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Abstract

This study is a point-by-point examination of both the positive and negative criticisms stated by George Orwell in his essay entitled “*Charles Dickens*”. The project involves understanding to what extent Orwell is fair in his criticisms. To be able to examine this, the two novels *A Tale of Two Cities* and *David Copperfield* are chosen and the statements of Orwell are supported and/or refuted through examples and explanations from Dickens’s work. In the conclusion part of this research an overall evaluation of the findings withdrawn from the two body parts is made.

(92 words)

*“Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own
life, or whether that station will be held by anybody
else, these pages must show.”*
(Dickens, 2000, p. 5)

I. Introduction

As is known, George Orwell has a number of essays on a myriad of topics. In one of these essays entitled *Charles Dickens* Orwell talks about the strengths and weaknesses of Dickens' literature¹. While praising Dickens in three main points, he criticizes the British novelist especially with regards to the two novels *A Tale of Two Cities* and *David Copperfield*. The three main strengths Orwell points out are that Dickens enters the child's point of view with an extreme insight, that he dexterously describes the appearance, and that he, by using paradoxical elements or instantaneous events, creates intrigue from the very beginning of his novels.

On the other hand, George Orwell finds Dickens's two well-known novels: "deficient" in the sense that they lack a structural criticism of the society, "inefficient" in that the plots are not well constructed, "abortive" as the long descriptions he uses in his writings have no effect on the plot in any way.

This extended essay will be a point-by-point examination of both the positive and negative criticisms of Charles Dickens's work made by George Orwell. The statements will be supported or refuted through analysis of the two novels.

¹ Orwell, George. *All Art Is Propaganda*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2009. Print.

II A. Strengths as indicated by George Orwell

George Orwell praises Dickens in that he “*wonderfully describes an appearance*”² (Orwell, 2009, p. 39). The details that are included in Dickens’s descriptions may be an indication of his being an attentive observer. They also contribute to the formation of vivid illustrations. Dickens captures tiny details whether it is the expression on the face of a man, or the way an old woman knits. If one remembers the Carmagnole scene he/she can clearly see this:

*“There could not be fewer than five hundred people, and they were dancing like five thousand demons... They danced to the popular Revolution song, keeping a ferocious time that was like a gnashing of teeth in unison... They advanced, retreated, struck at one another's hands, clutched at one another's heads, spun round alone, caught one another, and spun around in pairs, until many of them dropped...”*³ (Dickens, 2010, p. 239)

By forming a parallelism between Carmagnoles and demons and by emphasizing the deviousness of the act by using words like “ferocious”, “gnashing” that have negative connotations, the intensity of the scene is magnified. Overall, the usage of carefully chosen adjectives and rhetorical techniques makes the description so vivid that it is almost impossible for the reader not to mentally visualize these scenes.

² Orwell, George. All Art Is Propaganda. Boston: Mariner Books, 2009. Print.

³ Dickens, Charles. A Tale of Two Cities. London. Collins Classics, 2010. Print.

Another example from the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* would be:

“The rough, irregular stones of the street, pointing everywhere and designed, one might have thought expressly to lame all living creatures that approached the, had dammed it into little pools; these were surrounded, each by its own jostling group or crowd, according to its size.”⁴ (Dickens, 2010, p. 31)

A similar example that supports Orwell’s claim is present in the novel *David Copperfield*:

“And now I see the outside of our house, with the latticed bedroom windows standing open to let in the sweet-smelling air, and the ragged old rooks’ nests still dangling in the elm-trees at the bottom of the front garden.”⁵ (Dickens, 2000, p.18)

Another important talent of Dickens that George Orwell points out in his essay is Dickens’s being able to enter the child’s frame of reference with an amazing insight.

“The mental atmosphere of the opening chapters was so immediately intelligible to me that I vaguely imagined they had been written by a child.”⁶(Orwell, 2009, p. 14)

⁴ Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. London. Collins Classics, 2010. Print.

