

Contribution of Major Victorian Novelist-

The opulence of literature of all types, except drama, in the Victorian England is too evident to be pointed out. But it is in the field of novel that this richness and variety is especially notable; the genre advances by leaps and bounds from the preceding Romantic age; the literary world is almost flooded by the fictional products of highly creative writers throughout the Victorian period. Among the earlier novelists, besides women writers like George Eliot and Brontë sisters, the main creators are Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Anthony Trollope. On each of them voluminous books have been written. But here our endeavour would be to sum up the salient features of their genius with reference to the stories and characters they invented to keep their readers enchanted, and also, incidentally, enlightened about the society they lived in.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870), ranked 6th among the top hundred literary creators of all times by Daniel Burt, had an inexhaustible fertility which enabled him to create some twenty full-fledged novels, besides many stories, essays and other kinds of writing. His name inevitably occurs in any talk or writing concerning the English novel in general. His prolific career started with *Sketches by Boz* published in 1836, and it was followed by the first two complete novels written almost simultaneously— though so different by nature— *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* (1837) which at once made Dickens the most popular writer of his time. These revealed the promise of emergence of a great writer who can entertain as well as observe and criticise social problems, who combines an effortless flow of a pleasant narrative style and a flair for sentiment as well as sensation, and most importantly, present memorable characters involved in dramatic action. 'Pickwick is evidently episodically, a series of funny adventures and incidents the main attraction in this picaresque fiction is Sam Weller, the philosophic cockney servant, and Mr Jingle, who talks himself into the confidence of the Pickwickians at their very first meeting).

"Heads, heads— take care of your heads!" cried the loquacious stranger, as they came out under the low archway, which in those days formed the entrance to the coach-yard. "Terrible place— dangerous work— other day— five children— mother— tall lady, eating sandwiches— forgot the arch— crash— knock— children look round— mother's head off— sandwich in her hand— head of a family off— shocking, shocking!"

Among Mr Pickwick's benevolent blundering adventures the most farcical is his stealthy entry into the garden of a ladies' boarding school to prevent a young lady from eloping with a man, as per Trotter's information. The situation is carried to the point of extreme farce, as Miss Smithers discovers 'the man—behind the door' The lady abbess no sooner heard this appalling cry, than she retreated to her own bed-room, double-locked the door, and fainted away comfortably. The boarders, and the teachers, and the servants, fell back upon the stairs, and upon each other; and never was such a screaming and fainting and struggling beheld.'

Oliver Twist, though somewhat melodramatic in its plot and several key-scenes, is much better than Newgate School of novels like Ainsworth's *Rookwood* and Sheppard and Lytton's *Paul Clifford*. For the first time Dickens enters into direct social criticism. The inhuman cruelty and greed of the operators of workhouses, which made children either die or become future tyrants, or turned into thieves and murderers, is vividly made clear in the opening chapter. The realistic treatment of Oliver's experience at the workhouse, and his experience of the underworld of crime dominated by figures like Fagin, Bill Sykes and Artful Dodger, are co-related themes. The scene of Nancy's murder by her brutish lover Sykes, frequently read out by Dickens at the demand of listeners on public dais, is charged with high voltage drama. Good characters like Oliver himself and Rose Maylie are

unimpressive and pale compared to villains. But here we already have crime and murder as a central theme, as it will be in some future novels like *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Barnaby Rudge* and *Edwin Drood*.

Nicholas Nickleby, the novel which immediately followed *Oliver Twist*, deals with the abuses in private schools and the affairs of itinerant theatrical companies, through the story of Nicholas, who pits himself against villainous characters, and ultimately prospers. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens tries to write a tragedy, but makes a sentimental maudlin effect out of the pathetic deaths of Little Nell and her grandfather. It is only in the portrait of Dick Swiveller that we get some admirable Dickensian flavour (*Barnaby Rudge* is the first of Dickens's two novels dealing with historical events. It exploits the incident of the attack of Newgate Prison during Gordon Riots of 1780. The two heroes of the personal and the historical tales, *Barnaby* and *Gordon*, both somewhat subnormal, vaguely struggle towards one another through the world of darkness and evil forces.

