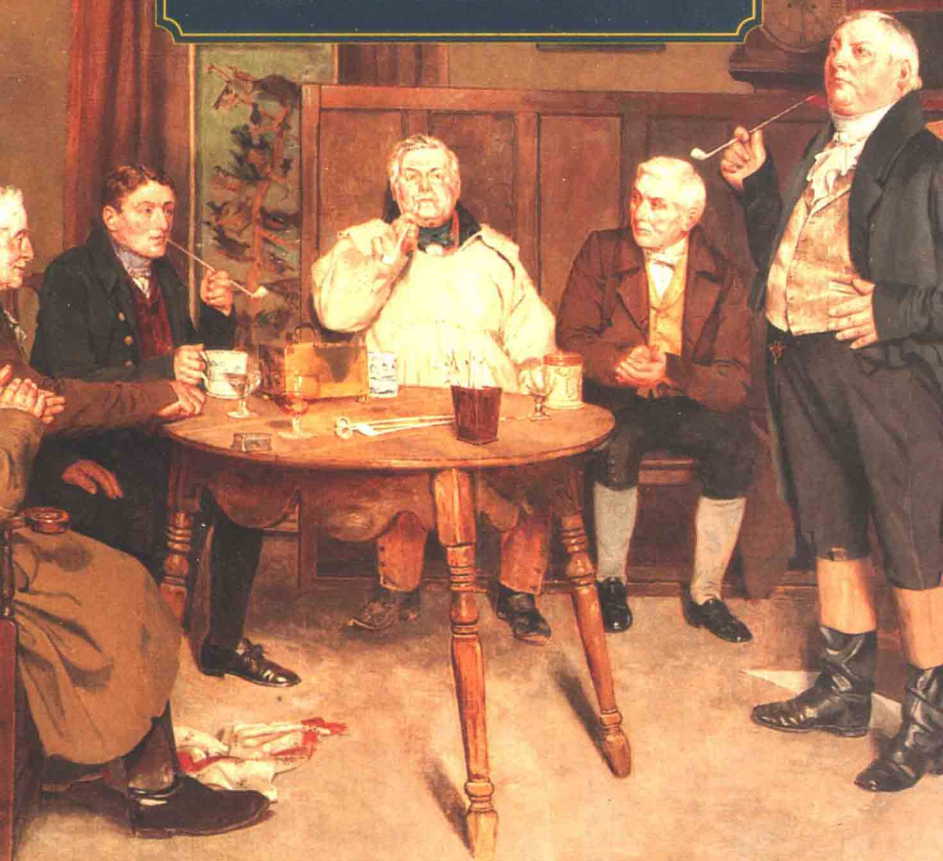


WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

CHARLES
DICKENS

*Martin
Chuzzlewit*



Complete and Unabridged

MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT

Charles Dickens

Introduction and Notes by
JOHN BOWEN



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INTRODUCTION

Martin Chuzzlewit, Dickens's sixth novel, is one of the funniest in the language, and has been loved and laughed at ever since its first appearance in monthly instalments in 1843-4. Its author was still only thirty when he began the book, but he was already the most celebrated and fêted author of his day, as he had been since the triumphant success of *The Pickwick Papers* six years before.

Much of the pleasure of the book comes from two immortal creations, Mrs Gamp and Mr Pecksniff. It is impossible to introduce them, and extracts from the novel can never really do justice to their sheer wild strangeness. Mr Pecksniff is often said to be a hypocrite; but he is much more than that, and his self-possessed power of deceit seems to take him beyond hypocrisy and moral judgement altogether. We sometimes wonder whether he is human at all, or some terrifyingly comic machine or monster. Like Scrooge at the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, he seems completely impervious to all outside influence or threats, and every check on him seems to spur him on to yet more excesses. Even when Antony Chuzzlewit tells him to his face that he is a hypocrite, he is sublimely unruffled:

'Charity, my dear,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'when I take my chamber candlestick tonight, remind me to be more than usually particular in praying for Mr Antony Chuzzlewit, who has done me an injustice.'

It is the precision that is so effective, and the extraordinary gift Dickens has of transforming the dead weight of bureaucratic waffle ('more than usually particular') into the deftest of characterisations.

The other great creation of the book is Mrs Gamp. In one way, she is simply a dirty, drunken old midwife and nurse. But she becomes for most readers a figure of mythical power and humour,

to be compared with only the very greatest literary creations. Here she is with Mr Mould the undertaker:

‘Young ladies with such faces thinks of something else besides berryins, don’t they, sir?’