⁵ Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Hertfordshire. Wordsworth Classics, 2000. Print.

⁶ Orwell, George. *All Art Is Propaganda*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2009. Print.

Let's remember the scene when David is obliged to wear a placard with the phrase "*Take care of him. He bites.*"⁷ (Dickens, 2000, p. 71) written on it. He glimpses at the old door in the playground and observes some names carved on it. Just from this short view of these inscriptions and from the way each name appears he seems to be able to understand how the other boys would read that sign on his back.

*"There was another boy, one Tommy Traddles, who I dreaded would make game of it, and pretend to be dreadfully frightened of me. There was a third, George Demple, who I fancied would sing it."*⁸ (Dickens, 2000, p. 72)

When one reads this passage one could see Dickens' infantile approach towards the world of David Copperfield. The reason for this could be the "sound associations"⁹(Orwell, 2009, p. 16) of the words. The names of the two characters of the novel *David Copperfield*, Demple and Traddles might be marvelous examples for this. When we realize that such words do not have a dictionary definition, we could consider the approach that these words might be the result of the modification of the words traddles and skedaddle. The names Demple and Traddles could then be the way a child would call those people if s/he were not able to pronounce their names correctly. Given this, one could think that Dickens intentionally modified the words to make them seem like those of an infant.

⁷ Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Hertfordshire. Wordsworth Classics, 2000. Print.

⁸ Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Hertfordshire. Wordsworth Classics, 2000. Print.

⁹ Orwell, George. *All Art Is Propaganda*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2009. Print.

Finally, the third strength mentioned in these two novels that is indirectly pointed out. Orwell points out that Dickens is outstanding in his creation of intrigue from the very beginning of his novels. When one remembers the exposition of *A Tale of Two Cities* this could clearly be seen:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.”¹⁰

(Dickens, 2010, p. 3)

The ambiguity created by the exhibition of dualities captures the reader immediately. The good and the evil, the darkness and the light, the hope and the despair seem to interact within a greater body and form a dynamic system. They also tend to leave a question mark in the reader’s mind in that there is no clear indication of how the novel will proceed which could make the reader curious.

When it comes to *David Copperfield* the suddenness of the events seem to create the similar effect on the reader. What we are talking about is the breezy entrance and banging

¹⁰ Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. London. Collins Classics, 2010. Print.

exit of Miss Betsey. The unpredictability of the events here again strikes one as being factors that make the reader inquisitive.

II B. Weaknesses as indicated by George Orwell

George Orwell criticizes Charles Dickens in the sense that his criticism of the society is almost exclusively **moral**. According to him, Dickens's novels utterly lack any clarified message or any constructive suggestion to the society. It may not be the main intention of a novelist to convey his message via direct statements or by proposing an advanced system; it may be communicated by disguising the abstract within the body of a tangible character, but Dickens, while attacking the law, parliamentary government and the educational system, antagonizes nobody but reprimands ones' spirit, behavior and human nature. *A Tale of Two Cities* serves as an example for this. In the novel, the reader is constantly reminded that, while four liveried footmen are serving chocolate to the lords; the peasants are starving outside. These depictions contribute to the creation of a dramatic atmosphere, but in the meantime they tend to leave a false or perhaps a defective impression behind the cause of the revolution is merely the indecent behavior of the aristocracy; their aggrieving the peasantry. Given this as the only cause, the solution eventually becomes a change in the spiritual essence of the society. The depiction of human nature as the only target is clarified by George Orwell with the following statement: *"His whole 'message' is one that at first glance looks like an enormous*

platitude: If men would behave decently the world would be decent."¹¹ (Orwell, 2009, p. 5)

The same concept is observed in *David Copperfield*. Dickens, never criticizes the educational system in existence in the society. When he sees that there is a "problem" somewhere in the educational system which is totally based on the Greek lexicon, which he personally experiences at the "Murdstone & Grinby's"¹⁰, he proposes a solution on the spiritual level as if he were not attacking the system. Here is one of David's descriptions of an advanced system, for instance:

*"Doctor Strong's was an excellent school, as different from Mr. Creakle's as good is from evil. It was very gravely and decorously ordered, and on a sound system; with an appeal, in everything, to the honor and good faith of the boys... which worked wonders... I am sure I did for one, and I never knew, in all my time, of any boy being otherwise –and learnt with a good will, desiring to do it credit...I remember, we were well spoken of in the town, and rarely did any disgrace, by our appearance or manner, to the reputation of Doctor Strong and Doctor Strong's boys."*¹² (Dickens, 2000, p. 205)

Examining the description above one might think that Doctor Strong's school is faultless.

¹¹ Orwell, George. *All Art Is Propaganda*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2009. Print.

¹² Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2000. Print.

The characters are “learnt with a good will”, they are so exceptionally developed in the moral sense that no one may ever mar them. The only obstacle in achieving the application of a system is the fact that almost no one behaves decently; not even the “perfect” people who teach David with “good will”. In the novel, they leave David in a position that results in his learning everything about life and manners by experiencing crucial events on his own. It can be concluded that even such a “morally correct” system has its flaws, even in a world where the author is free to delineate all as he wishes. Overall when the messages of both novels are taken into account it could be said that Orwell’s criticism could be just as he suggests that Dickens accept there might be an inadequacy in the infrastructure of the society.

Similarly in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Madame Defarge cultivates herself by being passive. Everyday she sits quietly in the wine shop, observes the chaos of the upcoming French Revolution and continues to do her only deed, knitting. Her awareness of the dreadful situation present in France is formed not by experiences but only observations. Still a relentless thirst of vengeance is formed within her so with her stitches she starts to register the appellations of the intended victims of the Revolution. Madame Defarge thus seems to learn everything with a “good will” by actually staying out of the whole picture, just using her personal observation skills.

Secondly, Orwell criticizes Dickens in that he focuses on the tree rather than the forest. *“The vivid pictures that he succeeds in leaving in one's memory are nearly always the*

pictures of things seen in leisure moments."¹³ (Orwell, 2009, p. 39) In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens deals with a historic necessity; a revolution, but rather than giving detailed information about the causes of this act and its influential effects on individuals' lives the author has chosen to dominate the novel with nightmarish scenes of the horrors of a revolution and private affairs: the frightful blood-lust of the mob, the child's being run down by the horses, the wine shop scene, the macabre series of murders with the guillotine and people's heads being shown to the mob to arouse the feeling of abhorrence, or maybe simply what is happening to Lucie Manette and Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton. Probably in writing the private struggles of the characters Lucie Manette, Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton, Charles Dickens's aim is to avoid writing an encyclopedic account of the French Revolution. However, trying to attain this goal Dickens forgets to give information about the revolution itself. He deals with the French Revolution in a narrower sense. He does not at any place designate his seeing it as a historic necessity arising from the Man's aspiration for equality, justice and fraternity. "*Revolution as he sees it is merely a monster that is begotten by tyranny and always ends by devouring its own instruments.*"¹⁴ (Orwell, 2009, p. 12) This statement clarifies the paradox in Dickens's account of the revolution: a series of violent murders, which is for the welfare of mankind. If Dickens were to impose the idea that achieving the application of an ideal system requires a massacre, then the end of the novel, a Sydney Carton's sacrificing his life for his beloved and Darnay's and Lucie's living happily ever after,

¹³ Orwell, George. *All Art Is Propaganda*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2009. Print.

