

Charles Dickens – A Tainted Gaze

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I first encountered Charles Dickens in Sierra Leone, Africa, when I was six and acted as Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* (1843). I was transported into another world. To me it was not make-believe, I sympathised with the working poor Cratchits, hated Scrooge, and fell in love with Dickens.

A ferocious reader, I raced through *David Copperfield* (1850), *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Great Expectations* (1861) and many more. All of them affected me. At ten, I cried when I read in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Sydney Carton's declaration: 'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.' I felt his pain. He believed he had failed in everything in life, but now he could succeed in death by giving his love rival, Charles Darnay, the chance to be with Lucy. What selflessness!

Charles Dickens created some of the world's best-known and loved fictional characters, and is regarded as one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian era. His writing style has a rich linguistic creativity, a gift for caricature and an ability to show the comical side of life.

I had read most of Dickens' books before I discovered his *American Notes* (1842), written after his first visit to America, five years after slavery had been abolished in Britain and nineteen years before the start of the US Civil War. His books were hugely popular in America, and he was feted across the 26 states that were then part of the Union. But as the tour progressed, Dickens realized that the US he had hoped to see was only in his imagination. As he wrote after his visit to the United States Congress in Washington:

'Did I see among them, the intelligence and refinement: the true, honest, patriotic heart of America? Here and there, were drops of its blood and life, but they scarcely coloured the stream of desperate adventurers which sets that way for profit and for pay.'

As a severe critic of British inequality, Dickens had imagined the US as a new 'Republic of my imagination', where 'liberty and justice for all' would be seen in action, and he arranged visits to prisons, orphanages and schools for the blind and deaf. Although he did find things, and people, to admire in the States, there was

much that nauseated and infuriated him, such as the indiscriminate tobacco spitting. He describes having to leave his clothes in puddles of brown saliva in the shared sleeping quarters of a riverboat.

The most disgusting outrage, however, the one he gave an entire chapter to in *American Notes*, was slavery. He saw it as an institution of oppression and dehumanisation, and he saw the hypocrisy, which supporting slavery required, in the hearts and minds of the American people. He wrote of: 'all those owners, breeders, users, buyers and sellers of slaves, who will, until the bloody chapter has a bloody end, own, breed, use, buy, and sell them at all hazards: who doggedly deny the horrors of the system.'

He met slave owners who claimed to be kind masters, saying: 'the greater part of my slaves are much attached to me.' Repulsed, Dickens stated that: 'slavery is not a whit the more endurable because some hearts are to be found which can partially resist its hardening influences'. As he travelled around, he realised that: 'Public opinion threatens the abolitionist with death, if he ventures to the South.' In the House in Washington, a Representative for South Carolina declared: 'I warn the Abolitionists, ignorant, infuriated barbarians as they are, that if chance shall throw any of them into our hands, he may expect a felon's death.'

Dickens was shocked and appalled by daily advertisements of 'Cash for Negroes'. In the long columns of crowded journals, he listed examples such as: 'Ran away, Negress Caroline. Had a collar with one prong turned down', or 'Ran away, a black woman, Betsy. Had an iron bar on her right leg.' Some adverts showed the cruelty extended even to children: 'Ran away, a negro boy about twelve years old. Had round his neck a chain dog-collar with "De Lampert" engraved on it.'

These adverts and many more, pages and pages of them in Dickens' account, hit me hard as I read them. These were people who had been bought and sold but who had somehow, even with such diabolical and debilitating treatment, managed to escape. They were fleeing from degradation and cruelty, fleeing in desperation for their lives. Knowing that worse would befall them if they were caught, they still ran.

Dickens knew that publishing *American Notes* could anger his American friends, including abolitionist and former president John Quincy Adams who had defended the African captives from the slave ship *Amistad*. The Mende captives revolted after being seized by Portuguese slave hunters in Sierra Leone (in violation of all extant treaties). As someone of Sierra Leonean ancestry, I found it moving to know that Dickens had dined with the man who had successfully defended the 43 survivors.

American Notes was published in October 1842 to a mixed reception. Dickens was regarded by many Americans as an ungrateful ignoramus from his account of his

travels. In it he criticised the louder American patriots, expressed his disapproval of slavery and complained that American publishers pirated his books, paid no royalties, but still expected him to be polite to them. Claire Tomalin said in her biography of Dickens: 'The New York Herald, which had greeted him so warmly upon his arrival in America, called the book "the work of the most coarse, vulgar, impudent and superficial mind.'" Edgar Allan Poe described it as: 'one of the most suicidal productions, ever deliberately published by an author, who had the least reputation to lose.'

Nevertheless, and proving the adage that there's no such thing as bad publicity, sales in the US were enormous. Two months later, in December 1842, the first instalment of *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which Dickens satirised some American 'types', was published. Dickens put in the novel many things he had seen and heard on his travels. There were direct references throughout the book, as in this excerpt, where those searing adverts from the news journals become one man's personal, physical and psychological history:

'And may I ask,' said Martin, glancing, but not with any displeasure, from Mark to the negro, 'who this gentleman is? Another friend of yours?'

'Why sir,' returned Mark, taking him aside, and speaking confidentially in his ear, 'he's a man of colour, sir!'

'Do you take me for a blind man,' asked Martin, somewhat impatiently, 'that you think it necessary to tell me that, when his face is the blackest that ever was seen?'

