



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: A
ARTS & HUMANITIES - PSYCHOLOGY
Volume 14 Issue 1 Version 1.0 Year 2014
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Dickens and the Visual: Realism and Mimesis in Sketches by Boz

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Introduction- Sketches by Boz is marked by a tension between reality and mimesis which continues throughout Dickens's career. This tension produces a series of dichotomies in Dickens's work, a number of which have been noted by critics. This paper will examine the duality of Dickens's artistic vision and will argue that the tension between objective reality and subjective interiority help Dickens achieve a unique view of Victorian England.

Critics have often characterized Dickens's writing as being realistic. This trend began with John Forster, who, in *The Life of Charles Dickens* wrote that "Things are painted literally as they are; and, whatever the picture, whether of every-day vulgar, shabby genteel, or downright low, with neither the condescending air which is affectation, nor the too familiar one which is slang" (Forster 92-93). While Dickens is often identified as a "realistic" author, there is no standard literary definition of what constitutes realism.

Although a universally recognized definition of realistic writing does not exist, a number of characteristics are associated with realism. These characteristics include a depiction of external events which are presented as being true to life and are meant to be taken literally. In addition, the interior reality of the work is meant to be consistent with the reality observed in the external world. Finally, the reality of the work is not influenced by the opinions or preferences of the author; as a corollary to this, the author's presence should not intrude into the narration of the work

GJHSS-A Classification : FOR Code: 130201p, 410199



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I. INTRODUCTION

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Critics have often characterized Dickens's writing as being realistic. This trend began with John Forster, who, in *The Life of Charles Dickens* wrote that "Things are painted literally as they are; and, whatever the picture, whether of every-day vulgar, shabby genteel, or downright low, with neither the condescending air which is affectation, nor the too familiar one which is slang" (Forster 92-93). While Dickens is often identified as a "realistic" author, there is no standard literary definition of what constitutes realism.

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Clearly, the characteristics of a purely "realistic" writing style do not apply to Dickens's work; although he paints brilliant visual images and depicts scenes of London life with great clarity, he violates several of the requirements of realistic writing. His frequent authorial interjections, use of symbolism, metonymy and synecdoche, as well as his narrative asides indicate that he does not wish his writing to be a literal depiction of the "real" world. That is not to say that Dickens abandons realism altogether. A number of the Sketches make use of Dickens's experience as a reporter to depict London scenes in vivid detail.

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One of the techniques he uses to describe London is the construction of lists, which has the effect of layering detail upon detail. Consider the description of the items to let in "The Pawnbroker's Shop" as an example of Dickens's technique:

A few old china cups, some modern vases adorned with paltry painting of three Spanish cavaliers playing three Spanish guitars. . . several sets of chessman, two or three flutes, a few fiddles. . . some gaudily-bound prayer-books and testaments, two rows of silver watches quite as clumsy and almost as large as Ferguson's first; numerous old-fashioned table and tea spoons. . .(223)

It seems that scenes such as the one described above, are an attempt by Dickens to depict external reality. Several critics have noted that, although Dickens attempts to depict reality, he does not present reality itself, merely an imitation.¹

To more fully understand the concept of imitation, it may be helpful to consult Plato's idea of mimesis as expressed in the "Cratylus".² According to Plato, mimesis is an imitation of a thing which involves not just the surface appearance of the thing, but also attempts to establish the nature of the thing itself. In Plato's dialogue, Cratylus mistakes the name of a thing with the thing itself and Socrates corrects him, saying "For there are no other names to which appeal can be made, but obviously recourse must be had to another standard which, without employing names, will make clear which of the two are right; and this must be the standard which shows the truth of things [*italics mine*]" (Plato 113). It is the attempt to get at the true nature of things that constitutes another element in Dickens's writing. In order to arrive at the nature of the thing itself, an artist must depart from the surface or the apparently real, and delve into the interior to arrive at the truth of the thing. The apparent or surface reality and the truth of the thing itself represent positions which are opposed to one another.

The tension between the surface depiction of a person or event and the presentation of the inner nature of a person or thing, leads to a series of dichotomies in Dickens. These dichotomies begin in the Sketches and continue in his later works. That the Sketches represent a starting point for many of the themes he would pursue in his later career is acknowledged by a number of critics. A quote from Angus Wilson in his book, *The*

World of Charles Dickens, will illustrate this point; "In Sketches by Boz we see how a brilliant young journalist's observation of London's movement is just on the point of taking wings into imaginative art" (84).³

The most obvious of the dichotomies which exist in the Sketches is that between reporting and fiction. An example of Dickens's abilities as a reporter can be seen in the description of the shops occurring in "Seven Dials." Once again, Dickens engages in one of the lists which mark these early sketches, and persist in his later novels.

