

The Old Curiosity Shop

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The death of little Nell is one of the most celebrated deaths in the Victorian Era. A death which, according to Oscar Wilde, one would need a heart of stone not to be made laugh. It certainly is a testimony to the general sentimental streak of the era, which Dickens did so much to pander to and exploit.

The novel is only the fourth to be issued by Dickens, being written in serialized form during the year 1840-41, following on the heels of *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, while Dickens had not yet reached the age of thirty. The tale started out as a short story in the weekly magazine 'Mr Humphreys Clock' which Dickens had started to ensure himself of a steady income, but quickly outgrew the original format with a first person narrator who is unceremoniously thrown over board. Writing in serial form, meaning that the author is only a few issues ahead of the reading public certainly has its advantages as well as disadvantages, of which the latter are the most obvious and the former more questionable. The possibility of feedback from readers seems on the face of it rather attractive, although on the balance with dubious benefits, while the impossibility to go back and change, disastrous for plot development. Now plot is never the strong suit of Dickens, and the plot of 'the Old Curiosity Shop' gives all the appearance of being improvised, with little direction and many contrived situations. Some of the characters change, or rather the author changes his mind about them, like Richard Swiveller, who initially is introduced as a scoundrel and good for nothing, in cohorts with a vicious brother of Nell, a brother who for similar reasons is quickly dropped altogether as if by distraction. The main focus of the book is of course little Nell, who is presented as an angle of sweetness and innocence and impeccable virtue, as if the latter would make much sense in a nature impervious to temptation. A divine being who is clearly too good for this world, and whose death at the very end is a deliverance. In fact the fate of little Nell, however unexpected and cruel to many readers, is never in doubt, and intimations of her eventual demise are there from the very start for those wanting to read the signs (which many readers obviously wanted to avoid). Maybe the most beautiful comes at the end. The final quest of reunion is through a snow-clad landscape, muffled and cold, in which the party makes slower and slower progress. When the grandfather is finally encountered, he speaks of his granddaughter as only sleeping, but with a desperation and a tense of the past, that points to death. But even in the beginning of the novel, when it may only have been conceived as a short story, the death of the heroine is prefigured. Such a consistency in treatment by the author, is probably less one of conscious design than subconscious intention. It is not too hard to find a real life model for the Nell character, one needs to look no further back than Dickens live-in sister-in-law - Mary Hogarth, who suddenly succumbed without previous intimations of ill-health after a party at the tender age of seventeen. This hit Dickens very hard, in fact so hard as to go beyond what one may find reasonable in a newly married man starting a big family. Dickens openly lamented her death as the worst disaster that

had ever befallen him and wished aloud to be buried next to her, a somewhat morbid wish he a few years later, much to his regret, had to relinquish when her brother died, also at a tender age, making a better founded claim. The unconsummated 'crush' on the girl-woman has been the speculations of many a literary historian, some of whom propose that in the emotional life of Dickens there was a distinction between the mature and sexual affection he felt towards his wife as mother of his children, and the high-strung exultation of innocence her sister could provoke. A feeling he obviously found more refined than the baser one of conjugality, but in so doing only expressing the pretensions of the age.

But little Nell does not occupy center-stage throughout the novel, a character with as much claim on the readers attention is the dwarf - Quilp, testifying to Dickens complementary predisposition for the bizarre. Such a creation would nowadays be impossible to create, so unabashedly wallowing in prejudice against a vulnerable minority. Quilp is also a child, if old, lusty and ugly, not only in physical statue but more pointedly in his aggressive flaunting of conventions. Obviously Dickens must have relished his utter egotism and shocking cruelty, as well as the power that goes by that, by no means excluding the sexual, exemplified by the thrall in which he holds his young pretty wife, in spite of, or maybe rather because of the way he mistreats her. In Quilp Dickens gets an opportunity to excel in verbal virtuosity, something the much more insipid character of Nell gives little opportunity to.

Few readers today entering upon the book can be ignorant of the eventual fate of the heroine, a fore-knowledge that can leave some of us in an apprehensive mood. Yet I did not find the final death, so sentimentally extolled, the most touching aspect of the novel; instead the incident rather early on, with her grand-father, a somewhat dubious character, whose love for his grand-child seems less disinterested than obsessive, steals the money she has saved, in order to satisfy his lust to gamble. A lust ostensibly being a desire to tend for his charge and win for her the privileges of wealth out of which she has been unfairly cheated.

Still the mixture of sentimentality thickly spread on and an unabashed fascination with the grotesque leaves the modern reader wearied, unable to muster much enthusiasm. It is a fairy-tale of course, and as such based on many a distinguished precedent ('King Lear' comes many readers to mind), and as such giving only an oblique, yet admittedly a unique view of the times. Dickens is no conscious documentarian, although social pathos motivates much of his novels. But the novels themselves as objects of wide-spread attention at the time, characteristically illustrated in a way that, unlike the case of most other novels, became an integral part of the text¹. In fact a large part of the fun and fascination of reading a Dickens comes with the contemplation of the contributions of the illustrators, who so to speak, provide 'snapshots' endowed with the authenticity normally only photographs would provide. The Dickens novel, especially in its serialized form is an obvious precursor to the soap-opera.

At about 1.5 million bytes, the novel is rather long. Written in forty instalments, of rather uniform length, comprising 73 chapters² this comes out to about 40'000 strokes a

¹ In fact modern editions of Dickens make a point of including the original illustrations

² the issues number 1,2,4,6,21,36 and the final 40th consist of just one (long) chapter, the others, with no exceptions, of two. Also the number of illustration - 75, tallies well with the number of chapters.

week. Not a remarkable achievement if one concentrates on a single week, but impressive when considered as an uninterrupted suit, especially when produced under constant pressure and the obligations of other duties. Dickens certainly was a disciplined writer, but maybe more to the point a fluent one, and one gets the impression that his pen flowed easily, never for a want of a word, but a natural verbal torrent, which intermittently can sink into the clichés of a hack, but more often than not gets drunk on its own juice producing arresting images.

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