‘I am sure I don’t know, Mrs Gamp,’ said Mould, with a chuckle . . .

‘Oh yes, you do know, sir!’ said Mrs Gamp, ‘and so does Mrs Mould, your ansome pardner too, sir; and so do I, although the blessing of a daughter was deniged me; which if we had had one, Gamp would certainly have drunk its little shoes right off its feet, as with our precious boy he did, and arterwards send the child a errand to sell his wooden leg for any money as it ’ud fetch as matches in the rough, and bring it home in liquor: which was truly done beyond his years, for ev’ry individle penny that child lost at toss or buy for kidney ones; and come home arterwards quite bold, to break the news, and offering to drown himself if sech would be a satisfaction to his parents. – Oh yes, you do know, sir,’ said Mrs Gamp, wiping her eye with her shawl, and resuming the thread of her discourse. ‘There’s something besides births and berryins in the newspapers, an’t there, Mr Mould?’

Dickens was interested in the way that opposites can be like one another, and Mrs Gamp brings together the two ends of human life, attending as she does ‘a lying-in or a laying-out with equal zest and relish’. In an unmistakable and precise comic idiom, she lurches with a kind of sure wildness between the life and idiom of the Victorian poor and deep meditations on human mortality, a view of the world where the only certain things are birth, death and ‘the bottle on the chimley-piece’.

Like Mr Pecksniff she is a monster, somebody who is or might be human, but who also makes us think or wonder (through our tears of laughter) if we can really take for granted what it is to be human at all. In fact, monsters and related creatures are very important for the whole story. Almost the first thing we see in the book is the dragon on the signpost of the Blue Dragon Inn, who becomes in Dickens’s description a peculiarly domestic little monster, ‘courteous and considerate . . . keeping one of his forepaws near his nose, as though he would say “Don’t mind me – it’s only my fun.”’ The Pecksniffs are always thinking of people as monsters: Pecksniff calls young Martin a monster; his appalling daughters Charity and Mercy (‘not unholy names, I hope?’) call Tom Pinch a ‘creature’

and a 'monster'; later still Jonas Chuzzlewit is a 'Griffin'. Even the coach that takes young Martin away is 'monstrous' to Tom Pinch, as is the steamer which takes him to America. In one of the funniest passages of the book, Mr Pecksniff attempts to introduce a classical allusion to 'those fabulous animals (pagan, I regret to say) who used to sing in the water':

Mr George Chuzzlewit suggested 'Swans'.

'No,' said Mr Pecksniff. 'Not swans. Very like swans, too. Thank you.'

The nephew with the outline of a countenance, speaking for the first and last time on that occasion, propounded 'Oysters'.

'No,' said Mr Pecksniff, with his own peculiar urbanity, 'nor oysters. But by no means unlike oysters; a very excellent idea; thank you, my dear sir, very much. Wait. Sirens. Dear me! Sirens, of course.'

The Blue Dragon, the sirens, the singing swans and oysters, and Mr Pecksniff himself, are fabulous animals indeed, and like the nephew with the outline of a countenance who says but a single word - 'Oysters' - we remember them for ever.

The inn sign is important for another reason because it points to the way that dead or inanimate objects in Dickens are constantly on the verge of becoming alive. The wind that opens the second chapter is as extraordinarily lively as the sign on the Blue Dragon, a 'swaggerer' who after tipping Mr Pecksniff on his head 'hurried away rejoicing . . . until it got out to sea where it met with other winds similarly disposed, and made a night of it'. And just as dead or inanimate objects can seem to come alive, so human or living things can sometimes appear to be machines or dead matter. Dickens throughout his life was fascinated both by copies of living things - like waxworks, masks and corpses - and by pieces of dead matter that fasten on to human beings or seem to come alive. The first letter of his that survives makes a joke about a wooden leg, and he never stops making such jokes. Mrs Gamp's husband sells his wooden leg for matches, and Mr Pecksniff even manages to make wooden legs the subject of a moral contrast - 'The legs of the human subject, my friends, are a beautiful production. Compare them with wooden legs and observe the differences between the anatomy of nature and the anatomy of art.'