Brokers' shops, which would seem to have been established by humane individuals, as refuges for destitute bugs, interspersed with announcements of day-schools, penny theatres, petition-writers, mangles and music for balls or routs, complete the 'still life' of the subject; and dirty men, filthy women, squalid children, fluttering shuttlecocks, noisy battledores, reeking pipes, bad fruit, more than doubtful oysters, attenuated cats, depressed dogs, and anatomical fowls, are its cheerful accompaniments. (94)

The lists add to the descriptive power manifest in the "Dials," and the abundance of detail paints a vivid word picture of this seedy area of London. "The Pawnbroker's Shop" provides further evidence of Dickens's ability to accurately report on London scenes and echoes the theme of urban decay which is found in his later works. "Of all the numerous receptacles for misery and distress with which the streets of London unhappily abound, there are, perhaps, none which present such striking scenes of vice and poverty as the pawnbroker's shops" (220).

Dickens would return to the theme of urban decay in his description of Tom-All-Along's In Bleak House, but by 1853, his powers of observation have been sharpened into a biting social commentary:

Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in every footprint than Lord Coodle and Sir Thomas Doodle, and the Duke of Foodle, and all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it. (217-218)

The lists are still present, which allow Dickens to present layered visual images, but are allied with a sense of outrage at the lack of concern by the peerage, and the inability to relieve the suffering of the poor.

While Dickens use of reportage in the Sketches is evident, so is his ability to look beneath the surface of things to discover the truth of the situation lying

underneath the veneer of reality. Turning again to "Seven Dials," Dickens writes of a shabby-genteel gentleman who writes poems for Mr. Warren:

The shabby-genteel man is an object of some mystery, but as he leads a life of seclusion, and never was known to buy any thing beyond an occasional pen, except half-pints of coffee, penny loaves, and ha'porths of ink, his fellow-lodgers very naturally suppose him to be an author; and rumors are current in the Dials, that he writes poems for Mr. Warren. (95)

The reference to Mr. Warren, proprietor of the blacking-shop where Dickens labored as a child, adds a special pathos to this portrayal of the shabby-genteel man. Here the reader witnesses Dickens speculating on the habits and occupation of the man in an attempt to deduce his inner nature. The ability to discern inner meaning while others see only the surface of an object is also evident in "Meditations on Monmouth Street," where Dickens muses on the nature of the people whose clothes have been consigned to a second-hand shop. In the following example, he delineates the habits of a small boy from the clothing he sees in the shop:

This was the boy's dress. It had belonged to a town boy, we could see; there was a shortness about the legs and arms of the suit; and a bagging at the knees, peculiar to the rising youth of London streets. If it had been a regular boys' school they wouldn't have let him play on the floor so much, and rub his knees so white. (99)

Perhaps the author is recalling his days at school in this sketch, where he would have worn a similar set of clothing, before he worked at the blacking factory. The loss of his childhood would affect him throughout his life, as Forster notes in his seminal work *The Life of Charles Dickens: 1812-1842*, "The never to be forgotten misery of that old time, bred a certain shrinking sensitiveness in a certain ill-clad ill-fed child, that I have found come back in never to be forgotten misery of this later time" (53).

In "A Visit to Newgate," Dickens's abilities as a reporter are once again manifest as he describes the details of the prison down to the wainscoting on the walls, the desks, stools, and the pictures which line the guard's office. In the same sketch, he recounts the last days of the prisoner as he waits for his execution. Here is an example of Dickens's ability to combine the accurate portrayal of external scenes with an ability to arrive at a deeper understanding of a person's character. As the prisoner passes an agitated night in jail, he thinks about his wife and wishes "to fall on his knees before her and fervently beseech her pardon for all the unkindness and cruelty that wasted her form and broke her heart!" (247, 248). As Dickens describes the thought of the condemned man, the reader is presented

with a glimpse of Fagin's last night in jail in *Oliver Twist*.⁴

A second dichotomy which is presented in these early works is seen in the descriptions of crowds in London, which are in contrast to the sense of isolation which exists for many of the less fortunate denizens of the city. In the sketch entitled "Greenwich Fair," the author conveys a sense of the activity generated by the crowds streaming to the fair; a sense which emphasizes external reality:

The road to Greenwich during the whole of Easter Monday, is in a state of perpetual bustle and noise. Cabs, hackney-coaches, 'shay' carts, coal-wagons, stages, omnibuses, sociables, gigs, donkey-chaises—all crammed with people. . . corks go off in volleys, the balcony of every public-house is crowded with people, smoking and drinking, half the private houses are turned into tea-shops, fiddles are in great request. . . (Dickens 137)

