Guest Blog: Why Read Dickens?

Posted on interestingliterature by Alexander Atkins, and posted last year on his excellent blog for the Dickens bicentenary.

This 200th article on Bookshelf is dedicated to my teacher, mentor, and dear friend, Tom A., who taught me how to understand the human condition and the world through the lens of literature, and cultivated a lifelong love affair with books.

All of this Dickensmania underscores the enduring value of the Dickens canon — realize that books have never been out of print — and has initiated numerous articles and discussions, in outside the academe, about why Dickens is still relevant. Indeed, the celebration of the Dickens Bicentennial begs the question: why read Dickens?

Among literary critics and English professors there is no middle ground: either you love Dickens or you hate him. Despite these polarized inclinations, there is an unequivocal agreement that Dickens had an amazingly fertile imagination and was an absolutely brilliant storyteller. Dickens had a cinematic style that enabled him to develop vivid characters and settings that leaped fully-formed from the page. In short, reading a Dickens novel is like watching a film. And Dickens — like another literary genius, Mark Twain — had a great ear for spoken language and dialect: each character has a colorful, distinct voice and presence. Moreover, Dickens, like other Victorian writers (Hardy, Thackeray, and Trollope, to name a few) had an expansive vocabulary. To read Dickens — and generally you need a dictionary by your side — you fully experience the richness, depth, and sheer beauty of the English language. One of the most obvious reason that Dickens endures is how his work, particularly the Christmas Books, influenced and changed our perceptions of Christmas. Watching Scrooge’s transformation in A Christmas Carol, whether on screen or stage, is a cherished annual Christmas tradition around the world. And finally, Dickens is regarded by many critics as one of the most influential authors in the pantheon of literature, joining such luminaries as Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, and Cervantes.

During the Dickens Bicentennial many Dickens scholars have weighed in on the question of the year — why read Dickens? Perhaps one of the most insightful and thoughtful answers comes from Jon Varese, currently a PhD candidate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a research assistant at The Dickens Project: “We read Dickens not just because he was a man of his own times, but because he was a man for our times as well. We read Dickens because his perception and investigation of the human psyche is deep, precise, and illuminating, and because he tells us things about ourselves by portraying personality traits and habits that might seem all too familiar. His messages about poverty and charity have travelled through decades, and we can learn from the experiences of his characters almost as easily as we can learn from our own

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experiences... These are all wonderful reasons to read Dickens. But these are not exactly the reasons why I read Dickens. My search for a [definitive] answer continued but never with success, until one year the little flicker came from a high school student, whose essay I was reviewing for a writing contest. “We need to read Dickens’s novels,” she wrote, “because they tell us, in the grandest way possible, why we are what we are.”

“What truly gives Charles Dickens his immortality is neither the life he lived nor the commercial genius that spurred enormous sales of his works [perhaps as much as $68 million in today’s dollars]. His immortality rests on the inimitable characters he created in his novels,” writes Elliot Engel, who has taught literature at the University of North Carolina, and North Caroline State University, and is President of the Dickens Fellowship of North Carolina. Engel elaborates: “He doesn’t give you realistic characters. Instead, Dickens makes sure that his characters, rather than being real people, are walking, talking, living, breathing personifications of a universal feeling. Scrooge represents stinginess in everything he does... Tiny Tim represents the victory of benevolence over handicap... Ultimately, [Dickens’s] characters will live forever because they never lived in the first place.” Engel makes an apt comparison to the Bard: “[Dickens’s] characters represent unchanging human emotion and feeling. In this way, his characters are similar to Shakespeare’s because they are timeless. Like Shakespeare, Dickens bursts through the age in which he lives... Dickens remains today as great a novelist as Shakespeare was a dramatist.”

Jonathan Yardley, a book critic and columnist for the Washington Post, dismisses the criticism that Dickens’s characters lacked depth: “I’ve believed in his characters all my life... I find myself very emotionally engaged when I read Dickens, and that doesn’t happen unless I care about the characters. Sure, David Copperfield can seem too perfect and priggish... but melodrama was part of Dickens’s arsenal. He wanted people to feel strongly. And the various fictive techniques and characterizations he used were not idly chosen.” Once again the comparison of Dickens to Shakespeare is compelling: “The world changes, but people don’t,” Yardlye continues. “Dickens’s understanding of human character is as pertinent now as then; you can find in public and private life types who exactly fit the Dickensian mold. Shakespeare understood everything! There are a lot of things Dickens doesn’t understand. Dickens was not given the gift of subtlety; he was prolix. He probably oversimplified things; he was guilty of sentimentality and melodrama and so forth, but he did have that same visceral sense of Homo Sapiens.”