The inn-board is also a sign, and Dickens constantly draws attention to the power and strangeness of signs and symbols. There are very many scenes of writing, drawing and inscription in the

book, and the book is full of signs and tokens. Indeed, like all books, it is made up of them. This is particularly clear in the Chuzzlewits' successive and various attempts to insinuate themselves into old Martin's will, a document which he is constantly writing and then destroying, unread. Pecksniff's architectural practice is constantly making the signs of buildings that are never built and his whole life is built on a 'strong trustfulness in sounds and forms' that makes him a mere 'direction-post which is always telling the direction of a place and never goes there'. Like his daughters, he is extremely adept at taking the outward signs of morality – such as simplicity and natural goodness – to cover the most ruthless power-seeking.

Language and truth are thus often at war in the novel. When John Westlock tries to bring home to Tom Pinch how dreadfully Pecksniff is exploiting him, he can only do so through denying what he knows to be true, and calling it 'madness':

'Madness!' returned young Westlock. 'Certainly its madness . . . Who but a madman would suppose you advertise him hereabouts, much cheaper and much better than a chalker in the walls could, eh, Tom? . . . or, to be more wild and monstrous still . . . that Pecksniff traded in your nature, and that your nature was, to be timid and distrustful of yourself, and trustful of all other men, but most of all, of him who least deserves it. There would be madness, Tom!'

In a world where Pecksniff is taken as a moral man, and where good nature and kindness can be 'traded in' like commodities, truth can only appear as a sort of madness. It is a disturbing set of thoughts, but they are near the heart of the novel, and give it much of its surprisingly modern air.

These ideas and questions become yet more apparent in the 'American' sections of the book where Dickens writes some of the most savage (and funny) satire in all his work. Much of Martin's experience of the United States is of the distortions and impossibilities of language. There is General Cyrus Choke's letter:

Devoted mind and body, heart and soul, to freedom, sir – to freedom, blessed solace to the snail upon the cellar-door, the oyster in his pearly bed, the still mite in his home of cheese, the very wrinkle of your country in his shelly lair – in her unsullied name, we offer you our sympathy . . .

and the not-quite-entirely-incomprehensible philosophy of the lady in the wig:

'Mind and matter,' said the lady in the wig, 'glide swift into the vortex of immensity. Howls the sublime and softly sleeps the calm Ideal, in the whispering chambers of Imagination. To hear it, sweet it is. But, then outlaughs the stern philosopher, and saith to the Grotesque, "What ho! arrest for me that agency. Go bring it here." And so the vision fadeth.'

The names of the New York newspapers – the *Sewer*, the *Stabber*, the *Family Spy*, the *Peeper*, the *Plunderer* – give a fair idea of their truthfulness. Most disturbing, and potentially fatal to Martin, is the advertising copy of Zephaniah Scadder who persuades him to buy property in a place which is called Eden but which is more like Hell. Here, the signs of language seem to float free from any truth or reference to the world. At times, of course, it is just people getting carried away with their own rhetoric, or the sharp businessman deceiving the naïve punter, but there are also times when we start to wonder whether there is anything behind or beyond rhetoric at all.

The black satire of these passages is in part a mark of Dickens's disappointment with the United States. He had travelled there the previous year in great hope, but as his letters – and *American Notes*, the book he made out of them – show, he was very disappointed. America in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a world on the one hand of empty or lying or misleading signs, on the other of raw nature and violence, about to become swamp or chaos. Critics have disagreed as to the accuracy of Dickens's picture of nineteenth-century American society, but it is striking that the things that troubled him most – the power of journalism and what we now call 'the media', of social violence and of the destructive force of free enterprise – are still at the centre of controversy and debate. These forces lead young Martin to the very edge of human society, to despair and nearly to death itself.

Part of Dickens's anger with the USA stemmed from his hatred of slavery, which was still legal and flourishing in the Southern States. Some of the most melancholy and 'un-Dickensian' pages of *American Notes* are those that reproduce, page after pitiful page, the advertisements for runaway slaves from contemporary newspapers in the slave States:

Ran away, Negress Caroline. Had on a collar with one prong turned down.

Ran away, a black woman, Betsy. Had an iron bar on her right leg.

Ran away, the negro Manuel. Much marked with irons.

Ran away, the negress Fanny. Had on an iron band about her neck.

Ran away, a negro boy about twelve years old. Had round his neck a chain dog-collar with 'De Lampert' engraved on it.

