

Depiction of Human Tragedy in “Nicholas Nickleby” by Charles Dickens

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Abstract:

In this article, the analysis of human tragedy and problems in “Nicholas Nickleby” by Charles Dickens has been discussed and analysed with the help of some examples.

Keywords: Human tragedy, character, playfulness, opposed characteristics, stylistic devices.

Introduction. Until recently, a lot of critics had little time for *Nicholas Nickleby*, finding the characters one-dimensional and the plot too.¹ Characters as Yorkshire schoolmaster Wackford Squeers, and the wicked uncle Ralph Nickleby, have struck such critics as cardboard figures. The actress Dame Sybil Thorndyke described Nickleby as the very “Incarnation of Sin”.

Analysis. Like Squeers, the kindly philanthropic Cheerybles were based on real people, but these too have failed to convince:

*“We cannot help reflecting on the position of the mass of workmen whose labours have accumulated their capital,”*² groused one early cynic.

Worst of all, the hero himself struck some of the earliest reviewers as having “no character at all”³.

Dickens's third novel was a favorite with the general public. Indeed, it was this book's huge sales that enabled Dickens to give up his parliamentary reporting and become a full-time writer. Years later, when Dickens was much less fashionable, the children's book illustrator Kate Greenaway would still write to Ruskin, “I am very fond of Nicholas Nickleby” (216)⁴. One reason for its popularity outside academe has been its theatricality, notable even among the works of this “most theatrical of Victorian novelists”⁵.

For all Smike's difficulties with learning his lines, both seem made for the stage. When Crummles first talks Nicholas into joining him, he says,

“There's a genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh.....”

‘There; he says it was not his fault, my dear,’ remarked the wicked Miss Price. ‘Perhaps you were too jealous, or too hasty with him? He says it was not his fault. You hear; I think that’s apology enough.’ ‘You will not understand me,’ said Nicholas. ‘Pray dispense with this jesting, for I have no time, and really no inclination, to be the subject or promoter of mirth just now.’

¹ Chesterton, G. K. *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*. New York: Haskell House, 1970.

² *Nicholas Nickleby*. Ed. Paul Schlicke. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1990.

³ Collins, Philip, ed. *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971

⁴ *Nicholas Nickleby*. Ed. Paul Schlicke. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1990. (Textual references are all to this edition.

⁵ Chittick, Kathryn. *Dickens and the 1830s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

'What do you mean?' asked Miss Price, affecting amazement. 'Don't ask him, 'Tilda,' cried Miss Squeers;

'I forgive him.' 'Dear me,' said Nicholas, as the brown bonnet went down on his shoulder again, 'this is more serious than I supposed. Allow me! Will you have the goodness to hear me speak?' (Chapter 12, 285)⁶

It is an example of stylistic devices to describe opposed features of the person to lead him to have tragedy in his life.

As for Smike, the lad strikes Crummles as the ideal actor for the "starved business," so that he adds, *"I never saw a young fellow so regularly cut out for that line, since I've been in the profession.*

'I hate everybody,' said Miss Squeers, 'and I wish that everybody was dead—that I do.'

'Dear, dear,' said Miss Price, quite moved by this avowal of misanthropical sentiments.

'You are not serious, I am sure.' 'Yes, I am,' rejoined Miss Squeers, tying tight knots in her pocket-handkerchief and clenching her teeth.

'And I wish I was dead too. There!' " (Chapter 12, 281)

Depiction of human tragedy is also playfully revealed with their clothing styles. It is no accident that Nicholas's sister Kate is apprenticed to the dressmaker, Madame Mantalini.

Predictably, Greenaway was fascinated by this side of it, reminding Ruskin of *"the dreadful costume of Miss La Creevy"* as seen in the early illustrations, adding *"but Kate Nickleby looks Pretty in the large bonnets Madame Mantalini too".⁷*

In the text as in the illustrations, clothes tell much about the wearer. Of the more important characters, Newman Noggs gets off to a shaky start. He is first seen in a threadbare suit, too small for him and minus most of its buttons. He has to apologise for being unable to offer Nicholas something dry to wear when the young man arrives at his lodgings wet through after his flight from Yorkshire. Fallen on hard times himself, Noggs is unable to act out his generous impulses. Noggs' later return to himself, to his self-respect and due place in society, is marked by his assumption of more respectable clothes: Nicholas is overjoyed to meet him near the end "genteelly dressed in black". As we know black colour shows negativity and sometimes it is a symbol of gentlemen who wear in black in special occasions. Writer's talent can be seen in depicting characters' self realization and pessimistic look to the life with the help of colours and clothing. Other characters' ill-fitting or inappropriate clothes are markers of more permanent, insoluble problems. When first met, Squeers is part over-dressed in "scholastic black" (31), part under-dressed, with his sleeves too long and his trousers too short, indicating his unfittedness to his "vocation." His lack of an eye marks him out as a misfit, too, and a man of warped vision. When last seen, he is wrapped in a huge greasy old great-coat, either through want of anything better to wear, or in an attempt at disguise. Both possibilities suggest a total collapse of identity. For young people to be dressed ridiculously is also deeply significant. It indicates that something is wrong, more generally, in the way they are being treated. Smike is a shambles.

