The Old Curiosity Shop

by Elaine Harris

English Association Dickens Bookmarks
No. 6
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Despite Little Nell’s fame as a literary character, *The Old Curiosity Shop* is no longer a popular Dickensian text. Teachers are partially responsible. Anxious to promote an appreciation of such a well-renowned, prolific author, they frequently bypass *The Old Curiosity Shop* in order to concentrate on a coterie of tried and tested contemporary favourites. *Oliver Twist*, for example, is often chosen from the early novels while the shorter, comparatively more accessible *Great Expectations* is standard fare for pre-university scholars. For modern readers of all ages, *A Christmas Carol* is a seasonal Christmas treat, while the massive, labyrinthine texts of *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* have all been recently popularised as major classic television serials. *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a relatively neglected text and even seen as uncomfortable and problematic. According to *The Oxford Guide to English Literature*, it is the least regarded Dickensian novel.

It was not always so. In Dickens’ own time, it was his most successful publication, enthraling readers with a combination of the grotesque and the sublime and providing a heroine to truly stir the emotions. Forster, Dickens’ friend and biographer, claimed that this novel made ‘the bond between him and his readers one of personal attachment.’ As it reached its concluding chapters in 1841, selling a staggering 100,000 copies, it became a literary sensation, with both sides of the Atlantic gripped by the fate of Little Nell. Dickens was in his element.

**Background to the publication of *The Old Curiosity Shop***

Although a highly regarded author, Dickens set his heart on being a champion of popular culture. In the 1830s, he rode the crest of the rising tide of rapid developments in technology that combined with an increase in general literacy to produce new readers who regularly demanded cheap periodicals of journalism and fiction. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, as the readership franchise widened, Dickens responded with *Sketches by Boz* and the serialised novels of *Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Oliver Twist*. Tirelessly prolific and inventive, he constantly experimented with different subject matter, formats and illustrators. He also looked to working-class periodicals for new ways of expanding his audience.

Essentially, he and his fellow novelists had to break through the long-established, three-decker novel structure. In the early nineteenth-century, each part of a novel was priced at 10s 6d so that a complete work would cost £1.11s.6d (a guinea and a half); a price within the reach of only the wealthier strata of the middle classes. In order to undermine this stranglehold of the market and make his work cheaper, Dickens offered monthly parts of a novel at a shilling each. Twenty would be composed over nineteen months: the last being a double issue. In this way, a whole book could be purchased for a pound and the expense defrayed over a nineteen-month period. This enabled those on much lower incomes to buy novels. The lower middle classes and ultimately, the better paid, aspiring tradesmen could then join the circle of Dickens’s ‘beloved readers’.

But, in 1840, as an up and coming young author, he wanted to go even further. He created his own weekly magazine, *Master Humphrey’s Clock*, priced at 3d, and planned to reintroduce Mr Pickwick and Sam Weller in a few set pieces and a series of new sketches and stories. At the outset, Dickens was dangerously optimistic, claiming that the *Clock* will ‘be far more

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1 Michael Slater, *Dickens* published by Yale, page 152.
popular both in the subjects of which it treats and its mode of treating them'. His publishers Chapman and Hall initially shared this enthusiasm so in the August number of *Nicholas Nickleby*, they advertised the publication of 'A NEW WORK ON AN ENTIRELY NEW PLAN'. Sixty thousand copies of the first weekly number of 'Master Humphrey's Clock' were sold and a further ten thousand were ordered but the readers were disappointed, so the whole venture came close to failure. The poor sales of numbers two and three, were to prove a liability, leading to the first financial disaster of Dickens's spectacularly successful career.

Dickens had promised 'an inexhaustible field of fun, raillery and interest' but as Alan Shelston notes the opening issues contained 'a series of gloomy narratives related by tedious old men about dying, death.' Ackroyd also comments on the mounting expense, as the magazine was published in a larger format on distinctive creamy white paper with wood engravings dropped into the text. Clearly, Dickens needed to make adjustments. Apart from the reduction in his income, any further losses would prevent him from commissioning or accepting contributions from other writers.

*The Old Curiosity Shop* at the beginning of the fourth instalment was to be the turning point. Gradually, the readers returned. Yet, for a while, perversely, Dickens struggled to keep the miscellany idea alive so that the story/novel was not resumed until the seventh issue. The publishers had to intervene so that once *The Old Curiosity Shop* was established as a novel, of which two chapters would appear in each weekly number then his readers remained faithful and steadily multiplied.

Some critics have suggested that *The Old Curiosity Shop* was originally destined to be only a short story, a view which Forster supports, writing that the book emerged like a splendid accident, 'with less consciousness of design on his part than I can remember in any other instance of his career.' However achieved, *The Old Curiosity Shop* was another triumph for Dickens. It was the novel in which he was at his most experimental, in which he courted popularity and came closest to his readers by dragging out the death of Little Nell.