"Greenwich Fair," which depicts the jollity of the vast festival crowd is in marked contrast to the isolation portrayed in "The Pawnbroker's Shop." Dickens describes several people in the common area of the shop; it is evident from the author's description that these people represent the "regular" customers of the establishment. It is when Dickens describes the "private" areas of the shop that the extent of the loneliness and fall from social grace is most evident. The description of a mother and daughter, looking to extract money from some once-precious gifts, reveals the extent of their decline and isolation. In this selection, Dickens is seeking to establish interior reality:

. . . for want has hardened the mother, and her example has hardened the girl, and the prospect of receiving money coupled with a recollection of the misery they have both endured from the want of it—the coldness of old friends—the stern refusal of some, and the still more galling compassion of others—appears to have obliterated the consciousness of self-humiliation, which the bare idea of their present situation would once have aroused." (Dickens 228)

The sense of estrangement which Dickens portrays in the Sketches, including his use of the word "we" to distance himself from the scenes he is observing, has been noted by J. Hillis Miller in his work *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar*.⁵ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, in his recently published book entitled *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist*, comments on Dickens's ability to see through the exuberance of the London crowds to the isolation lying beneath this apparently festive surface:

Where Dickens differed from these other writers was in recognizing that London was not only a

celebration of sociability. It was also a place that magnified loneliness. Although many people feel isolated from time to time, London seemed especially adept at transforming such moods into a way of life. (152)

Louis James, in his paper "Cruikshank and Early Victorian Caricature" echoes the views of Douglas-Fairhurst notes that "Dickens offers us London as experienced by a sensitive but lonely and estranged onlooker" (114).

This sense of isolation would reappear in Dickens's later work, from the character of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* who was told by her aunt "You are set apart," (Dickens 19), to Jo the street sweeper who knows "nothink," to Mr. Gridley, the Shropshire man, who inveighs inchoately at the "system," to Miss Flite, who in her loneliness has named her birds after the stages of the interminable Chancery suit that has consumed her solitary life "Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon" (Dickens 199).

In this second dichotomy, the reader is presented, on the one hand, with surface views of seemingly carefree London crowds and on the other with the loneliness which is hidden from the casual observer. The surface view is a function of Dickens's acting as a reporter. The second, inner view, is a function of the artist seeking truth.

The final dichotomy to be explored in this paper is that which contrasts a highly-charged waking state, in which the author's powers of external observation are most keen, to that of a dream or fugue state, which presents an alternate view of interior reality. Dickens opens the sketch "Shabby-Genteel People" with a detailed, reporterly, description of a member of a certain class of people:

We will endeavor to explain our conception of the term which forms the title of this paper. If you meet a man lounging up Drury-lane, or leaning with his back against a post in Long-acre, with his hands in the pockets of a pair of drab trousers plentifully besprinkled with grease-spots: the trousers made very full over the boots, and ornamented with two cords down the outside of each leg—wearing also what has been a brown coat with bright buttons, and a hat very much pinched up at the sides, cocked over his right eye—don't pity him. (304)

Later, in the same sketch, Dickens shifts the narrative to reveal that he was "haunted by a shabby-genteel man: he was bodily present to our senses all day, and he was in our mind's eye all night" (305). Dickens, unable to ascertain the man's true identity from his outward appearance, attempts to do so through "meditation on the subject of his retirement from public

life” (306). Dickens then outlines a series of suppositions about the man’s identity, whereabouts and state of being. Finally, Dickens’s “conjectures were suddenly set at rest by the entry of the very man himself. . .” and it is revealed that “. . . the truth flashed suddenly upon us—they had been ‘revived’” (306). That Dickens misunderstood the nature of the shabby-genteel man’s actions is beside the point. In this sketch he notes that the man occupied his thoughts at night, presumably in his dreams, and that he developed theories about the man during the man’s absence. These theories are an attempt on the part of Dickens to arrive at the true nature of the shabby-genteel gentleman.

The nature of the dream state in Dickens’s writing is explored in the book, *Charles Dickens*, by G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton notes Dickens’s brand of realism which is akin to the skewed view of reality presented in a dream:

Herein is the whole secret of that eerie realism with which Dickens could always vitalize some dark or dull corner of London. There are details in the Dickens’ descriptions—a window, a railing, or the keyhole of a door—which he endows with demonian life. The things seem more actual than things really are. Indeed, that degree of realism does not exist in reality: it is the unbearable realism of a dream. (46-47)

Dickens’s use of dream states continues in “A Visit to Newgate,” where he describes the last night of a condemned man who “Worn with watching and excitement, . . . sleeps, and the same unsettled state of mind pursues him in his dreams” (247). The condemned man dreams of his wife who looks “not as she did when he saw her for the last time in that dreadful place, but as she used when he loved her. . .” (247). In this passage, Dickens goes beyond surface observations to explore the condemned man’s psyche and emotions which could not be expressed during his waking hours.

