Why Read Dickens? - Discovering the Value of Sympathy in a Changing World

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Charles Dickens is a world-class author whose messages to his Nineteenth-Century readers remain strikingly relevant for us in the Twenty-First century. The pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty has suggested that Dickens is the kind of author whose works one would like to have nearby because his ideas and themes are the kind which can sustain human civilization. In Rorty’s Contingency, Irony and Solidarity (1989), he says that Dickens writes the kind of book that is “relevant to our relations with others, to helping us to notice the effects of our actions on other people. These are the books which are relevant to liberal hope, and to the question of how to reconcile private irony with such hope” (141). This comment reflects a perception of Dickens’s ethical merit that was held by Dickens’s own Victorian readers. They too saw that Dickens’s quality of sympathy speaks loudly of human values and ethical principles. As John Bowen observes, in Charles Dickens’s novels we hear the voices of people of all classes that are “suddenly and overwhelmingly blown back toward us in the form of an ethico-political responsibility” (255-69). Dickens’s stories continue to play a role among us today as a point of reference in our efforts to construct responsive societies of mutual respect and ethical integrity.

However, Dickens does more than this for the thoughtful reader. He has taught many people how to read English better, observes historian Jonathan Rose, who has documented the role of Dickens through the autobiographies of immigrants and workers in Great Britain. Dickens became quite popular in India among those who were literate in the English language. (Even so, he was outsold in India for a time by G.M.W. Reynolds, as Priya Joshi has pointed out.) Popularity, in Dickens’s case, also led to longevity and influence. This is because Dickens’s fiction is filled with claims about human responsibility for life that we might call universal. Dickens urges his readers to think critically through his English characters and settings about the world that they live in.

This challenge to think critically is an important feature of what reading literature holds for us. By imaginatively entering Dickens’s stories, we are drawn to sympathize with some of his characters: particularly the innocent children he creates, like Oliver Twist and Little Nell, or the uncertain and awkward attempts at adulthood and sophistication of Pip in Great Expectations. We recognize the hopes of Esther Summerson in Bleak House and her search for her origins and her identity and we see the tragedy of Jo, the crossing Sweeper, who is unable to read. Reading Dickens has led reformers to work to change the circumstances that people live within. For example, one American reader, Joseph Pierce, who borrowed Oliver Twist three times from the New York Society Library, used his
ample means to start two orphanages. Another reader in upstate New York founded a hospital for people suffering with mental difficulties. Josiah Gilbert Holland (1819-1881) wrote:

He had a heart which brought him into sympathy with all those phases of humanity which were intellectually interesting to him. He loved the rascals whom he painted, and enjoyed the society of the weakest men and women of his pages; and it is this sympathy which gives immortality to his novels. (71)

Wayne C. Booth, in his book *The Company We Keep* (1998), argued for a re-centering of ethics in our contact with literature. Booth, who spoke of “friendship with books” and of “the exchange of gifts” (3-6), proposed that we who are concerned with ethics are interested in any effect on the *ethos*: in this case, on that of a reader or listener. Powerful stories, he said, may contribute toward a conversation among us. So we are led to ask, what happens as we read? With what quality do I accompany these authors and these characters, plots, and scenes? Who am I as I read and with whom am I keeping company?

Charles Dickens was quite aware of the ethical power of fiction upon his audience and he consciously sought connection with his readers through an appeal to *ethos*. Indeed, for Charles Dickens, his relationship with his readers constituted the greatest love affair of his life (Butt and Tillotson, 1957). They, in turn, kept company with this author. Keeping company with Dickens offered them connection with each other: a means of sympathetic identification that they shared. They were a community of readers engaged month to month with a serial publication that urged them to be attentive to issues of justice and an ethics of care.

It takes a good deal of time to read a Dickens novel. With the exception of his novel *Hard Times* (1854), Dickens’s Victorian novels are quite long. In style they are of another century- a contemporary reader meets with long paragraphs, lengthy sentences, and curious descriptions of characters. Reading Dickens involves a reader in the fictional dream that is unfolding. In the Nineteenth Century, readers often read Dickens’s fiction in serial installments. They would read a bit of the story in a periodical and it would end on an exciting scene or problem and then they would have to wait for the next issue to see how that problem was resolved. Today the reader has to patiently read and allow the novel to create that fictional dream.