Martin Chuzzlewit (1843), last novel of Dickens's early period, is universally acknowledged as the greatest comedy by Dickens. Its loosely constructed plot gives abundant scope to his talent for exuberant wit and humour. Many delightful episodes, not relevant to the main plot, are told with characteristic gusto. The two villains, murderous Jonas Chuzzlewit and hypocritical schemer, Pecksniff, drawn with an exaggerated colour, are superseded in popularity by the excellently comic drunken midwife, Sarah Gamp.

Among Dickens's middle-novels, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*, one notices a maturing social consciousness and a greater regard for unification of plot, besides creation of memorable characters. In the first novel, the focal point is Dombey's hopes for a son to perpetuate the business so dear to him. The contrast between the selfish Dombey and his unselfish daughter Florence carries Dickens for the first time into the serious mystery of human relationships. Dombey feels an unnatural hatred for Florence, and yet is fascinated by her warm-hearted humanity. In *Dombey*, critics have found 'a permanently valid image of the 19th century Economic Man' to be found also in Thackeray, Meredith, and Galsworthy's *Forsytes*. *David Copperfield*, one of world's most popular autobiographical novels, was Dickens's own 'favourite child'. In its early chapters he touchingly records some traumatic experiences of his own unhappy child-life, mixing fact and fiction, humour and pathos, childish dreams and helplessness in a unique and wonderful manner. On one extreme are wicked and sadistic giants like Murdstone and Creakle, on the other, immortal comic king, Micawber, who can suck out of despair and extreme wretchedness undying optimism, always waiting for 'something to turn up'. Indeed, readers will never forget Micawber's name even if they forget the name of the novel in which he figures. This is why Dickens's novels are mainly novels of characters, rather than of incidents or plots.

Bleak House (1852), considered by many modern critics as the best of Dickens's creations, because, besides being a valuable social document, it is a successful experiment, probably under the influence of Wilkie Collins, of an intricate and elaborate plot construction. There is also an employment of two points of view through the method of double narrative— one told by Esther Summer son, one of the saintly characters, and the other by the author himself. It is also remarkable that some of the supporting characters like Harold Skimpole (a prototype of Leigh Hunt) and Boythorn (drawn after Landor) are taken from real life celebrities. But the real unity of the novel is its theme of corruption pervading like the symbolic Fog, described so poetically in Chapter I:

'Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green silt and meadows, fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on

the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners....'

It may have inspired some very famous lines in T. S. Eliot's *The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

Great Expectations, called a romantic 'autobiography', was preceded by *Hard Times* and followed by *Our Mutual Friend*. In *Hard Times*, Dickens really subjects himself to the discipline of concentration on a single theme and strict requirement of plot and necessary characters at the cost of comic vivacity and surprising innovations. The vivid image of *Coke Town* is both realistic and symbolic of the dehumanising outlook caused by evil profiteering industrialists, and the misery and hopelessness of the wretched working-class is seen as an inevitable effect of *Laissez Faire*. Gradgrind ruling his house and school with hard facts, is ultimately made to realise the poisonous results of his unnatural policies. But *Bounderby*, the owner of factory, is a greater villain, being greedy, cruel, hypocritical as well as proud. Shortest in length among Dickens's completed novels (229 pages only), it was written most systematically in three sections called 'Sowing', 'Reaping' and 'Garnering', respectively. The picture of *Coke Town*, as given in the first chapter of Book II, beginning 'The streets were hot and dusty on the summer day' makes one think of the contrasted picture of Hardy's *Egdon Heath*. Strangely enough, in both *Hard Times* and *The Return of the Native*, the setting plays a role larger than the human actors. But for lack of adequate knowledge of such characters, Dickens fails to make Stephen Blackpool and Rachael convincing enough. But he makes it up with the idealism of Cecilia Jupe, that love conquers all evils, and the indomitable gusto of Mr Sleary, the owner of the circus, an oasis in the desert of the *Coke Town*.