John Carey claim that Dickens spends *"more time describing clothes than describing people"*⁸. It is clear only that the young hero strikes other characters, like Squeers, not to mention Squeers'

⁶ Charles Dickens. *Nicholas Nickleby*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1920.

⁷ Bolton, Philip H. *Dickens Dramatized*. London: Mansell, 1987.

⁸ " Charles Dickens. *Nicholas Nickleby*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1920.

enamoured daughter Fanny, as looking like a gentleman. Squeers, for example, senses immediately that he will be out of place at Dotheboys Hall.

He has more to spare selling in order to relieve Noggs of the burden of hospitality, and pay for lodgings for himself and Smike. In a narrative packed with references to money, clothes have been seen as a form of currency already: new boys were required to bring various garments to Dotheboys Hall, for Mrs Squeers to purloin. Nicholas's dealings show not simply that clothes or of secondary importance to him, but that he is resourceful and considerate. Above all, the cash will enable him to be independent. It is a propitious start.

Role, spectacle and meaning are subtly intertwined throughout the narrative. Attracted as he was by vivacious theatre folk, keen as he was to maintain the extraordinarily high volume of sales for this new work, Dickens was not using the "pantomimic" just to entertain.

Far from presenting a kind of escapist romp, he was offering his readers a vehicle through which he could express the world-view earlier expressed in his essay on "The Pantomime of Life" in Bentley's Miscellany that "*the close resemblance which the clowns of the stage bear to those of every-day life is perfectly extraordinary*"⁹ the implication being that society itself is a pantomime, in which people act outrageously and risibly. This invites the Bahktinian corollary that the carnevalesque has a subversive purpose, providing a diversity of voices and provoking a diversity of responses, producing fluidity, liberation and change — providing, in fact, "an opportunity for changing his readers' basic stories about the nature of reality". Bahktinian readings, bringing out the fantastical in the text, and showing the subversive purposes it serves, seem highly appropriate here. After all, this was the novel that had the most direct and specific impact of all Dickens's novels, making the so-called "Yorkshire schools" notorious, and forcing their closure¹⁰. As in *Oliver Twist*, which he was finishing while writing the earlier chapters, the general idea was to show goodness endangered but finally triumphant. But the Crummles epitomise the author's current approach to the conflict involved, as a struggle dramatic in its intensity, far-reaching in its possibilities, and heroic to the core.

Amazed by what he sees at the school, and laid siege to by the simpering Fanny Squeers, Nicholas is now exactly at the stage Rousseau sketches further on in *Émile*: "he knows what is done in society; it remains for him to see how one lives in it" (327). According to Rousseau, this period, when the youth is first let loose in the adult world, is one of "so great and so sudden a change" that it is truly a dangerous time for him, when he is liable to become both vulnerable and "jaunty" (330). As for the former, we learn in the opening chapter that Nicholas has been brought up by a good, if weak and hen-pecked, father who values "the quiet routine of a country life" much like the one Rousseau proposes for his *Émile*. In this respect, the youth has been as properly preserved from the "great world" and its vices as Rousseau would have wished. Consequently, he is not influenced by his new companions, or drawn to their way of thinking. As to the latter, he becomes jaunty, as he strikes a pose with Squeers, flourishing words and blows together when he leaps to Smike's defence. Far from swaggering or trying to look good in order to impress, however, he is launching himself boldly and effectively against corruption and cruelty; the "inflated stage diction" here, as elsewhere, expresses what he truly feels in his heart. **Conclusion.** This first encounter is an important milestone for him. He, who had previously thought he should follow the path his uncle had laid out for him, is now following no one's principles but his own. And in doing so, he is choosing his path for himself, and taking his preliminary steps towards establishing his own identity.

⁹ Charles Dickens. *Nicholas Nickleby*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1920.P.173

¹⁰ Ackroyd, Peter. *Dickens: A Life*. London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1990

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