Charles Dickens and His World of Readers

Charles Dickens is an author of worldwide importance. His novels remain for us models of inquiry into human character and values. Dickens overwhelms us with variety in characters, figures, tropes, and the sheer force of his writing. In the process, he launches forth the energy of voices that cross the boundaries of society. As we, like his nineteenth-century readers, live in the busy context of life, Dickens’s writings suggest for us a universal sense of humanity, an essential demos that we participate in. His novels, now regularly transformed into films and onto the stage, continue to contribute to conversation across boundaries. They have been read by people of all classes, across race, gender, and profession, in a wide variety of forms in homes, libraries, and other public and private places. Translations have brought them across national and linguistic boundaries. Stage and film adaptations have made them familiar to many people who have never read his books. The pervasiveness of this world-class author and his attention to human concerns makes him a valuable point for dialogue among us today. For Dickens’s contemporaries, his texts were sites where discourses were enabled and prompted a system of relations that may be called discursive (Foucault 1972, 45-46). Dickens’s many-voiced texts are pluralistic, drawing his readers into imaginative participation in a wide social panorama. They enact a heteroglossia emerging from many classes and regions of British society. They represent a world of voices seeking to communicate across boundaries.

The energy and excess in Dickens’s texts is designed to communicate sympathetic relationship within the human condition. As the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin once wrote in his reflections on Fyodor Dostoevsky, “To be means to communicate… I cannot become myself without the other” (quoted in Todorov 96). Dickens became an author of worldwide importance in connection with his audience. In his novels he offered his readers a dialogism of voices of all classes in which the claims of abstract reason and power discourse are deposed and people are allowed to speak. In his writing is an invitation to mutual engagement in life. Dickens’s texts enact human connection through sympathy. It is through the details of his characters’ lives that we enter the material circumstances and meet his narrative mobility and strangeness, and what John Bowen calls “the ways in which the works make an ethical claim upon or call to us” (208).

Dickens is for us a model of boundary-crossing warmth in everyday life in all its cognitive, ethical, and metaphysical richness. As Richard Rorty has pointed out, Dickens writes a 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). Or as the American philosopher George Santayana has said, Dickens has expressed “sympathetic participation in the daily life of mankind” (537). It is this sympathy that can draw us into the conversation that crosses boundaries and develops interpersonal community. Indeed, Dickens’s contemporary reading audience appears to offer us some examples of this capacity for sympathy that Dickens’s writings underscored.
In this paper, I present some voices of Dickens’s contemporary readers in America who were sustained and encouraged in their lives by Dickens’s fiction. Their comments, in their letters, autobiographies, or journals, point to the significance of Dickens in peoples’ lives across different societies. As Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund point out “Indeed, a story’s characters could come to seem a part of a readers’ own extended family or circle of friends” (11). For Dickens, as Kathleen Tillotson and John Butt once noted, his audience was “the greatest love affair of his life.” The author was, in their view, “peculiarly susceptible to the influence of his readers…”

By presenting the voices of some of Dickens’s readers, I wish to let them sound both Dickens’s universality and his continuing relevance for us today. In looking at Dickens’s audience, I am concerned with the translation of cultural materials from one context to another. In this paper, my focus is on the transmission of Dickens’s texts and their reception by American audiences. However, through this I would like to suggest that work of this type may be developed by scholars looking at Dickens’s various readerships internationally, from language to language and nation to nation. In this larger sense, I wish to suggest that such a mutual effort to uncover Dickens’s audience, as well as his international critical reception, exemplifies our exchange today in communities of interest and concern across boundaries. Cultural exchange and the circulation of texts act as ways in which we reach to each other and recognize what we share in common.

Dickens worked across boundaries. This was so not only geographically, when he wrote while in America, Italy, and France, where he traveled. It was also the case professionally: Dickens wrote journalism as well as fiction. He wrote on the borders of romanticism and realism. He not only wrote his stories, he enacted them in public readings, in effect making them oral communications as well as written texts. Further, Dickens’s characters are often liminal and on a boundary on “the romantic side of familiar things.” Some of them have an ambiguous double-nature, like [Mr. Jaspers] of the Mystery of Edwin Drood. Others, like Oliver Twist, live between poverty, criminality, and a saving inheritance. Jo, of Bleak House, is a crossing-sweeper. Little Nell, of The Old Curiosity Shop, drifts on the streets, as her innocence is shadowed by evil. Gaffer Hexam of Our Mutual Friend wanders a murky world scavenging along the Thames, where things are submerged and life and death appear intertwined. Pip, of Great Expectations, as a boy on the misty marshes at Christmastime, is turned upside down by an escaped convict and plunged into uncertainties. He later meets Miss Havisham, who drifts aimlessly in the past.

