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Role of Entertainers in Charles Dickens's Novels

— A Research Note —

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“In *Bleak House*, I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things” (*B. H.* xlii.). —These famous words by Charles Dickens in the preface to *Bleak House* typically represent his perception of the world and how he delineates it in his novels. What makes the world of his novels more fertile and attractive is that it is actually not only “the romantic side of familiar things” that he presents, but we can also find “commonplace side of fantastic things” presented in various kinds of ways. This paper will discuss this inseparableness of two (or more) sides of one entity, chiefly focusing on the world of showpeople, or entertainers, which can be often witnessed in Dickensian novels.

I .

Among many novels by Dickens, the one that introduces the widest variety of entertainers must be, perhaps, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Diverse backstage scenes and circumstances they allow us to peep at testify how indivisible the fanciful world of showpeople is from the values of the real world we live in.

The heroine Nell, on her flight with her grandfather from London into the country, first encounters two Punch-show performers, who are sitting on the churchyard grass “to make some needful repairs in the stage arrangements” (123). The showmen deliberately try to finish this work before they go to the hotel because they know that “it would destroy all the delusion, and take away all the in-

terest" (123). Moreover, a group of performers on stilts called "Grinder's lot" wear the "public costume . . . of the Highland kind" on the stage, while they are found by Nell attired in a pea jacket or pelisse to avoid chill off stage (133).

The Old Curiosity Shop, in addition, presents a quite intriguing aspect of the issue of calculation and the world of showpeople. One of the showmen, Mr. Vufin tells his friends, "Once get a giant shaky on his legs, and the public care no more about him than they do for a dead cabbage-stalk" (143). He explains that "used-up giants" are "usually kept in carawans [sic.] to wait upon the dwarfs" (143-4). They keep the aged giants not because they pity them but because they have a calculating policy: "It's better that, than letting 'em go upon the parish or about the streets . . . Once make a giant common, and giants will never draw again . . ." (143). This scene foregrounds the severe fact that aged and weak-legged giants are no longer valuable in the show-world, and the only thing they can do is to avoid "ruining the trade" by hiding themselves from the general eyes (144). What is all the more cruel for those giants is that aged dwarfs are cherished because "The older a dwarf is, the better worth he is" (144). In a certain Maunder's group, it is reported, old giants have to serve old dwarfs, and to suffer being stuck pins in the legs by an elderly and vicious dwarf.

Another instance of shrewd business ability of entertainers is seen in Mrs. Jarley, whom Nell happens to meet on a common. This wax-work exhibitor, who travels around in a caravan, has "an inventive genius" and contrives "various devices for attracting visitors to the exhibition" (216). She tries to dispose the ornaments "to the best advantage in the decoration of the room" (211), distributes advertizing bills, and buys, after negotiation, an acrostic for promoting the spectacle, although she refuses the trade, at first, saying "It comes very expensive" (212). When there are few visitors, she is even seen sitting "in the pay-place, chinking silver moneys from noon till night," and "calling upon the crowd . . . that the price of admission was [is] only sixpence" (243). While inviting the visitors into

the fantastic world of wax-work, this lady is fettered in the most realistic universe.

Thus the entertainers in *The Old Curiosity Shop* keep reminding the reader that their world is not so fanciful as it appears to the outsiders, and that it is immersed in commercialism and calculation just as other kinds of worldly business are. This bears more significance if we remember that the purpose of Nell's wandering journey into the country is to flee from Quilp, a villainous moneylender, and from London, which sometimes serves as the symbol of mercenary values. By making the heroine and her grandfather encounter, one after another, a broad range of showpeople submerged in calculation, the author suggests that there is no actual escaping from the common money-conscious world, except by death.

II.

It is well known that young Dickens was enthusiastic about theatricals and was "a keen and frequent attender at all forms of dramatic entertainment," "really studying the bills first, and going to see where there was the best acting" (Ackroyd 120). Not only did he enjoy watching the plays but he was "seriously considering the idea of a career in the theatre (Ackroyd 138), although it never came true due to the severe illness that caught him on the day of an audition with a certain stage manager. His interest in theatricals, however, was never lost even after he became a writer, which may be one of the reasons Dickens sometimes includes theatres and stage performers in his novels.

Nicholas Nickleby, for example, sends the young hero into a theatrical group, while he is changing his careers from one to another. Nicholas happens to see, at a roadside inn, Mr. Crummles, the manager of a theatrical company, rehearsing a combat scene with two actors. When Nicholas is required to make a remark on the performance, he refers to the difference of the height of two combatants: "if they were a little more of a size" (274). Then, the clever manager answers:

“Size! . . . why, it’s the very essence of the combat that there should be a foot or two between them. How are you to get up the sympathies of the audience in a legitimate manner, if there isn’t a little man contending against a great one . . .” (274)

At this point, Nicholas is still an outsider, but he glimpses how the entertainers calculate and contrive the ways to control the audience’s feelings.

