

# The Making of Charles Dickens

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Imagination is calling forth from nothing a rich world. In fact it is as close to creation as we mortals are capable of. But is it really the calling forth from nothing, even in a writer so singularly imaginatively gifted as Dickens is acknowledged to be by admirers as well as detractors? The point of Christopher Hibbert's study is to show that to every of his creations there is a model or an event from his life, especially its early and formative part, a claim generously supported by lengthy quotations from the various works. True every writer is in a sense an autobiographer, and Dickens is no exception. True imagination consists not so much in creating from scratch but to wilfully embellish actual events and characters from real life. The line is thin, as is the distinction between an act of successful fictionalizing and one that has not really gotten off ground. Dickens, like everyone else, makes a fool of himself when he sticks too closely to his own obsessions, without performing that magic transformation which is the hallmark of living fiction.

The story of Dickens has been told many times, and many people are familiar with its outlines. Stemming from respectable ancestry, getting down in the world, due to the irresponsible profligacy of his father, he is momentarily dipped in ink, an experience that was to prove deeply traumatic, although its extent was of very limited duration, six months at the outmost, including the continuation brought about by his mother. Slowly he is making a come back, reassuming an interrupted education, becoming a lawyer's clerk and teaching himself stenography landing a job as a parliamentary reporter. Journalism is clearly his cup of tea, and with initial success, he soon starts writing stories that strike a chord among the rapidly growing reading populace, never above the nitty-gritty of financial bargaining he manages to close more and more successful deals, climbing up socially and financially. His enduring fame and success does not desert him, and when he dies from an apoplexy at the age of 58, he is still as sought out as ever.

The work of Dickens is one of nostalgia. A nostalgia he felt for his own happy childhood in the early 1820's when he was living with his parents in relative comfort and respectability in Chatham north of London. The 19th century probably saw as many social transformations due to improved technology as did the 20th, stage-coaches being replaced by railways, hackney coaches by omnibusses, and with extensive urban renewals, changing, sometimes beyond recognition the face of everyday life. But the majority of Dickens stories and novels take place in a vaguely imagined 1820's, with few if any of the modern amenities available to the author himself visible. It is this romantization of a period irretrievably gone, that gives to his fiction that special touch of fairy-tale, which was to appeal so deeply to the reading public. Dickens is also inseparable from his illustrators, whose works direct the imagination of the reader into the appropriate grooves. By modern comparisons he would be a media star, creating a public role that had not existed before.

His deficiencies are as obvious as his merits. His intelligence was not of the original and probing kind, his work effects no intellectual challenges, and his oft lauded passion

for social reform does on closer inspection turn out to be much more a stance and an attitude than a genuine mission. There are no constructive proposals to be found in his work, only ridicule, satire and appropriate indignation. Someone has likened Dickens social zeal, as to that displayed by a young man trying to breach a door by bursting it open by repeatedly throwing his entire weight on it. Failure will lead to frustration and bruised shoulders, success to tumbling down. In fact, the author speculates, he may not even had a destructive urge at all, poverty and squalor being an integral part of existence and hence of nostalgia, providing sweet indignation but no incentive to cut such sources off. One may wonder whether he was in love with poverty, just as Gandhi idolized it, and hence deep down would resent (like Gandhi?) any measures of its eradication.

The squalor of early 19th century England, and repeated all over the world, was a fact of life, and now only comparable to the slums of the third world. England was a society stratified by class and money, and such things must have been obvious to anyone, especially anyone with a mission to climb. Modern welfare states provide safety-nets and material security, but two hundred years ago, the majority of mankind must have presented the spectacle of a big ocean of misery, out of which it was the prime individual responsibility to keep his head above and not to drown. Drowning and perdition were in fact constant threats, especially to those of the lower middle-classes. and getting on in the world, was not so much a matter of exploitation as plain survival. It is in this light one must view the young Dickens desire for respectability, of being above the fray, of his need to dress like a dandy<sup>1</sup> and to seek the patronage of his betters. The desire is of course still with us, but at the time, (as well as in the present Third World) it had (and has) a sharper edge.