Dickens speaks to us still, as he spoke to his contemporaries, through his universal sympathy. We respond to Oliver Twist or Esther Summerson as they seek a kind of liberty and wholeness. The characters and settings that Dickens portrayed point outward, beyond the page, to sites of the search for liberty and dignity in the world that surely include places like Bulgaria in the 1870’s. Here the poet Xristo Botev, killed in the 1876 uprising against the Turks, did not live to see an independent Bulgaria. Others, like the poet Ivan Vazov, could later celebrate
national pride, the beauties of the land, and the virtues of the Bulgarian people. Like them, Dickens’s work underwrites a struggle for liberty.

To put liberty into practice, in the 1870’s or today, requires responsive institutions: ones anchored in values. In Dickens we see the call to make institutions responsive and responsible. Dickens provided a language of life for those nineteenth century readers who were puzzled by the incomprehensibility of the modernizing world. The workhouse of *Oliver Twist*, the Chancery and Mrs. Jellyby’s telescopic philanthropy in *Bleak House*, and the Marshalsea Prison and Circumlocution Office of *Little Dorrit*, all pose ethical claims. Dickens sees through illusions of mastery. He is paradigmatic of a commitment to human freedom and integrity and the right to equality. Indeed, Dickens’s work underscores the capacity of language to engage clearly and truthfully with the world, not in circumlocution, not in evasive legal jargon or bureaucratic double-speak, and not in abstract reason or Gradgrindian fact.

For there is also an ethical boundary that Dickens’s characters live on either side of, or trip uneasily along the edges of. Dickens is important for us because of the ethical claims that appear in his work. In his work, Dickens critiqued institutions, bureaucracies, legal systems. Within Dickens’s lyricism, we hear the voices of people of all classes that are, as John Bowen observes, “suddenly and overwhelmingly blown back toward us in the form of an ethico-political responsibility.” This call to ethics is emphasized by Martha Nussbaum, who examines Dickens’s *Hard Times* for its ethical imperative and call to sympathy. Nussbaum rejects “the economists’ habit of reducing everything to calculation” and seeing only “abstract features of people and situations” (44). Some philosophers have read Nussbaum’s early work as too attached to a principle of realism, or as too focused upon our affective response to literature. One might add that Nussbaum and Rorty both have notions about how a work of literature should be read. Readers do read in many different ways.

Even so, following Nussbaum and Rorty, I would argue that reading Dickens did, for many people, promote empathy and understanding for disadvantaged people. We may look at the comments of his readers in their journals and letters to consider how these readers may have looked at Dickens’s texts. 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.” It appears that Dickens 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.

Dickens appealed to a Victorian audience seeking moral grounding in a changing world. He expresses a kind of virtue ethics that urges the humanizing of his characters. His characters, 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? His villains, like Daniel Quilp and Bradley Headstone, fail miserably at this and one, Mr. Krook, explodes in spontaneous combustion. 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. As Fraser’s Magazine in 1840 said: “he has always espoused the cause of the humble, the persecuted, the oppressed” (400). 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.

Dickens’s fiction was an important resource for Victorians, who responded to the changing world around them: a crowded, diversified environment caught up in the engine of modernity. Dickens and his readers met at this busy intersection of their world. Serial fiction was alive in periodical rhythm that has been likened by some to the train and its movement. It held a sense of the suspense and passage of time. Its readers were living in history and creating a home, as Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund have pointed out. They too were heroes and heroines in danger of being pulled by the speed of the city, as we are pulled today by the rhythm of globalization and technologies. Reading fiction was, in a sense, performed in a space apart from history, or at least in a moment of reflection and respite from the challenges of the commercial world. Dickens’s serialized stories participated in this reflective and often communal moment, before people plunged back into change and the rhythms of their industrial world. For in these moments in the family circle, or the reading group, there was companionship between the book and its readers and between the readers, or listeners, and each other.