Of *Our Mutual Friend*, Kettle says, 'Of all Dickens's novels this is the one most deeply and consistently impregnated with a consciousness of power of the bourgeois: The theme of the corrupting influence of money which we saw in *Domby and Son*, continues here with Mr Bohm; and the snobbery of Podsnap recalls that of Pip in *Great Expectation* for which the hero underwent spiritual sufferings. Another social novel, *Little Dorrit* comes in for an enthusiastic admiration from R. C. Churchill when he says 'There could not well be a way of combining the comic achievement of *Chuzzlewit* with the psychological realism of *Great Expectations*. *Little Dorrit* comes nearest to such an unlikely combination.' *A Tale of Two Cities* which uses the background of the French Revolution, and was definitely influenced by Carlyle's book on the subject, is not really a great historical novel. The mystery of identity occupies the centre of interest. Sydney Carton's physical resemblance with Charles Darnay, and the former's self-sacrifice for love of Lucy Manette, has nothing to do with the particular setting and time. Finally, the unfinished *Edwin Drood* indicates that Dickens's fictional genius might have contributed a lot to the English novel of crime and detection, if he had not died at 58 out of sheer overstrain.

'Dickens will be mainly remembered and adored for his rich humour of all sorts— uproarious fun, exaggerated farce, sly irony, gentle satire; humour of situation as well as characters, and humour of narrative style and dialogue. It is often said that Dickens's characters are puppets; that Pecksniff and Heep are hypocrisy personified, Tom Pinch is amiability personified, and Micawber is optimism personified. It is unthoughtful to say that any of his great characters could step out of one book into another without materially disturbing the arrangement of either. If we try to imagine Sam Weller in *Our Mutual Friend* or Micawber in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the limitations of this formal criticism are at once plain. Another charge is that Dickens exaggerates. But exaggeration is a fundamental condition of rich comedy, and it is a great art to know how far to go and where to stop. No other novelist knew it so well as Dickens. Santayana rightly says, "When people say Dickens exaggerates, it seems to me

they can have no eyes and no ears... they have little sense of those living grimaces that play from moment to moment on the countenance of the world. The thoughtful aspect of Dickens's novels come in the form of social criticism. He was the expression of the conscience of his age. In *Oliver Twist*, he attacked the administration of the Poor Law; in *Bleak House* law's delay; in *Little Dorrit* the target is the injustice which persecutes poor debtors; in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the abuses on charity-school and brutal school masters; in *Hard Times*, orthodox political economy. But Dickens is not really pre-occupied with a social system as he is with some of its manifestations. David's employment at the Ware House is a pointer to the evil of child labour; but Dickens is not bothered with it as soon as David can escape from the atmosphere.

In fine, some words may be said about Dickens's delineation of children. He does not modify facts to suit the standards of his age. The child's view of human beings is not less real than the adult's, and it is the true child that Dickens captures so unerringly when writing as David or Pip. The childlike view of the world found in the first halves of *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* is one of the finest achievements in his works. We may find fault with Pip's description of Wople's great aunt keeping a school, or David's description of the affairs at Salem House. Yet to have represented them with the just and unobtrusive realism of Flaubert would have been an offence against artistic effect.