**The Death of Little Nell**

The idealisation of Little Nell as an angelic figure of mercy who dies tragically at the end of the novel gives *The Old Curiosity Shop* an enduring power and pathos. By the final stages of the novel, Dickens was undoubtedly under the spell of his own creation famously claiming that 'Little Nell followed him about'. He had, of course, made this claim about other characters but there is much evidence of Dickens consciously working himself up to this pathos, as he loved the feeling of having power over the emotions of his readers and listeners. At one point, he claimed that the story was 'difficult to turn' so it was strongly believed that for the final chapters, he deliberately worked himself into a state of grief by brooding on the pain and loss he experienced at the deathbed of seventeen year old Mary Garth, his beloved sister-in-law. The epithet on her tombstone 'Young, beautiful and good' could equally apply to Nell.

Later critics were less than complimentary. G.K. Chesterton complained bitterly, 'It is not the death of Little Nell, but the life of Little Nell that I object to.' Carey, too, shows how Dickens makes constant references to *King Lear*, in making Nell 'an improved Victorian version of Cordelia, without Cordelia's regrettable impoliteness in the first act.' Two years earlier in 1838, Macready's late-Romantic *King Lear* had been played for sheer pathos. Lear's poignant scenes with both his daughter and the fool, a delicate young actress, had been rapturously received. Dickens, at the time, was an enthusiastic and much-affected young reviewer of this production. He was understandably overwhelmed by the pathos of a style of drama that, we must accept, is no longer fashionable.

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2 Alan Shelston: *The Old Curiosity Shop and the Alice Books*
To a modern reader, Nell’s passivity and goodness pall all too readily in a novel where the creative energy is given to the grotesques surrounding her. She is pious, over-idealised and fulsomely devoted to a grandfather who is ironically, more than Quilp, the source of her troubles. It is his addiction to gambling that places her in constant jeopardy and unlike the Marchioness, an appealing young servant girl in the later chapters, she is relentlessly passive and long-suffering. Like Alice, she moves in a dream world, often wondering whether she is awake or asleep.

But Nell’s effect on the early Victorian public was undeniably powerful. For fifty weeks, readers in England and America were so caught up in the fate of Little Nell that when, in December 1841, they sensed a note of melancholy in the tone of the instalments, they inundated Dickens with letters recommending poor Nell to mercy. It is also said that crowds gathered on the harbour front of New York asking incoming passengers ‘is Little Nell dead?’

Nell had to die and reduce his adult readers to paroxysms of grief. Dickens describes Nell lying dead with barely contained emotion as a beautiful, sweet figure waiting for her ascent to heaven. He is thought to have opened the floodgates of tears with the line, ‘So shall we know the angels in their majesty after death.’ At this point even his most distinguished readers broke down. Lord Jeffrey was found with his head on the library table while Daniel O’Connell, the Irish MP, burst into tears, throwing his book out of a train window. Forster, too, reported an incident of a man crying so much and so painfully, while Dickens, in a letter to his wife, gives us an insight into his sense of triumph: ‘If you could have seen Macready last night undeniably sobbing, and crying on the sofa as I read, you would have felt, as I did, what a thing it is to have power.’

Only much later did the cynicism set in. Oscar Wilde’s memorable comment - ‘No man without a heart of stone can read of the death of Little Nell without bursting into immediate laughter’ – seemed to burst the bubble on all this sentimentality while John Carey, in The Violent Effigy, goes even further by describing Nell’s fidelity to a disgraceful grandfather as ‘sanctimonious’. Moreover, he accounts for the book’s contemporary popularity by alleging acerbically that, at a time when there was no social security, Victorian parents had every intention of becoming a burden to their children: Nell, he says, is ‘a dwarf who brings not only intimations of immortality but a superannuation scheme as well.’ Surely, the unkindest cut of all.

The Problem of Quilp

Nowadays, we are particularly sensitive to the protection of children and finely tuned to the slightest hints of abuse or paedophilia, so the character of Quilp is a huge problem for modern readers. Though darkly comic, villainous and a masterpiece of creative energy, Quilp’s character is marked by his thinly disguised lust for this vulnerable child. It is he who calls her Little Nell and uses the diminutive whenever he speaks of her and as Robert Newsom points out the sexuality of Quilp’s sadism is far more explicit than we might expect in Victorian fiction. Throughout the novel, he is the malevolent, threatening dwarf who sets out to persecute Nell and her grandfather. In the early chapters he fantasises about her bed, torments her with a grisly marriage proposal and threatens her with salacious insinuations at every opportunity: ‘Such a fresh blooming, modest little bud, neighbour,’ said Quilp nursing his short leg and making his eyes twinkle very much.’ His insidious attentions are disgusting and discomforting even though there is a rich vein of humour in his antics and suggestions. Perverse, twisted, distasteful, this is a comedy that is difficult to relish in current times.
The Illustrations

One of the great strengths of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is the illustrations. From two main contributors, George Cattermole and Hablot Browne (Phiz) with a single illustration each from Samuel Williams and Daniel Maclise, they reflect the strange world of the grotesques and Nell's contrasting purity. Dickens' editing skills are at the heart of their power. When formulating ideas for *Master Humphrey's Clock*, he insisted on controlling the publication at every level and in reviving woodcut illustrations, he was looking back to the eighteenth-century publications of the *The Tatler*, *The Spectator* and even the chapbooks - crude productions that were almost synonymous with popular culture. Nostalgia for childhood favourites and a desire to share them with his readers underpins his decisions. As Michael Slater observes in his recent biography, 'Dickens does not just want to be popular; he wants to be the beloved friend, pleasant and comforting...his weekly visit eagerly anticipated by all degrees of readers.'