Dickens gives to us the gift of sympathy. From his first appearance with Sketches by Boz and The Pickwick Papers, Dickens made his readers laugh. He caught the popular imagination and his characters became topics of discussion. From the first appearance of Oliver Twist in 1837-38, Dickens’s novels drew sympathy from his readers. Jane T.H. Cross, a writer from the American south, remarks in 1860, “I will read now, I will lose, in the pathetic story of Oliver Twist, a sense of my own miseries. It is one of the few novels I can read; there are some touches of deep feeling in it.” (155). Little Nell, in The Old Curiosity Shop in 1840-41, prompted even greater public sympathy from Dickens’s readers. Readers wrote to Dickens to spare Little Nell. Mothers wrote to him to tell him of their own children who had died, writing to him, as Edgar Johnson tells us, about “how good she was, and how, in this or that respect, she resembled Nell.” (1:260).

Readers encountered these sympathetic characters in Dickens’s fiction not only in private but in oral readings among family gatherings and small reading groups. These readers and listeners discussed Dickens and his characters entered their conversations. These people, who read Dickens, interacted on an interpersonal level, and may be said to come close to an ideal of “community.” Dickens was a resource among them for social sympathy. His fiction continues to be this for us today.

Social historians have observed that during the 1840’s sympathy became a principle of social relations in America and in Britain. (Bushman, 1992, 81-83, 91-92, Haltunnen, 1982, 35.) Dickens’s texts struck a chord within this environment. Today, perhaps, we are less moved by
sentiment of this sort than Dickens’s readers were in the 1840’s. Even so, sympathy, or human empathy, remains a valuable language of the heart for us. The pathos and humor in Dickens’s novels still appeals to the heart and can strike the chords of social sympathy among us. As it moved some of his contemporary readers to sympathetic activity, so it can move us. When we look back to the time of Dickens, we can see the circulation of Dickens’s texts as translating messages across country, region, class, race, and gender. Dickens, then and now, speaks loudly to the experience of marginalization, economic underdevelopment, and wrestling with unresponsive institutions. In his stories we see people seeking human dignity amid the impact of modernity. These issues remain important in our world today and beckon to us for a sympathetic human response.

Dickens’s social sympathy led him into personal involvement in philanthropic causes. As a court reporter in the early 1830’s, Dickens had seen the limitations of the legislative process in Parliament and the courts. He developed a more ‘grassroots’ approach to social action. With Angela Burdett-Coutts, he started a home for wayward young women to help them to reform their lives. He attempted to develop a fund for indigent writers. He engaged in charity benefits through plays and his early public readings.

Of course, Dickens’s most effective way to effect change was to use the pen, to move the hearts and minds of his audience. The entries that appear in his readers’ journals, letters, library records, and autobiographies strongly suggest that he did. We see in these examples some of the practical and personal consequences that reading Dickens appears to have had among some of his contemporaries. Dickens, with humor and pathos, provided hope for his contemporary readers.

Humphrey House once insisted that Dickens had never produced an actual effect in the world of reform (222-23). Likely, he was referring to enactments of legislation, like reform of the Poor Laws, against which Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*. Perhaps Dickens’s writing resulted in no direct legislative changes. However, the influence of Dickens extended in other ways. The diaries, notebooks, and letters of legislators, abolitionists, educators, ministers, and other prominent workers for justice show that Dickens did indeed have an impact upon their thinking. Karl Marx, in 1854, noted that Dickens’s “graphic and eloquent pages” had “issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians”(4). The private diaries and letters of Dickens’s contemporaries who read him bear out the tenability of this statement.

One may correlate reading Charles Dickens with practical effects that emerged in his contemporaries’ lives. We can see several Dickens readers in the United States, in the state of New York, through whom Dickens may have had practical impact on institutions. For example, [George Pearce], a noted philanthropist, was a patron of the New York Society Library who read *Oliver Twist*. Library records show that in 1851 Pearce checked the book out twice. He later started two orphanages, one for girls and one for boys, in upstate New York.
Wilbur, an avid reader of Dickens started an asylum for the mentally retarded in Syracuse, New York. In discussing Dickens, he reflects that “the natural observation of childhood is so devitalized.” He turns to *Hard Times* as he considers the problems in educational systems and he writes of a system that is “subverted from its ordained purpose of importing power and warmth and vigor to the whole spiritual nature, as to draw upon itself the scoring finger of the satirist”(68).