Dickens's contemporary, William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) was an intellectual with a Cambridge background. After ridiculing those people who admire mean things meanly' to give themselves a superior air in *The Book of Snobs* (1846-1847), and writing the picaresque-type *Barry Lyndon*, he was excellently prepared to settle down to his masterpiece called *Vanity Fair* (1847-1848). Taking the title as well as its basic implication from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Thackeray in this 'Novel without a Hero' presented a society where foolish, sensual men can be easily seduced by an artful and attractive young woman bent on achieving power and money by exploiting her lovers and husbands. There are two central female figures in *Vanity Fair* of totally contrasted types: While Rebecca or Becky Sharp is a shrewd unscrupulous social climber without any human sentiment, Amelia is affectionate, trusting, sentimental and foolish. Becky is unquestionably the star of the story, and in the society depicted by the realistic novelist evil is potent, and goodness is of no good. Becky's initial failure to secure Jos, makes her secretly marry Rawdon, and she has to reveal the secret when Rawdon's father Sir Pitt Crawley himself proposes to her. After suffering poverty and discontent for some time she is involved in an illicit relation with Lord Steyne, gets exposed to her husband, and flies to continent to try her fortune. Thackeray integrates the plot of his novel through constant parallelism of the fortunes of Becky and Amelia, and particularly through their chance-meeting at Paris 'where Becky shows a letter which reveals to Amelia that her husband George, killed in war, in whose memory she kept shedding tears and hesitated to marry the devoted Dobbin, was mean enough to propose an elopement to Becky, before going to war.

Thackeray lavishes all the brilliance of his art in depicting the unscrupulousness and duplicity of the glamorous Becky Sharp, the meanness and cowardice of Joseph Sedley, the viciousness of Lord Steyne, and Ra von Crawley's utter lack of moral principles. Besides these the virtuous characters seem dull and incompetent. Amelia is mild and inane; while Dobbin's virtue of passive goodness is made ridiculous. One finds some similarity of the satire and theatrical effect in action between Thackeray and Ben Jonson. But Thackeray takes care to use the novelist's advantage of interpolating personal commentaries and appeal to the middle class readers. 'He also wittily mixes in his narrative the ironical, the cynical, the comic and pitiful moments. The dialogues are pointed and effective, and the general style, as Hugh Walker says, 'is flexible as well as strong, and always adequate, never over-charged, so times impassioned and nobly eloquent.

Thackeray's next novel, *Pendennis* (1850) distinctly marks a fall from the brilliant height of *Vanity Fair*. Chesterton finds 'Victorian compromise' in the writer's attitude here. Realism is blunted by some romantic sentiment in portraying the story of Arthur Pendennis and Helen. The snobbish and vainly ambitious unheroic protagonist is shown as being saved by his wife who happens to be an ideal woman. The novel is lacking in psychological insight,) and somehow, though the social scene has Thackeray's usual brilliance, the characters lack conviction.

Henry Esmond (1852), his great historical novel, is a truly admirable creation. It is written with a conscientious fidelity to history that is seldom equalled. Thackeray has put into the novel all the wealth of his knowledge of the age of Queen Anne which he had laboriously gathered for his lectures on *The Four Georges*. The narrative deals with a curious situation: Lady Castlewood's growing love for Henry Esmond, a protege of her husband; Esmond's infatuation for her daughter Beatrix, a heartless ambitious minx who jilts him; and ultimately after Lord Castlewood's death, Esmond's decision to return Lady Castlewood's affection by marrying her. While Thackeray is even more conscientious than Scott in his treatment of history, and captures even the tone and temper of the age he depicts, he does not succeed in analysing the psychology of characters. As Seymour Betsky says, 'the telling moments of perplexity, where for example, one cannot imagine how Rachel can feel for Esmond as both "son" and "lover" are moments of perplexity for Thackeray as well.' Beatrix, of course, is Thackeray's subtlest character after Becky Sharp, and has a fascination which the latter has not.

Colonel Thomas Newcome, Thackeray's hero in his next novel. *The Newcome*, is an admirable and amiable gentleman, but perhaps the only memorable thing in the novel is the moving scene of the death of the Colonel, which shows Thackeray's superiority over Dickens in the art of pathos. The last novel *The Virginians* which is a sequel of *Henry Esmond*, and is concerned with Henry's grandsons, George and Harry Warrington, betrays the waning creative capacity of the novelist and does not really hold the reader's attention either in characterisation or in the maintenance of an interesting plot.