It is clear that characterization is central to the Dickens canon. In a recent interview, Dr. William Moeck, curator of “Charles Dickens: The Key to Character” on exhibition at the New York Public Library, notes Dickens’s mastery of melodrama and his remarkable visual style: “[Dickens] continues to make us laugh and continues to make us cry, often on the same page. Although that melodrama may not be to everyone’s taste, the philosopher George Santayana nailed it when he said that although Dickens’s taste is sometimes wanting, no one can deny his genius... [The] reason why Dickens has continued to be powerful is because of the visualizable quality of his way of drawing characters, and that has made him a natural for cinematography. Early screenwriters said they were influenced by Dickens because they found in his novels such pre-cinematic techniques as panning, close-ups, montage, and parallel plotting. Since we live in a visually oriented culture, I think that’s probably his power. He speaks to our mind’s eye.”
Radhika Jones, executive editor of *Time* magazine and former managing editor of *The Paris Review*, focuses on Dickens’s theatricality and masterful use of language: “Dickens had trained to be an actor, and the aural quality of language was always on his mind. [His novels] were often read aloud among families and communities, and eventually Dickens performed scenes himself, in his series of wildly popular theatrical reading tours. This strategy broadened his audience, primed them and motivated them. And it shaped his style. All those characters with funny names and verbal tics and signature accents — their words beg to be spoken. Even his most complex sentences have a natural rhythm to them. They work out loud and on the page.”

Michael Feingold, writing in the *Village Voice* about Simon Callow’s recent biography, *Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World*, recognizes not only Dickens’s theatricality, but also his enormous reach and influence: “Dickens’s creativity, merging with his trauma-powered drive for success, gave his art unexampled reach: he went everywhere and noted everything he saw. Casting his net so widely over his own time, he ensnared his successors: Without Dickens, you wouldn’t have Dostoyevsky, Proust, and Kafka, all of whom cherished him... His innate theatricality drove his novels onto the stage; some were pirated even before he’d finished writing them.”

This theme of reach and influence is echoed by Peter Ackroyd, who wrote the most definitive and comprehensive biography in recent times about Dickens. Ackroyd notes: “In Dickens’s work — in Dickens’s life itself — there is the unmistakable urge to encompass everything. In this he is a part of his period, the man exemplifying the spirit of his time in his energetic pursuit of some complete vision of the world. The intricacy, the complexity, the momentum, the evolution, the very length of his narratives indicate as much, so great a concern for the central human progress of the world, and yet such a longing for transcendence also. Charles Dickens was the last of the great eighteenth-century novelists and the first of the great symbolic novelists, and in the crushing equilibrium between these two forces dwells the real strength of his art.”

Author John Irving correctly identifies Dickens’s “abiding faith in the innocence and magic of children” that explains why his work still appeals to new generations of readers. “Dickens believed that his own imagination — in fact, his overall well-being — depended on the contact he kept with his childhood. Furthermore, his popularity with his fellow Victorians, which is reflected in the ongoing interest of young readers today, is rooted in Dickens’s remarkable ability for rendering realistically what many adults condescendingly call fantasy.”

Biographer Fred Kaplan, who has written a highly-regarded biography of Dickens, shared a very illuminating story of when Henry James and Dickens met in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1867. Although terribly brief, their encounter was an epiphany in James’s life. He observed Dickens alone in a room and noted his aura of authority and discipline; James described the famous author’s look as a “merciless, military gaze.” Kaplan explains: “[James] realized that Dickens could get maximum amount of life out of the smallest experience. That, combined with his talent, was conducive to the creation of great art... James learned that the great artist has to use his energy in the most disciplined and ruthless way.” Like Shakespeare, Dickens had the instinctive ability to placing humanity under a microscope — meticulously probing, dissecting, distilling, analyzing — to collect the fodder for his life’s work.

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