Dickens’s message to England of his time is equally valid in our own. It was a call to take care of the people: from the rising middle class to the struggling working poor. It was a reminder that people who work hard merit amusements, as he pointed out in his first edition of his periodical *Household Words* in 1850. He insisted on the remarkable and unexpected connections between people and a issued a call for conscious awareness of aspects of society that were in need of repair, sympathy, and intervention. People laughed and cried as they read Dickens and his fiction was read across gender and class by a wide range of people of different races, ethnicities, occupations, and regional commitments. Dickens was read by workers seeking self-improvement, as well as by people who sought social and economic development. Most of all, he drew sympathy from his readers for his
characters. For example, in *Bleak House*, the plight of Jo, the crossing sweeper, is beset by poverty. However, he is equally poor in his inability to read. Jo is unable to make any sense out of the many signs he sees around him. In Dickens’s creation of this character he expresses a call to recognize the urgency of promoting literacy and reading. This has become increasingly important in our information saturated world.

In addition, Dickens’s novels raise important questions about whom and what we value. In *Great Expectations*, his protagonist, Pip, inherits a great deal of money. This changes his life situation from that of an apprentice blacksmith to that of an aspiring young professional in the city of London. However, this legacy he has been given by an anonymous benefactor is something he has not earned by his own diligence. He becomes conceited, proud that he can wear fancy clothes and be “a gentleman.” When his stepfather Joe Gargery the blacksmith comes to London to visit, he is awkward in his new surroundings. Pip realizes that he has neglected Joe: a man who is far from sophisticated but who is genuine and sincere. Pip learns a lesson that material values are not as important as the character of people. In many other ways, this novel shows how Pip grows to become a more thoughtful and genuine person.

To write a long essay about Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, one has to get absorbed in his long novel. As one is entertained by the story and his fascinating characters, it is important to consider one’s own impressions. Sometimes it is helpful to jot these down on paper, or type them into a computer. Critical thinking about the novel may be developed by asking questions about Dickens’s characters and the situations that they find themselves in. A long essay might focus on one main character’s qualities and concerns, such as those of Pip. Asking questions about this character will lead the reader to some observations. It is then useful to propose a thesis: such as an assertion about this character and his or her motivation and goals. Or, one might write about how this character changes during the course of the novel. For example, one might write about how Pip goes from being a poor boy on a foggy heath in England to an adult in the city and what learns in the process.

Dickens enlists his readers in this sympathy for his characters: from the orphan Oliver Twist, who is forced to live on the street and is urged by the criminal Fagin to pick pockets, to Little Nell, a young girl who wanders the streets in search of her lost grandfather. It is this rich sympathy that the novels of Charles Dickens may encourage in readers. Of course, everyone reads a bit differently and one will not necessarily become more empathetic by reading Dickens’s novels. But some thinkers, like the ethicist Martha Nussbaum believe they will. It is this sympathy in Dickens that Nussbaum pointed to in her advocacy of ethical fiction. Nussbaum, in *Poetic Justice*, examines Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) for its ethical imperative and call to sympathy and how the novel rejects “the economists’ habit of reducing everything to calculation” and seeing only “abstract features of people and situations” (44). She echoes the idea of a “vast sympathetic participation in the daily life of mankind” that philosopher George Santayana saw in Dickens (59-60).
Philosophers have responded this way to Charles Dickens’s fiction because it is clear to them that he was fundamentally concerned with ethical action and believed that novel writing and reading was a practice that was fully engaged with life. We read at the conclusion of *Hard Times*, Dickens’s narrator’s final words: “Dear Reader! It rests with you and me, whether in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be.” Dickens here calls us here to create a just world - even where the Coketown of *Hard Times* or the London of *Bleak House* are unjust and characters like Stephen Blackpool or Jo the crossing Sweeper die without justice.

This concern for disadvantaged people appears throughout Dickens’s novels. In his panoramic cross-section of London, Dickens shows us people in poverty and in need. He prompts his audience to ask where justice is when bad things occur in this world. How can innocent Little Nell of *The Old Curiosity Shop* die so miserably? Why are there Poor Laws that send Oliver Twist out onto the streets? Why must Tiny Tim be handicapped and perhaps die so young? Why do villains get away with murder? Why does justice get tied up in interminable cases before the courts of Chancery?

Dickens appealed to a Victorian audience seeking moral grounding in a changing world. Critiquing institutions, bureaucracies, and legal systems, he sounded the call to make these institutions responsive and responsible. With *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickelby*, he criticized institutions responsible for the plight of poor children. With *Bleak House*, he examined the legal system. With *Hard Times*, he assessed the educational and personal losses of imagination to utility and fact. Beyond this, he urged the humanization of his characters. Dickens fictional creations, from David Copperfield and Pip to Sidney Carton and Eugene Wrayburn (and his readers) are led to ask the question, what ought I to be? In Dickens, the moral life is about discovering the ideals for human life and learning to embody them in one’s life. He finds virtue and the wellsprings of life in sympathy.

The sympathetic and moral challenges of Dickens’s fiction are an important resource for us, as they were for Victorians, who responded to the changing world around them: a crowded, diversified environment caught up in the engine of modernity. They remain a significant resource for people today in a developing, changing twenty-first century world.

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