As contemporary novelists Dickens and Thackeray are as much different from each other as Tennyson and Browning are as poets. Dickens is overwhelmingly popular with the mass of readers Thackeray is more appreciated by thoughtful elite readers. The world of Dickens is larger, more varied, and full of vitality. Thackeray works within a specific circle of society, and so his characters fall into certain types. Dickens is a fertile creator, but often artistically indifferent. Thackeray is a more careful artist who copies the intricacies and manners of the society faultlessly. When he repeats some types of characters, he tries to improve on it. Thus the Dobbins type is made more likeable in *Colonel Newcome*: the brilliance of Becky Sharp dazzles, that of Beatrix fascinates. But Dickens hardly repeats himself; he varies his themes and creates endless individual characters. Thackeray is true to reality, Dickens is fond of exaggeration and eccentricity and idiosyncrasies. His faithfulness to the time and the particular class of his characters, makes Thackeray's novels curiously dated, but the appeal of most novels of Dickens is imaging. His world is full of rogues as well as saints, gentlemen and ladies coexist there with labourers, thieves, sweepers, wretched drunkards and swindlers in a broad canvas like life itself, Thackeray's approach is intellectual and selective, and he has nothing of Dickens's magical power of spontaneous laughter.

One must call Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) one of the major novelists of the time, first because he wrote forty-seven complete novels in a span of twenty years, none of which is below an acceptable standard; and secondly, because he showed a shrewd power of observation, an healthy attitude, and maintained uniformly his competent literary workmanship. But there is little truly

brilliant or original in Trollope. Basically, he follows the tradition of Austenian social novel, but due to his vast and varied experience of life his novels cover a larger area.

Yet the most successful of his novels are those based on a particular region called Barchester, a fictitious location somewhere in the South-West of England. In creating and using an imaginary region for the setting of his fictions, he may be called a model who has inspired later Victorian regional novelists like George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. The first successful novel of Trollope is *The Warden* (1855). It tells in an undramatic, quiet manner the long-drawn story of the fight between Septimus Harding, warden of the almshouse of Hiram's Hospital, and the reformers who demand greater allowance for the old men. Bold, a leader of the agitators, compromises his principle through marriage with Eleanor. But ultimately Harding has to resign wardenship.

By common consent Trollope's best novel is *Barchester Towers* (1857). Explaining its popularity, he himself wrote, 'The story is thoroughly English. There was a little fox-hunting and a little turf-hunting, some Christian value and some Christian cant. There was no heroism and no villainy. There was much church and more love-making.' One of the main attractions of the novel is the portrait of Mrs Proudie, the redoubtable wife of a hard-working, earnest clergyman. She is a sharp-tongued, strong-willed capable woman who rules her husband's house and his diocese with equal authority. The novel also interestingly depicts the struggle for political power between Archdeacon Grantly and Mrs Proudie. More or less the ideas of *Barchester Towers* are continued in the subsequent novels of the series: *Doctor Thorne*, *Framley Parsonage*, *The Small House at Allington* (1864), and *Tim Last Chronkle of Barset* (1867). Trollope's practice of storytelling through some almost independent subplots flowing happily parallel to each other, instead of taxing the brain about how to unify a really intricate plot, suggested a flexible method of writing to many later novelists. But it is anything but easy to express the restrained irony and satire like Trollope has done in his absolutely naturalistic narration and even some apparently inconsequential dialogues. Perhaps this consistent ability of the realistic novelist made a writer of Tolstoy's stature say, 'He kills me with his excellence'. It is only in a late novel, *The Way We Live Now* (1875) that the satire is quite explicit. His political novels like *Phineas Finn* (1869) and *The Prime Minister* (1876) are inferior to the Barchester group of novels. Rather his *Autobiography* is quite an interesting book, where we get to know the astonishing fact that he began a new novel, every time throughout his career, the day after finishing the last.