¹⁴ Orwell, George. *All Art Is Propaganda*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2009. Print.

seem quite absurd. On the other hand, it should also be considered that Dickens could have aimed to display an ethical and judicial defect in the society, which could explain the replacement scene in the end: not all of the punished are the people who are actually responsible for an evil deed. Assuming that Dickens's aim was that, Orwell could be unjust in stating that Dickens does not display a consciousness that the structure of society can be modulated. Though one should keep in mind that Dickens magnifies only the intensity of the dreadful scenes and that the enhancement of the brutality in the scenes results in the prevalence of the inconsequential details in one's mind.

Accepting that Orwell is fair in this criticism that the emphasis is put on the inconsequential details, we can scrutinize *David Copperfield* now. In this novel the lack of description when acquainting processes would be what deflects Dickens from hitting the target directly. Dickens visualizes the life of David only, someone who ends up as a writer like himself. He clearly states that a "gifted child" ought not to work several hours a day pasting labels on wine bottles. Nevertheless, there seems to be no clear indication of his wish that the order be overthrown or be replaced by another system. Neither is it elucidated throughout the novel that no child ought to be condemned to such a fate. After David escapes from the warehouse there is no information given about the "non-gifted" children Mealy Potatoes and Mick Walker. What happens to them doesn't seem to trouble Dickens particularly.

Explaining a social defect by communicating the stories of each and every individual in it, that could be nonessential, but if one was to state a social defect he/she should have at

least hinted, as Orwell puts it, that “*no child ought to be condemned to such a fate*”¹⁵ (Orwell, 2009, p. 8) Then, it probably would have been a more discreet approach if the protagonist were not chosen to be as a “gifted” individual, like Dickens himself, but a more ordinary member of the society instead. On the other hand it should also be taken into consideration that the aim of the author might just have been to write an autobiography, as we know the story is parallel to his own life.

Thirdly, Dickens’s work is found to be deficient by Orwell in the sense that it is dominated by unnecessary or misleading descriptions of appearances or processes, which have no significant effect on the authors conveying his message. When one remembers the “carmagnole scene” one could think that describing the scene with such intensity does not advance the story. As stated previously, the atmosphere could have been a means of Dickens to state a structural criticism. Thus, the descriptions of these tiny details should not be overlooked even if they were added on the edge of the page for extra cash, for we know Dickens “was paid by installment”¹⁶. Even if Orwell was fair in stating that unnecessary details take up most of the novel, one thing is to be said for sure and that is that these contribute to the formation of the “Dickens atmosphere”. In every piece of writing atmosphere undertakes a significant role in conveying a message whether it is the “intended message” or not. In the guidance of this view one could say that any means by

¹⁵ Orwell, George. *All Art Is Propaganda*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2009. Print.

¹⁶ “Was Dickens Really Paid by the Word”. University of California Santa Cruz. Web. 16 August 2011.
<<http://dickens.ucsc.edu/resources/faq/by-the-word.html>>

which the author creates the atmosphere would not be unnecessary. On that account, Orwell could be found discreditable.

When it comes to the events, which reflect the true revolution phenomenon, Dickens achieves to attribute a monstrous quality to the demonstrations, which as previously stated makes the inconsequential details prevail in the readers' minds.

“Flashing weapons, blazing torches, smoking waggon-loads of wet straw, hard work at neighbouring barricades in all directions, shrieks, volleys, execrations, bravery without stint, boom, smash and rattle, and the furious sounding of the living sea...”¹⁷ (Dickens, 2010, p. 239)

In the extract above we can examine that by means of onomatopoeia (boom, smash, rattle) a mood of battle is being evoked, which in the mean time makes the incident appear as only chaotic. At first glance one might think that it was the intention of Dickens to present the revolution as a monster which could as stated before be considered inconsistent with the end where Sydney Carton sacrifices his life for his beloveds and Darnay lives happily ever after. If of course, Dickens's philosophy was that the ones who “behave decently” can escape the ghastly future that awaits him then the end could be regarded as considerate.

¹⁷ Dickens, Charles. A Tale of Two Cities. London. Collins Classics, 2010. Print.

