

## Commentary

# Charles Dickens: The first popular media titan

Robert M. Howe, III

Auburn University. E-mail: [rmh0022@tigermail.auburn.edu](mailto:rmh0022@tigermail.auburn.edu).

Accepted 20 February, 2012

In *CHARLES DICKENS, THE FIRST POPULAR MEDIA TITAN*, author Rob Howe (Robert M. Howe, III), uses Charles Dickens' original works and a welter of secondary research to examine and evaluate Dickens as not only an enormously popular Victorian Period author, but also as the first popular culture media titan in the context of three epic changes in Victorian society—the unprecedented sudden availability of printing technology, the sudden vast increase in literacy and the massive changes in popular culture (advertising, spending money, consumer appetites, and the roles of women). Howe's highly available writing style and his elegant use of illuminative sources makes this piece highly readable as well as quite scholarly. Howe's consideration of Dickens is fresh, unique and timely, coming as it does on the bi-centennial of Dickens' birth.

**Key words:** Charles Dickens, printing, publishing, multi-media, literacy, consumer behavior, roles of women, Victorian period, culture, content, redstone, plagiarism, copyright law, media titan.

## CHARLES DICKENS, THE FIRST POPULAR MEDIA TITAN

"Content is King," Sumner Redstone, originally spoken ca.1954 and again in 1994. "It's not what it's on; it's what's on it." (Address Hosted by Boston University School of Law and College of Communication on September 18, 2007, <http://www.bu.edu/buniverse/view/?v=a0R7b5b>).

Charles Dickens, both the popular artist and the publishing businessman, was a most apt beneficiary of the "Perfect Storm" of epic change that broke upon the printing industry, the literacy rate and the popular culture in mid-Victorian England. So adept was he at capitalizing on the effects of that storm, that he came to not only control what it was on, he controlled what was on it. That magnificent perfect storm was the spontaneous confluence of the necessary and sufficient capabilities required to fuel an insatiable Victorian media engine whose blanketing reach and massive distributive power propelled Dickens' authorial career to heights never before reached by any British author. Riding before that storm upon his enormous gifts as a writer and storyteller, his visionary publishing acumen and his relentless work ethic, Dickens became not only the most beloved and revered popular fiction writer of his time, but also the

world's first media titan.

Simultaneous major leaps forward in technology, literacy, artistic development, printing method, delivery systems, as well as the emergence of mass-market advertising, indeed, the emergence of a mass-market itself, all contributed to a literal paper blizzard in the Victorian publishing industry. A comprehensive list of the foundational changes which took place immediately prior to and during the period in which Dickens was writing would be daunting. But a few of the seminal developments were: in printing, 32-page signature and columnar formatting; in distribution, the rapid development of improved roads and an efficient rail system; in advertising, the development of a predictable, repeatable economic model. Still, however, the ultimate artistic driving force of that perfect media storm was then as it is today, compelling, enthralling, audience-immersing content, and no one in mid-Victorian England produced content like Charles Dickens.

The technology of printing and its influence on British and European culture is explored at great length by Elizabeth L. Eisenstein in her comprehensive discussion of the phenomenon in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: communications and cultural transformations in*

*early modern Europe* (1997). Eisenstein concludes that the technological developments of printing presses in the eighteenth century made possible the rise of small modern print shops which did more than just print materials for the church as their predecessors had done. These new shops were capable of fast-turn sheet-fed printing of all sorts of materials such as handbills, newspapers and what came to be Dickens' stable distribution format, weekly or monthly serials. Those foundational changes in the printing industry put into the hands of ordinary, secular businessmen the power to create specifically targeted materials for specifically targetable audiences.

"In print shops especially, the old missionary impulses were combined with the demands imposed by an expanding capitalist enterprise. In the early-modern print shop, however, several other impulses converged. Was the driving power of capitalism stronger than the long-lived drive for fame? Both together surely were stronger than either one alone. . . . When dealing with the new powers of the press, one may make the case for a multivariable explanation even while stressing the significance of the single innovation . . . Whether (in) a profit-making capitalist or Christian evangelist . . . the convergence of different impulses proved irresistible, producing a massive irreversible cultural 'change of phase' (Eisenstein, 1997 p. 702).

There would surely entail a profound outcome from the rise of the commercial print shop. Aside from creating a popular audience and feeding it printed entertainment, the development of the Victorian printing industry would also generate great economic and political power for those who knew how to use it and could wield it well: "He would be a bold man' says Somervell (David Church Somerville, *English Thought in the Nineteenth Century*) in discussing certain popular nineteenth-century English novelists, who would deny them 'an influence on general elections' (Eisenstein, 1997 p. 706).

Dickens found himself in the midst of that profound "change of phase" in London when he began his commercial writing career as a free-lance reporter at Doctor's Commons Court in 1829 (Michael Slater, 2009 p. 32). The means to reach a large and diverse audience had only recently come into existence. Printing technology had progressed enough to provide a fast-turn delivery vehicle for not only public records, newsworthy events, both ecumenical and secular, but also for serialized fiction.

The linkage of Dickens and the rise of popular media publishing is not a new topic, nor is a consideration of the industrial developments which gave rise to the potential for widespread, efficient, relatively inexpensive printing.