We see that Dickens was read by American anti-slavery activists. The papers of Samuel May, a noted abolitionist, show him to be an enthusiastic reader of Dickens. Frederick Douglass reprinted Dickens’s *Bleak House* for his readers of *The Frederick Douglass Paper*, printed in Rochester, New York. For Elizabeth McHenry, in her book *Forgotten Readers*, Frederick Douglass’s use of *Bleak House* suggests a black readership and an abolitionist readership for Charles Dickens in America in the early 1850’s. Samuel May’s journals in the Cornell University Library show that anti-slavery activists were inspired by Dickens’s concern with human rights. The writings of Lydia Marie Child suggest her close acquaintance with Dickens’s fiction and that the sympathy she found in it may have informed her own work and writing. To her friend Sarah Shaw, she wrote on March 23, 1856: “I have admired several of Bulwer’s heroines, but I never loved one of them and hugged them to my heart as I do Little Nell, and Esther, and Little Dorrit. Dickens is the great Apostle of Humanity. God bless him” (212).

Certainly there were many variables besides the reading of Dickens that were involved in the action of these reformers. However, it is clear that Dickens’s works had an important and continuing place in the consciousness of these activists and leaders. In some cases, it can be suggested that Dickens made a tangible difference by encouraging social sympathy and action.

Dickens helped people to learn how to read English. He gave some of his readers access to a written form and style that they could imitate in articulating their autobiographies (Rose 111-12).

Dickens’s novels and characters were cited by reformers during and after his time. These included educational reformers, social workers, and social scientists. Junius Henry Browne, a popular magazine writer, looked at the poor children of New York City in 1870 and wrote:

Not a few are pale and haggard, and sad-eyed, reminding you of Smike, Oliver Twist, Little Nell, with the promise of better things in them. With education and training they would be intelligent and worthy men and women. Their eyes look appealingly at you… Each one was furnished with a little bowl and spoon, and it was interesting to see how quickly the bowl emptied in most cases, and like Oliver Twist, they called aloud for more. (194)

A New York City social worker, Ignatz Leo Nascher, wrote in 1909:
The term Fagin, after Dickens’s notorious character in Oliver Twist is now generally applied to one who induces of children to become pickpockets and shoplifters. (49)

These examples suggest that the works of Charles Dickens did indeed have a practical effect upon peoples’ lives and public discourse. He stirred people to sympathy. The ethical texture of Dickens’s work was frequently remarked upon by ministers and educators, who turned to his fiction for examples of virtue and charity. For example, Henry Copee, the first president of Lehigh University wrote of “the good work” Dickens had done “in expanding individual and public charity”:

His tenderness is touching, and his pathos at once excites our sympathy. He does not tell us to feel or to weep, but he shows us scenes like those in the life of Smike, and in the sufferings and death of Little Nell, which so simply appeal to the heart that we are for the first time forgetful of the world which conjures them before us… Dickens is bold in the advocacy of truth and in denouncing error; he is the champion of honest poverty; he is the foe of class pretension and oppression; he is the friend of friendless children; the reformer of those for whom society has made vagrants. (455-57)

The social sympathy embodied in Dickens’s moved these readers to public or private comment. Dickens offered them a means for meditation on the core values of humanity and the perils of the human condition. He provided a sense of pluralism in his many-voiced texts that helped them to free their own voices.

What I wish to suggest is that great novels, like those of Dickens, which appeal to human sympathy are among our most precious international resources. In the nineteenth-century, print circulation, the distribution of books and periodicals and other media through the communications circuit, played a key role in opening ideas and dialogue broadly among people. Following Benedict Anderson’s proposal that the circulation of print contributed to the development of nations as “imagined communities,” a similar model might be used, with some qualifications, in our age of globalization to suggest the role of textual distribution toward international dialogue beyond previous national boundaries. That is, now beyond imagining nation, we readers may also imagine a world. Like Dickens’s first readers, we bring our experience of the world to our reading of international publications, past and present.