The same sense of the convergence of external reality and the lucidity of a dream would appear in later works by Dickens. During one graphic sequence in *Bleak House*, Esther Summerson accompanies Inspector Bucket in pursuit of Lady Dedlock. Esther notes that “I was far from sure I was not in a dream. We rattled with great rapidity through such a labyrinth of streets, that I soon lost all idea where we were; except that we had crossed and re-crossed the river. . .” (756). The character of Esther Summerson is unsure of her state of consciousness—is she awake observing actual “real” events, or is she in a dream-state where reality assumes different, sometimes terrifying, aspects? “I suffered in that dreadful spot, I never can forget. And still it was like the horror of a dream” (756). The mingling of external, observable reality with the workings of the dream state produces an effect that goes beyond

realism to an imagined world that is as unsettling as a nightmare.

The third dichotomy is made up of the contrast between the waking state characterized by the observation of external or “real” events, and the dream state which is marked by subconscious processes which speak to interior motivations, wishes and desires. That Dickens was aware of such processes is evident in his correspondence with a medical practitioner, Dr. Stone, in which Dickens notes that we dream “in a sort of allegorical manner” (Winters 986).

This paper has attempted to show that Dickens’s work is not “realistic” in the traditional sense of the term, but that Dickens makes use of realistic techniques and combines them with a penetrating look at a character’s inner state to arrive at an unique, dual, view of Victorian London. In order to merge the outer or objective nature of an object, with the inner or true nature of an object, Dickens makes use of a series of dichotomies which work to emphasize the external, observable world as it is opposed to the internal, subjective world. In his paper entitled “Realism Reconsidered,” artist Ben Shahn notes the two different types of reality that an artist employs:

Then there are two different attitudes toward reality which I think have some pertinence for art, and which I would like to discuss somewhat. The first might be called the realistic attitude, the second, the searching, or truth-seeking attitude.

The realistic individual, as we all know him, is inclined to take a somewhat laissez-faire view of life. He is not given to self-deception; he is likely to be honest with himself even as to where his own interest lies. He does not plague himself with vain fancies of how things ought to be, or might be. He takes a hard view of reality as it appears to him; he makes it his business to cope with it as it is.

The truth-seeking individual is one who must see within reality an implicit deeper reality. He cannot be content with the surface appearance of things, but must probe beneath the surface to discover why they are so, and indeed often whether they are so. (33)

As Shahn notes, there are two different ways of viewing reality. By combining the reporter’s observation of external detail with the artist’s ability to penetrate beneath the surface appearance, Dickens was able to present a dual view of London, a view that was at once familiar and new. The ability to combine these two viewpoints is what makes Dickens the “inimitable” and continues to fascinate and delight his loyal readers.

II. NOTES

1. See J. Hillis Miller's *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar on May 9, 1970* 3 – 9, and John Reed's *Dickens's Hyperrealism* 13-15, for a discussion of mimesis in Dickens's work. Miller argues that Victorian critics viewed Dickens's work as realistic; a view echoed by modern critics such as Thea Holme and Angus Wilson. He further argues that Dickens's work is not realistic, as Victorian critics insist, but that it is fictive and relies on extra-textual references which are reinforced by other fictional entities with and external to the text.
Reed argues that Dickens's work is not realistic, but that by consciously violating the conventions of the realistic novel, Dickens's work should be characterized as hyper-realistic.
2. Reference to Plato's "Cratylus" is made in J. Hillis Miller's *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar on May 9, 1970*, 5-6, and John Reed's *Dickens's Hyperrealism*, 105. J. Hillis Miller argues that while the "Cratylus" is used to justify mimesis in art, the definition of reality, as it applies to the Sketches, may be incorrect. Similarly, Reed argues that the real was not necessarily the visible, and that reality must be defined before it can be accurately represented.
3. J. Hillis Miller, in his work *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar on May 9, 1970*, uses the same quote from Angus Wilson to illustrate the modern critical view which describes Dickens's work as realistic.
4. Among the critics who have drawn parallels between the Sketches and Dickens's later works are: Vince Grillo in *Charles Dickens' Sketches by Boz: End in the Beginning*; Philip Hobsbaum in *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens*; J Hillis Miller and David Borowitz *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar on May 9, 1970*; and Michael Slater *Charles Dickens*.
5. See J. Hillis Miller and David Borowitz in *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers read at a Clark Library Seminar on May 9, 1970* 3- 4, for a discussion of Dickens's use of the "journalistic we" to depersonalize himself.
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13. Wilson, Angus. *The World of Charles Dickens*. New York: The Viking Press, 1970.
14. Winters, Warrington. "Dickens and the Psychology of Dreams." *PMLA*. 63.3. 1948, 984-1006.

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3. ---. *Sketches by Boz*. London: Penguin Books, 1995.



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