Dickens, then, chose woodcuts rather than separate steel engravings. In a letter to Cattermole, he asked him to 'name his own terms', and explained that woodcuts would be cheaper and that, more significantly, he would be able create another dimension by having the cuts embedded in the text in a way that would enrich the story. This juxtaposition of letterpress with illustration was inspired and sets up what Forster called 'the main idea and figure of the book.'

Two Examples of Hablot Browne's Illustrations

It is worth examining a couple of examples, in context. In Browne's woodcut below, the grandfather is drawn into a card game using Nell's hard-earned money: a turning point that strikes the underlying note of doom that characterises their flight from Quilp. Dickens frames the scene with two sentences that skilfully demonstrate the interplay between language and image:

As he spoke he drew a chair to the table; and the other three closing round it at the same time, the game commenced.

The child sat by, and watched its progress with a troubled mind.

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9 Slater page 147.
The preceding sentence draws us into the cardsharps’ territory. As the old gentlemen draws up his chair we see that his gaze is concentrated on the cards when it ought to be directed at his adversaries. The central figure looks at him askance, emphasising our sense of dramatic irony and making us aware of the deception in progress. The trappings of gamesters lie around, including a snooker cue and triangle. The candlelight illuminates the faces of these tricksters, giving a conspiratorial atmosphere to the whole tableau. We take all this in but then in the sentence that follows the picture, Dickens reminds us of our heroine: the emotional heart of the story. It is she who bears the pain of all this. Dickens returns us to the power of words by telling us directly of the ‘troubled mind’ that her body language can only suggest.

Much later in the book, Quilp seems to burst through the pages unexpectedly. Dickens uses this image as a shock tactic on both the consciousness of the innocent Kit and the reader. One of Quilp’s sadistic techniques is to make unforeseen appearances in order to terrify his victim with threats or, as in this case, to humiliate him with mocking sarcasm.

...he became aware of the face of Quilp.

And what a leer there was upon that face! It was from the open window of a tavern that it looked out; and the dwarf had so spread himself over it, with his elbows on the window-sill and his head resting on both his hands, that what between this attitude and his being swoln with suppressed laughter, he looked puffed and bloated into twice his usual face.

Dickens’ editing and Browne’s illustration ensure that Quilp makes the impact of a ghastly Jack-in-the-box by making him burst, with sinister effect, through the sentence. The smallness of the window and the huge blackness of the dwarf’s body in which a few grinning teeth can be discerned all contribute to his sudden monstrous presence. As if to underline the point of this character, the words ‘Man’ and ‘Beast’ are inscribed on the wall or shutter beside him. In a novel, in which people and things are constantly put on show, this could be a

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Catherine Waters, ‘Gender, family, and domestic ideology’ in The Cambridge Companion to Dickens page 125
fitting label for this particular grotesque. The illustrations link with the infamous characters of Mrs Jarley's waxworks but without their 'calming' effect.

*The Old Curiosity Shop* teems with life and death. Graveyards, gravestones and a preoccupation with dying permeate the novel but it is richly populated and as Elizabeth Brennan points out ‘unique among Dickens's novels in having a large proportion not only of unnamed characters, but of characters who are not named when they are first encountered.’ Never again was Dickens forced to expand a short tale into a novel but, with its looser narrative structure and sketchy scenes, it has all the youthful vitality of the picaresque structure that characterised *Pickwick* and *Nickleby* and in Little Nell it looks forward to the more fortunate Little Dorrit.

When writing *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens was keen to popularise his work and reach an ever widening audience and this is reflected thematically in his foregrounding of several itinerant popular entertainers. He is in good company. In Schlicke’s view this novel has ‘the most important presentation of popular entertainment in all of Dickens’ fiction.’ Whether we appreciate this potent amalgamation of comedy and pathos or condemn its sentimentality and savage humour, it deserves to be read more widely than it has been in recent times.

**Further Reading**

*Curiouser and curioser: The Old Curiosity Shop and the Alice Books* by Alan Shelston
*Dickens* by Peter Ackroyd
*Dickens* by Michael Slater
*Chesterton on Dickens* by G.K.Chesterton
*The Violent Effigy* by John Carey
*Knowing Dickens* by Rosemarie Bodenheimer

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11 Paul Schlicke quoted in Elizabeth Brennan's introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition page xxxi