The picture he strikes as a young man is not entirely sympathetic. He is vain, he is ambitious, and as such ruthless when cornered. At the same time he is sensitive and generous, filled with seemingly inexhaustible energy, and with, what must be characterized as almost bizarre, a sound sense of fun and mischief, spiced with excentric behaviour. He is socially adept, the light of the party in more humble circumstances, diffident and respectful when granted a presence at more exalted tables.

The love life of Dickens is strange, as well as an integral part of his emotional imagination as it manifests itself in his many books. He married a wife he did not love, whom he (and others) found boring and redolent, but whom he regularly impregnated. An early love affair with a girl who spurned him, left an indelible mark, but maybe more on his vanity than on his heart, to the extent they can be separated. But what really devastated him was the early death of a younger sister to his wife, on whom he had doted. Naturally he had found her more intelligent, more fun and spirited than his dour wife, and obviously her ability to express admiration would have been far more unhampered than that of a legal wife; but the passionate desire, he had contrived, incidentally not without rather macabre excessess, at least rhetorical such, must have fed on deeper roots. On such we can only speculate, but throughout his fiction there is an idolization of sibling love and angelic innocence, that true love really only could be enjoyed by brothers and sisters, freed

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<sup>1</sup> The latitude as to the variety of mens clothing allowed by fashion in the early 19th century was far greater than today, giving him plenty of scope to express himself by his choice of vestment. The narrow possibilities to the male, as opposed to the female ffor the past one hundred years is rather noteworthy and I find it remarkable that it has not been commented upon more

from the debasing demands of carnal consummation. Such phantasies accorded well with the public phantasies at the time, phantasies he may have unwittingly shaped as well as conformed to, and to which we nowadays refer to as Victorian prudishness. As we all know, Victorian prudishness had a darker side, and would indeed have been impossible without that lusty underbelly, but as to the sensual tastes of Dickens, we are still in the dark. Eventually he separated from his wife taking up with a young actress, yet it is not clear that this infatuation was ever brought to its conclusions, or whether she indeed ever was his mistress.

His reaction to his ever growing family, the event of which almost seemed to be a source of puzzlement to him, as if he had no inkling of his own responsibility. He loved his children well enough when they were small, when they grew up they became so sources of frustration. He himself as a self-made man was aghast at their lack of go and general incompetence. The children, sensing the demands made upon them, had often no resource but resignation. To earn the approval of such a demanding father, was a foregone conclusion. Many of his children died in early adulthood, and that did not seem to have bothered him deeply.

Was Dickens a genius? The designation is often handed about frivolously, thereby being deprived of any real meaning. In the case of Dickens, one cannot but concur. He definitely was extreme, and his moods tended to swing between elation and dejectedness, yet even in his highs, he never took leave of his senses, but was able to channel his exuberance artistically. Nowadays we would diagnose him as suffering from a cyclic mood impairment. Writing came to him easily, the pen literally flowed along the pages, undisturbed by distraction he could in fact write even while socializing. But his imagination possessed him to the point that the characters took on independent existences, with whom he literally conversed and cursed. As he wrote he enacted physically the happenings on the page, he cried, he laughed, he clenched his fist. And when he killed little Nell, the experience was a re-enacting of the death of his young sister-in-law a few years earlier, and so painful that he hardly was able to go through with it. This total identification with his various characters did in his final years find an outlet through his public readings. It was not a question of a mere obsession, but being possessed demonically. It tied up with his ertwhile ambition, that of being an actor, and gave him an outlet otherwise denied him emotionally and domestically. It was carried to the point as to endanger his health, and in fact it eventually proved to be his nemesis. Always a fit individual, taken to long and brisk nocturnal walks, often overflowing with energy and restlessness, having no other issue than strenuous exercise, he nevertheless as he grew older was cursed by an enfeebled heart and rising hypertension. An apoplexy eventually did him in.

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