It is very different from the exuberant rhetoric that is the characteristic mark of Dickens's style, but there could not be a more eloquent or powerful condemnation. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the anger is equally apparent, most strikingly perhaps in its depiction of the American flag, where 'the stars wink upon the bloody stripes', the stripes of the flag transformed into the stripes on a slave's whipped back.

Although England was free from slavery it was certainly not free from ruthless, acquisitive fraud and the manipulation of signs and tokens. The England that Dickens writes about in *Martin Chuzzlewit* was undergoing enormous processes of change: political, industrial, social and economic. The Industrial Revolution had transformed large areas of the country beyond recognition and the years of Dickens's life, 1812 to 1870, saw the creation of enormous and unprecedented wealth and power in the rise of Britain to industrial and imperial pre-eminence. But it also saw, in the slums, factories and mines of Manchester and London, the most terrible exploitation and cruelty. As a twelve-year-old boy, Dickens had worked in a rat-infested warehouse on the banks of the Thames, sticking labels on pots of shoe-blackening, his father an imprisoned bankrupt. Still in his teens, a parliamentary reporter, he had witnessed the passage of the First Reform Act of 1832, and the first, faltering attempts to regulate the hours of children in factories and mines. As a young novelist, he had travelled to Manchester to see the factory system at first hand, and in the United States he visited prisons and factories in a constant, inquisitive search to comprehend the extraordinary forces that were recreating the world before his eyes.

Critics have sometimes seen Dickens as a rather naïve critic of Victorian society and capitalism because there are relatively few factories and industrial workers in his novels. But, as we can see in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, he is extremely interested in what lies behind industry and business, in particular the power of banks and financial institutions and the economics of rent and speculation. Mr Pecksniff is a member of the *rentier* class, someone who lives on the backs of other people's work: Tom Pinch's, Young Martin's and his tenants'. Even his moral hypocrisy Dickens describes in economic terms: 'he

was a tradesman dealing in a certain species of moral exhortation'. But the most interesting example is the depiction of Montague Tigg and the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Company. Montague Tigg, who begins the novel as the shabby parasite of Chevy Slyme, is transformed into Tigg Montague 'the great capitalist', transmuting in the process Young Bailey, the put-upon boots at Todger's, into Mr Bailey Junior, man about town. It is of course, all a fraud, resting on nothing but the manipulation of appearances and such signs of power and wealth as fire-buckets and ledgers, court-guides and letter-boxes, weighing-machines, safes, and the 'vast red waistcoat' of Bullamy, the company's porter.

As these examples may suggest, *Martin Chuzzlewit* has a magnificently complicated and ramshackle plot, loosely centred on the battle to inherit old Martin's wealth and involving blackmail and fraud, bribery, suicide and murder. In the preface to the book, Dickens says that his aim was to show 'how selfishness propagates itself', and this is confirmed and emphasised by old Martin's important outburst at the end of Chapter Three, which condemns selfishness, but does so in the most self-centred of ways. The book then goes on to show how difficult it is for young Martin to free himself from his upbringing, and how much he has to suffer before he can lose his family's vice of self-interest. Much of his moral education is the result of the forbearance and good will of Mark Tapley, whose moral strength grows in proportion to its being opposed. The worse-off he becomes and the more danger and difficulty there is, the more he rises to the challenge. Mark Tapley is a kind of embodiment of the free moral will, whose force and significance in the book come from continuing acts of self-asserting goodness.

As with Martin, moral problems in Dickens are usually entangled with the question of families. Dickens is often thought to be a sort of honorary patron saint of the family, a writer whose novels invariably and inevitably end in a scene of domestic bliss. But as the dreadful families of this novel show, this is far from the case. No one would want to be born a Chuzzlewit or a Pecksniff. The opening chapter, with its dated puns on Victorian terms for pawn-broker's shops and going hungry – 'my uncle's', 'dining with Duke Humphrey' – sometimes puts readers off, but it is an important one, not just for its attack on snobbery (the Chuzzlewits believe themselves to be descended from the Lord No Zoo), but also because it raises in the strongest possible form the book's central concern with inheritance. Inheritance can be a matter of money, as in the fight over old Martin's will, but Dickens is also troubled by the inherit-

ance of family characteristics and dispositions. In particular there seems to be a deep anxiety in the book about the relation of fathers and sons. In seeking to explain the 'sordid coarseness and brutality' of Jonas Chuzzlewit, Dickens claims him 'as the legitimate issue of the father upon whom those vices are seen to recoil'. It is striking that in one of the key phrases he uses to describe the power of inheritance and upbringing – 'As we sow, we reap' – Dickens is echoing a favourite phrase of his own improvident father.