Great books like those of Dickens continue help us to imagine our place in this world. Like the reading circles and family groups who first read Dickens, we, with our unique differences in experience and perspective, may meet in small groups of conversation about such texts. Such conversation can have practical consequences. For example, the circulation of information among nascent movements in Eastern Europe shaped concerns and assisted in bringing about change in the 1980’s. Economic and political factors will always have a powerful role in the globalizing environment. However, the humanities can continue to direct a compelling appeal to the human heart and to the richness of conversation among us.
Clearly, Charles Dickens became an author of worldwide importance, in part, because of Britain’s imperial global reach. Dickens was obviously commercially assisted by the expansion of British influence and the economics of the book trade. There is a crucial connection between an author and the economic system in which he works. However, the point is that, through the book trade, the very human message in his books got out to the world. The widely circulated works of Charles Dickens fostered a kind of imagined community: one not of nation but rather one of mutuality grounded in human sympathy. This cultural exchange operated on a fundamentally interpersonal level among readers. Dickens’s books became a cultural vehicle for dialogue and participation. The characters and stories of Dickens, who democratized fiction, became a topic of conversation.

Our sharing of great books, like those of Dickens, across regional and national borders, enhances humanistic dialogue among us. Conscious attention to an author’s works fosters dialogue among us that promotes such community and may serve as a model for international exchange. The universality and sympathy we continue to find in Dickens can yet foster hope in this age of globalization. Conscious attention to an author’s works and to his or her audience fosters dialogue among us. This may serve as a model for international exchange. The universality and sympathy we continue to find in Dickens can yet foster hope in this age of globalization.

The novels of Charles Dickens continue to speak to the heart of the humanities, which today seem to be alive on the margins of a world that is absorbed in commercial and techno-scientific activity. Dickens’s novels are among the great books that are our common cultural property. They speak to the inner life of people and to the crisis of modernity. As philosopher Richard Rorty has pointed out, in the event of a disaster, novels like those of Dickens would preserve values (141). Books like those of Dickens are the kind of books that can sustain us.

If the great novels- those of writers like Dickens, Tolstoy, or Dostoevsky- still touch a universal core in us, we can learn much by looking at how their earlier readers responded to them. Our dialogue about how authors crafted their texts and how these texts speak to us today is enhanced by insight into how common readers and others besides professional critics responded to the work of these writers in the past. Dickens- for his humanity, his call to ethical responsibility, and his keen awareness of human character- is a key humanistic resource for a dialogue across the boundaries that may separate us. For opening the heart and quickening one’s vision, the novels of Charles Dickens continue to be uniquely valuable works. These books are classics from the past that speak to the present and can foster the discussion of values that will lead us into the future.
References


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(1837) *Oliver Twist* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(1838) *Nicholas Nickleby* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(1840) *The Old Curiosity Shop* Oxford: Oxford University Press.


*Fraser’s Magazine* (April 1840): 400

*Frederick Douglass Paper* (July 1852): 1


Notes

1. Kathleen Tillotson and John Butt, Dickens at Work, London: Methuen. The authors provide insight into Charles Dickens’s working habits in writing his serial novels, beginning particularly with Dombey and Son (1848). They point out of serialization “To the author it meant a larger public, but a public more delicately responsive, who made their views known during the progress of a novel…”

2. In the first number of *Household Words* (1850), Dickens wrote that the intention of the publication was “To show to all that in familiar things, even in those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out.”

3. The free market can be correlated with the distribution and wide availability of Dickens’s books. In America, for example, the lack of international copyright made the reprinting of Dickens’s texts highly cost-effective for fledgling publishers.

4. Dickens’s novels in Russian editions had a considerable impact upon the history of literature. Leo Tolstoy listen Dickens’s *David Copperfield* as one of the books that had “immense influence” upon him. Dostoevsky knew Dickens’s works well and had French editions of *Bleak House* and *Dombey and Son* in his library. His wife’s diaries tell us that he read *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*. Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* has been thought by some critics to reflect his close reading of Dickens’s *Hard Times*. See Loralee MacPike, *Dostoevsky’s Dickens* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1981), Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism* (Cambridge UP, 1985), N.M. Lary, *Dickens and Dostoevsky* (London, 1973).
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