Moreover, the hero notices the manager viewing people “with a professional eye” (275). Nicholas wishes his friend Smike’s countenance “were a little more plump and less haggard,” but Mr. Crummles finds it “a capital countenance,” because “without a pad on his body, and hardly a touch of paint upon his face, he’d make such an actor for the starved business” (275). The stage manager finally recruits the young man, together with Smike, for his company as “a novelty,” telling him, “There’s genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh” (277).

Besides watching people’s appearance with a professional eye, Mr. Crummles pays attention to Nicholas’s education and takes advantage of it by asking him to write bills for shop-windows, hand-bills and even “a piece to bring out the whole strength of the company” (278). He is also concerned about the props for the stage, and is eager to introduce, in the next piece, “a real pump and two washing-tubs” that he “bought . . . cheap, at a sale the other day” (278). This stage manager, so to speak, is a guide for an inexperienced youth to go into the world that consists of multiple aspects. Although Nicholas exhibits “such a contrast” (37) to his uncle Ralph, he cannot live completely free from the mammonistic values incarnated by Ralph, whose morals are “that riches are the only true source of happiness and power, and that it is lawful and just to compass their acquisition by all means short of felony” (18-9). The young man’s contact with the theatrical company hints at the possibility of different aspects things or people may possess, and

their close relationship with one another.

Another instance of a youth involved in the scene of the theatricals, this time as a mere audience, can be found in Mr. Wopsle's amateur play in *Great Expectations*. Despite the playbill "relative to the celebrated provincial amateur of Roscian renown" (225), the performance is so wretched that the hero Pip feels "afraid . . . to say a word about the play" to the amateur actor after the stage. Chiefly because it is an amateur play, the players fail in establishing the world of fancy on the stage: a "venerable Peer" is played by an actor "with a dirty face, who seemed to have risen from the people late in life," a Danish chivalry has "a feminine appearance," and the late king of the country refers to the "manuscript round its truncheon" "with a tendency to lose the place of reference" (226). The audience playfully hoots the player, and "on the question whether 'twas nobler in the mind to suffer, some roared yes, and some no, and some inclining to both opinions said 'toss up for it'" (227).

The ineffective separation of the performers from the audience, or the failure in the division between the world on the stage and the real world, however, has more than a comical effect upon the novel, as the whole novel is concerned with the hero's oscillation between two worlds: the common world of a blacksmith and the lustrous and wealthy world where beautiful Estella lives. Even the conditions that the royalty and nobility are played by common people is suggestive enough of Pip's difficult relationship with the two worlds.

Since his first call at Satis House and encounter with a beauty there, Pip's life has been filled with abhorrence for the world he was born into. Especially after Pip becomes a man with great expectations and starts his life as a gentleman in London, he tries, though guiltily, to keep distance from his home. Pip's complicated feelings towards his home are depicted well in the episode of his visit to Satis House from London. He goes to his hometown because his brother-in-law Joe informs him that Miss Havisham at Satis House wants to see him. Pip, on

hearing this, feels that he “must stay at Joe’s,” but soon starts to “invent reasons and make excuses for putting up at the Blue Boar” (200). His disinclination to stay at Joe’s finally wins, and Pip leaves his hometown without even meeting his family.

The theatrical episode mentioned above takes place just after he returns to London from this visit to his hometown. The intrusion of the real into the play, as we have seen, suggests Pip’s futile efforts to set the boundary between the world of his longing and the world he wants to forsake. Moreover, noble people on stage, who are actually commoners, not only reflect Pip’s own figure, but foreshadow the later disclosure of the ironical fact that Pip’s life as a gentleman has been supported by the former convict Magwitch, who has been Pip’s nightmare. The ultimate irony in the novel may be that Estella, who is the incarnation of Pip’s dream, actually has criminals, Magwitch and Molly, as her parents. “The romantic” is not so romantic as Pip wishes to believe it.

Thus, Pip’s struggle to separate the high world of Satis House and the common world is disturbed repeatedly in various ways throughout the novel, and the theatricals are, just as in *Nicholas Nickleby*, utilized to intimate the indivisibility of the two worlds, which the hero has to realize in the end.

III.

The close relationship of “the romantic” and “the familiar” is manifest also in another novel by Dickens, *Hard Times*. Angus Wilson points out, “The contrast between Mr Gradgrind’s dead world of fact and Sleary’s circus world of imagination is well established,” in this novel (Wilson 194). *Hard Times*, however, seems to emphasize that the two worlds are intertwined and indivisible, while depicting the totally contrastive and dissimilar nature of the two.