'No, no; when I say a man of colour,' returned Mark, 'I mean that he's been one of them as there's picters of in the shops. A man and a brother, you know, sir,' said Mr. Tapley, favouring his master with a significant indication of the figure so often represented in tracts and cheap prints.

'A slave!' cried Martin, in a whisper.

'Ah!' said Mark in the same tone. 'Nothing else. A slave. Why, when that there man was young – don't look at him while I'm a-telling it – he was shot in the leg; gashed in the arm; scored in his live limbs, like crimped fish; beaten out of shape; had his neck galled with an iron collar, and wore iron rings upon his wrists and ankles. The marks are on him to this day.'

Dickens' Victorian readers would have understood that expression, 'A man and a brother,' as a reference to the widely reproduced 1787 anti-slavery medallion by Josiah Wedgwood, a prominent abolitionist. My admiration for Dickens grew, believing him not just a champion of the poor and neglected in Britain, but for all the oppressed everywhere.

And then I found out that the topic of Charles Dickens' own racism had long been a subject of discussion. I was shocked. How could I not have known this when I had been reading his novels for over sixty years? Although it was not obvious in his works, Dickens was writing at a time of colonial expansion and Empire building. Could it be that like many authors of the period, Dickens expressed some attitudes that could now be interpreted in the 21st century as racist?

Among scholars, Priti Joshi has argued against the charge of racism in Dickens. She maintains that he never advocated any form of scientific racism in his works, but did hold extreme antipathy for non-European peoples, and steadfastly believed in their assimilation into Western culture. Grace Moore claims that his racism subsided in his later years. Others claim that his racism deepened during the period. The historian David Olusoga advised that readers of Charles Dickens should not ignore his 'troubling attitude to race', explaining that the author did write about black people in racist ways.

In his 1990 biography, Peter Ackroyd observed that Dickens' major objection to missionaries was that they were more concerned with the welfare of non-Europeans abroad than with the poor at home. In *Bleak House* (1852), Dickens derides Mrs Jellyby for neglecting her children to care for the inhabitants of a fictional African country. Dickens described an Irish American settlement in America's Catskill mountains as 'ruinous and filthy', a mess of pigs, dogs, pots, and dunghills. By his

infamous caricature of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1837), Dickens also contributed to antisemitic stereotyping of the Jews.

Dickens' support for liberal causes at home did not always translate into backing for liberal causes abroad. In response to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, Dickens wrote about Indians as: 'dogs – low, treacherous, murderous villains.' He called for their 'extermination' and applauded the 'mutilation' of the 'wretched Hindoo'.

Likewise, the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica in 1865 had a profound impact on English society and severely questioned Victorian liberal values. The rebels, led by a black Jamaican deacon, Paul Bogle, seized a courthouse to protest economic and judicial injustice on the island. In a savage response, the island's Governor, Edward John Eyre, unleashed a brutal crackdown on the rebels, and on the black and coloured population in general. After a month of martial law, hundreds were dead, the majority executed on the Governor's orders.

The brutality of the Governor's response evoked horror and rage in some quarters in England. Some, including Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley, called for Governor Eyre to be put on trial for the atrocity. Other Victorian leading lights immediately sprang to Eyre's defence, among them Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and Charles Dickens.

Dickens' support for the Governor of Jamaica was by no means an aberration. In October 1849, Dickens wrote about an article that would discuss: 'a history of Savages, showing the singular respects in which all savages are like each other; and those in which civilized men, under circumstances of difficulty, soonest become like savages.' Dickens' reputation as a Victorian social reformer scarcely measures up to his 'darker' side, in which he publicly and privately held contempt for the black and Asian world.

Following his second visit to America in 1868 – after the Civil War had ended and slavery had been abolished – *American Notes* was reprinted, and Dickens added a postscript. His rhetoric had changed. He heaped praise on the Americans, wanting 'to declare how astounded I have been by the amazing changes I have seen around me on every side, —changes moral, changes physical, changes in the amount of land subdued and peopled, changes in the rise of vast new cities, changes in the growth of older cities almost out of recognition, changes in the graces and amenities of life.'

Dickens' feelings towards Black Americans were more complicated. He also wrote a letter in 1868 criticising the newly emancipated Black Americans for their lack of education, arguing: 'the melancholy absurdity of giving these people votes', which 'would glare out of every roll of their eyes, chuckle in their mouths, and bump in their heads.'

I now see a paradox, an ambiguity and hypocrisy in Dickens. One Dickens inspired charity at home and showed humanity to the poor and neglected in industrial England, while another uncharitable Dickens spoke, wrote about and supported some of the vilest descriptions of and actions against the non-white poor of the British empire.

Part of the fascination of fictional works is that they can present many different meanings, give multiple viewpoints, and bear contrary interpretations. Literary works are unavoidably of their time. Should we think of how our novel will be read in the future? As Maya Angelou advised: 'when you know better, do better'. After Black Lives Matter, the bringing down of statues, and contemporary condemnation of the legacy of slavery and imperialism, is it time now for us to consider the historically important figures in our literary canon? In light of our views on historical racism, we must pay even greater attention to the works of 'revered' authors such as Dickens. We must try to understand the often-contradictory, postcolonial national culture we have inherited from them, and then do something about it. Has my admiration for Charles Dickens diminished? Will I stop reading his books? No, but I do know that mine is now a tainted gaze.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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