for a dogged practicality which, as often as not, meant ferocious egotism. With all this, a prevalence of such ignoble vices as religious hypocrisy and servile snobbishness."

And to this life so cruel and unlovely, Dickens holds up the mirror. He leads us into the dingy courts and wretched alleys of London, or down its crowded streets with the hum of traffic, or the wail of misery in our ears; while among barges and ships, and below gloomy arches the dark river glides on its solemn stillness laden with its burden of sin and woe.

Occasionally however, he breaks away from London fog and mystery, into that vague entity of peaceful hamlets, sunlit meadows and bright sky, which the citizen but dimly knows as the country. He gives us exquisite pictures of the lone church yard with its sad memories, the forge-lit sky looking down on roaring furnace and grimy workers, and the wild sea-beach with its simple pathos of toil and danger. But it is only to return to that stage whereon the deepest tragedy and the broadest comedy are hourly played.

I have said that the element of "Manners" finds a place in the first two books. In the next, "Oliver Twist," there is something more. Here we find some attempt at "Construction," and we touch at once upon Dicken's principal weakness. The novelist's love for the stage proved, in many cases, an ill and not a good, for many a fine passage is marred by dialogue only too characteristic^{ic} of the world behind the foot lights. "Nicholas Nickleby" is marked by the same defect.

"The Old Curiosity Shop" shows decided improvement in this respect over its predecessors. Unity of action is better observed, and the story moves to its close in a manner, at once happy and serene. Almost the same praise may be accorded to "Barnaby Rudge" which is marked by a departure into historical fiction.

Passing over "American Notes" and the "Carol" we come to "Martin Chuzzlewit" which was completed in 1844. Here all sense of unity is thrown to the winds, and apparently the novelist had no properly defined plan when he began to build. It is necessary, of course, to bear in mind, that the works of Dickens appeared in monthly instalments, and this may account for much in the way of faulty construction.

"Dombey and Son" shows considerable dramatic power. It is marked by the choice of a moral theme, and in construction, is a decided advance

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upon the author's previous work. There are really two novels here, the first and best, ending with the death of Little Paul.

Two years later, "David Copperfield" appeared, and in this genuine masterpiece of fiction, Dickens' genius reached its climax. The action is free, broad and sustained. Though much is improbable, not to say impossible, the very strength of the story sweeps aside all criticism. Here as in "Black House" which appeared three years later, we have some striking examples of the novelists' use of coincidence, that time-honoured device of the stage.

Omitting reference to "Little Dorrit" and "Our Mutual Friend," neither of which demands our serious attention, we come to another historical novel "A Tale of Two Cities" which, despite the fact that the dialogue has lost much of its freshness, is more artistic than "Barnaby Rudge." "Great Expectations" which appeared in 1861, is one of the best constructed of all Dickens books, and "Edwin Drood" which was begun nine years later, was cut short by the authors' lamented death. "An Author" says M. Alexandre Dumas films" as he advances in life, can conceive and execute works of stronger tissue, than when he began; in a word the matter he can cast into his mould will be nobler and richer, but the mould will be the same." How eminently true is this of Dickens. The great novelist never learned how to develop "situation," and later where he gained in technique, he lost in freshness. A great situation must be led up to, step by step; there must be a regular advance, toward which character and incident must contribute their proper proportion, and here, let it be said in all kindness, is just where Charles Dickens failed.

In concluding this part of our subject, it might be well to glance for a moment at Dickens' treatment of the "dénouement." Nowhere should ~~be~~ the close be other than a consequence of the action itself. However sudden or even surprising may be the dénouement, it should not be unprepared but like every other part of the action, should preserve its organic connection with the whole.

Tried by this canon how do the works of Dickens fare? I need not ask. Think of those grand closing scenes. Always a lover of poetic