The first chapter also reminds us how radical a writer Dickens was, and he rarely loses a chance in the book to contrast rich and poor to the latter's advantage, as in the description of the steerage passengers travelling to the New World 'with infinitely less of complaint and querulousness and infinitely more of mutual assistance and general kindness . . . than in many brilliant ballrooms'. But it was a radicalism that had received an apparent setback in Dickens's deep disappointment with the USA. Although it had representative democracy and personal liberty, with none of the aristocratic corruption and privilege that Dickens so detested in England, America also had a supremely powerful, brutal and exploitative economic system, barely distinguishable from legalised crime. Dickens did not become a reactionary or conservative in response to this, but started to examine and depict (and laugh at) those very forces that had so shocked and horrified him, his commitment to political and social reform leading him to question not just the abuses of the capitalist system but the very system itself.

It is one of the great wonders and mysteries of Dickens's writing that he was able to create novels of such satirical force without falling into the satirist's traditional melancholy and misanthropy, that he could be so serious and so funny at the same time. The novel, unlike *Martin Chuzzlewit* in the hell-hole of Eden, never despairs and there is a deep confidence in ordinary human capacity that survives and indeed is strengthened at the very blackest moments of the novel. It stems perhaps from Dickens's sense of the absurdity of so many human characteristics and institutions. To see something as absurd, even if absurdly powerful, is the beginning of a recognition that there is nothing permanent or inevitable about it. The author and critic Walter Benjamin said that the wisest thing that fairy-stories teach us is 'to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and high spirits'. A similar belief in practical intelligence and good humour in the face of Pecksniff, the Anglo-Bengalee, Jonas Chuzzlewit and their kind, fills the pages of *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

It is, then, the comedy of the book that is most to be treasured, and there are many joys awaiting the reader of *Martin Chuzzlewit*: the picture of Chevy Slyme 'shambling with his legs'; Mrs Brick's lectures on 'The Philosophy of Vegetables'; Mrs Hominy 'talking deep truths in a melodious snuffle'; best of all, perhaps, Mrs Gamp's, 'He'd make a lovely corpse.' There is the remarkable figure of Chuffey, like a character in a play by Samuel Beckett, 'looking at nothing with eyes that saw nothing, and a face that meant nothing'. There is Mr Nadgett who, in another scene concerned with the power and self-destructive force of writing, writes letters to himself:

and when he found them in his pocket, put them in the fire, with such distrust and caution that he would bend down to watch the crumpled tinder while it floated upward, as if his mind misgave him, that the mystery it contained might come out at the chimney-pot.

And there is the wonderful anecdote of the Viscount at Tigg Montague's dinner-party, who insists that the great failure of Shakespeare's plays is their lack of female legs:

There's a lot of feet in Shakespeare's verse, but there ain't any legs worth mentioning in Shakespeare's plays, are there Pip? Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, and all the rest of 'em, whatever their names are, might as well have no legs at all, for anything the audience know about it, Pip . . . What's the legitimate object of the drama, Pip? Human nature. What are legs? Human nature. Then let us have plenty of leg pieces, Pip.

But any anthology of the best parts of a Dickens novel is in danger of becoming as long as the book itself. Dickens when he wrote the book said that he felt it was 'in a hundred points immeasurably the best of my stories'. Millions of readers have agreed.

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FURTHER READING

Biography

There are some good modern biographies, in particular:

Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, London 1990

Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, New York 1952, revised 1977

Fred Kaplan, *Charles Dickens*, London 1988

But the best of all is by Dickens's friend John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, London 1872-4 (often reprinted)

Criticism

G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, London 1906

G. K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Work of Dickens*, London 1911

George Gissing, *The Immortal Dickens*, London 1925

George Gissing, *Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens*, London 1926

John Lucas, *The Melancholy Man*, London 1970

Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey*, London 1965

J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*, Harvard 1958

Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*, London 1983

Grahame Smith, *Dickens, Money and Society*, California 1968

Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, London 1970

Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens*, London 1970

Dickens's *American Notes for General Circulation* (1843) provides a fascinating comparison with the American sections of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The story can be further pursued in volumes three and four of the magnificent Pilgrim edition of Dickens's letters, edited by Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, which contain all Dickens's surviving correspondence from this period.

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