The similar concept is observed in the novel *David Copperfield*. Here is the description of Mr. Murdstone, the cruel husband of David's mother:

*“He had that kind of shallow black eye –I want a better word to express an eye that has no depth in it to be looked into- which, when it is abstracted, seems from some peculiarity of light to be disfigured, for a moment at a time, by a cast. His hair and whiskers were blacker and thicker, looked at so near, than even I had given them credit for being.”*¹⁸ (Dickens, 2000, p. 23)

When the passage is studied, it can be seen that Mr. Murdstone is described as an evil-looking man and indeed, he turns out to be a brutal man; not only towards David but also towards David's mother. The other characters are not any different from Mr. Murdstone in that sense; similarly their physical traits match with their emotional traits. Knowing this, life becomes easy for David (or should we say Dickens) as he can judge anyone just by looking at everyone's faces'. This could seem quite unrealistic. On the other hand, one might assume that Dickens intended to achieve to enter into the child's point of view by forming a parallelism between the emotional and physical traits of the characters as childhood perception of people is generally formed by the initial impression formed at first sight.¹⁹ If that is the case, one could say, opposing to Orwell's view, Dickens's approach was insightful.

¹⁸ Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Hertfordshire. Wordsworth Classics, 2000. Print.

¹⁹ “The First Impression”. Web. 29 February. <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200405/the-first-impression>>

Another evident example of “the unnecessary” occurrences might be the translocation of David. In the novel *David Copperfield* the poor protagonist David wanders along several different roads to seek his fortune only to find misfortune. His story begins in one place and ends in another. There is no real connection between the beginning and the end of the novel except a biographical one. Still, Dickens displays a clear optimism about emigration that would make him seem as if he could relieve the pain of his characters by sending them off to different locations.

Finally, one other point that Orwell states indirectly in his essay is that Dickens’s work is exiguous in its plot, especially in the sense that the events are unrealistic. If we take the replacement scene in *A Tale of Two Cities* into consideration the stated argument may clearly be seen. No one realizes that Sydney Carton takes Charles Darnay’s place seems unrealistic, or even extravagant. Of course Dickens could have intended to write a fictional novel, but he probably wouldn’t have founded it on a historical fact, then. When this event is considered it should be thought that George Orwell can be accredited for his criticism.

Conclusion

Throughout this extended essay I questioned the extent of validity of Orwell's criticisms pointed out in his essay entitled *Charles Dickens*. To examine this, I initially chose the two well-known novels of *A Tale of Two Cities* and *David Copperfield* by Dickens. As a method of assessment I grouped the criticisms with regards to their approaches towards Dickens's work: positive or negative. Then, I tried to objectively examine each claim made by Orwell, referring to or by demonstrating some examples from the novels that would justify my point.

As a result of my evaluations I decided that Orwell was just in all but one of his criticisms. Just as Orwell states in his essay, Dickens is able to enter the child's point of view with an extreme insight. His faculty in describing an appearance is unquestionable. By using dualities he manages to create intrigue and capture the reader immediately.

On the other hand, when it comes to the negative criticisms I believe that Orwell is not fair in that he finds Dickens's work devoid of a structural criticism. When we take all the demonstrated examples into consideration descriptions of events or appearances that do not advance the story can be seen. However, I believe that the "absurd" ending of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* is not as simple as it seems. Though it seems exiguous on the grounds that the novel is an account of a historical necessity: a revolution, the absurdity should lead the reader to be open to another approach towards it. We, the reader, should consider that a structural criticism could be present within the "unnecessary details".

All in all, a majority of Orwell's criticisms seem to be justified. Yet, one should definitely try to be open to other views even if accepting those views corresponds to facing unpleasant facts. The thought of hearing some negative criticisms about someone whom we've celebrated from an early age could be an excruciating experience for us. Nevertheless, if those approaches are founded on a solid basis we should get out of our safe zones sometimes and not be one of the unconscious, silent majority.

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