Hard Times notifies, in its 5th chapter of Book I entitled “The Key-note,”

that its chief scene of actions Coketown is “a triumph of fact” :

It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never get uncoiled . . . It had . . . vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. (27)

Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town ; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. (28)

While emphasizing the flat, monotonous machinery, and fact-centred values (which has been already introduced in a quite memorable speech in the opening chapter, of the industrial town), the author infuses the images of “serpents” and “an elephant” in the description of the town, suggesting a certain scope for some elements other than “fact” to sneak in there. Although “interminable serpents” or “an elephant” repeatedly moving its head up and down “in a state of melancholy madness” are rather grotesque and far from being the pictures that evoke happy and pleasant associations, still they foreground the existence of the imaginary, which some of the characters in the novel ignore. Moreover, the reader is later told that even the great factories in Coketown look like “Fairy palaces” when they are illuminated (66).

The possibility of imaginary factors in Coketown is most conspicuously represented by Sleary’s travelling circus, which is currently staying there. As early as in the 2nd chapter of Book I, we find one of the showmen’s daughter Sissy Jupe cutting an improper figure at the Utilitarian Gradgrind’s school. Her answers to the questions posed by Mr. Gradgrind are all unsatisfactory to this “eminently practical” man of calculation (29). After the sudden disappearance of her father,

however, the girl is taken into Mr. Gradgrind's house and comes to play a significant moral role in the family.

Although Sissy's father Mr. Jupe never comes out onto the stage before us, except through the words of his daughter or of other members in the circus, it is worth focusing on the missing father here rather than on the girl herself. It is because he is the very person who manifests that even the fantasy world of circus cannot be free from hard reality, just as Coketown, a town of fact, cannot discard the elements of fancy completely.

One of the noteworthy points about this showman is that he has "had it in his head" that his daughter should be educated properly. According to a member of the circus :

How it got into his head, I can't say ; I can only say that it never got out. He has been picking up a bit of reading for her, here—and a bit of writing for her, there—and a bit of cyphering for her, somewhere else—these seven years. (39)

Mr. Sleary's circus, to which he belongs, consists of a few families, all the members of which take part in the show, including their children. Mr. Sleary's daughter Josephine, who is eighteen, was already "tied on a horse at two years old," "made a will at twelve" and is now an active performer in the group. Sissy herself has not started performing acrobatics, but it is highly possible that she will be apprenticed to the circus and will lead her life, just like Josephine, in the circumstances she was born into. Mr. Jupe, however, seems to have held doubts about it long before he begins to suffer his disabilities. His insistence on sending his daughter to school shows that he has somehow felt that living only in the circus world is not enough. This horse-riding man's decision, in addition, causes a closer contact of the Utilitarian world of Coketown with the fancy world of circus.

Another point of interest raised by Sissy's father is the problem of aging and masculinity. When Mr. Gradgrind and his friend Mr. Bounderby go to visit Mr. Jupe to talk about remedying the girl so that she would be suitable to the motto of the school, they find that the father has disappeared while Sissy was out running an errand for him. One of his circus colleagues tells them that as Sissy Jupe's father has been unable to "do what he ought to do," being "short in his leaps and bad in his tumbling," he "has lately got in the way of being always goosed [hissed]"(36). He adds that Mr. Jupe could not stand it and has chosen to leave the circus group, leaving behind his beloved daughter Sissy.

Sissy's father, who is unable to perform well due to his age, is no better than the above-mentioned aged giants in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Once the man loses the ability to perform his duty, he feels himself utterly worthless and has lost his own *raison d'être*. It seems to be no accident that Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby are received by "a young man" of the circus Mr. Childers and "a diminutive boy" Master Kidderminster (34-35). These young members appear to symbolize the threat and fear the aging man must feel of losing his position and being supplanted by the younger generation.

It would not be too much, therefore, to say that the absent circus member Mr. Jupe is actually the key person in the novel. He not only raises the significant question of man's compound relationship with the world of reality and the world of fancy, but also presents the issue of man's aging and masculinity, which concerns both of these two worlds.

As has been discussed so far, a variety of entertainers and showpeople in Dickens's novels play a significant role of intermediary between the world of fancy and the world of realistic values. In spite of the manifest contrast of the two worlds, the backstage scenes and the inside stories the entertainers casually reveal to the reader prove that even "the romantic" world has "familiar" sides, and that

the two worlds are indivisible and inescapable from each other. Their intertwining represented in Dickens's novels denotes both the manifold nature of the world and diversified viewpoints from which the author contemplates it.

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