Numerous studies have been made of the effect of the serial publishing model on Dickens' plot structure and character development as well. (Grubb, 1942 Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 141 to 156; Graham Law, 2000 p. 34).

Indeed, Dickens himself, in several of his published letters (Grubb, 1942 p. 141), reveals his clear understanding of his own facility with the serial method and with editing techniques required to effectively adapt a novel to its restraints. There is no doubt that Dickens fully understood both the business he was in and how best to go about providing compelling content for his "beloved readers" (content that would without doubt keep them enthralled as they themselves read, or were read to; content that would leave them hungering for the next "number" in the series, and content that would, as the common advertising parlance of today would have it, "sell soap.").

That there was a sufficient pool of "beloved readers" for his work is indisputable. Robert K. Webb's investigation of literacy in England during the Victorian period, *Working Class Readers in Early Victorian England* makes the point that people learned to read in a variety of ways:

"Reading could be learned in the many varieties of schools scattered about the country; among these the Sunday schools play an important part . . . while stimuli to individual study existed in the pressure of the times, in the newspapers which reflected it, in the rapidly increasing number of coffee houses where papers could be read, in improved forms of artificial lighting, and even in such humble things as the advertising posters which appeared on nearly every wall" (Webb, 1950 Vol. 65, No. 256, p. 334).

Webb then comes at this notion of expanding literacy through an interesting use of reverse projection from a highly pertinent, though obscure set of data:

"The amount of reading material available increased tremendously. Newspaper stamps issued in the United Kingdom in 1831 totaled 38,648,314, to which must be added an unknown but considerable number of unstamped journals; in 1864 newspaper circulation, daily and weekly, metropolitan and provincial, had reached 546,059,400; while in the same period periodical circulation increased an estimated fifteen times. No little weight must be given also to the ordinary varieties of street literature; those productions devoted to crimes, executions, passion, and scandal, which rarely leave traces commensurate with their circulation" (Webb, 1950 p. 334).

Clearly, the enormous 14 times growth in the number of issued newspaper stamps and a corresponding 15 times

growth in circulation during the period that Dickens was writing demonstrate that there was an equally enormous amount of increased readership during the period. Jeremy Hawthorn, in his *Studying the Novel: An Introduction*, points out that “during the Victorian period the habit of reading aloud within the family was much more widespread than it is today . . . part of Dickens’s audience was of this sort” (Hawthorn, 1992 p. 16). The second component of the perfect storm was clearly extant. Victorians were reading, or put another way, were consuming popular content, voraciously.

The subject matter of Dickens’ “content” touches all of the major themes still making the rounds of pop media today: “Family Matters”, “Legal Thrillers”, “Class Inequity”, “Quests for Identity and Spiritual Understanding”, “Good versus Evil”, “Love and Sex”, “Hope and Despair”, “Sacrifice and Loss”, “Loss of Innocence”, “Journeys to New Lands”, “The Law and all its complexity and convolvement”, “Greed”, “Lust”, “Gluttony”, “Betrayal”, “Salvation and Forgiveness”, “Destruction and Resolution”, all of them feeding the insatiable beast of the popular media that in the Dickens era grew from a cottage industry into a Brobdingnagian paper colossus whose reach spanned the industrialized world.

In this context, Dickens’ preface to *David Copperfield* takes on another level of meaning. When he calls Copperfield his “favorite child”, he surely means it. Most critics take him at his word and accept that he means he loves it best because of its many autobiographical elements, and that undoubtedly is correct in light of the famous “Fragment” revealed by John Forster in his biography of Dickens. (Forster, 2008 Vol. 1 to 3). However, Dickens could easily have also meant on another level that it was his favorite because of the ease and elegance with which it flowed into the 32 page signature-for-a-shilling, periodic format.

In great many ways, Dickens’ characters and their exploits appealed so strongly to his readers because they were so like his readers; small businessmen and their families, innkeepers, second-hand merchants, beggars, hard-scrabbles, grifters and thieves, barristers, solicitors, bureaucrats, policemen, pretenders, pampered gentry, law clerks, copiers, lawyers, judges, “light” gentry, sailors, soldiers, doctors, midwives, day-laborers, sweepers, undertakers, clerics, gravediggers, maids, butlers, stablemen, iron workers, coalmen, dance teachers, schoolteachers and all the other kinds of people found in everyday life on the streets of London and in the countryside.

According to Michael Slater, the following item appeared which exemplified how the general reader likely felt about Dickens, “a eulogistic *Daily Telegraph* review (14 Sept.) of the Charles Dickens Edition (‘revised by the master’s hand’) (appeared) praising the creations of his ‘exhaustless and marvelous mind’ and highlighting his

great quality of ‘sympathy with all the forms which human life puts on.’” (Slater, 2009 p. 571).

Almost all of those “forms” could either read themselves, or knew someone who could, or would read to them. And, to the extent that they could earn, beg, borrow or steal a shilling, they paid for a copy of the latest increment of whatever popular story was making the rounds at any given time.

Just how much available disposable income the reading public had to spend on serial publications and the goods they hawked from their ads inside is difficult to ascertain, but an article by H. M. Boot in *The Economic History Review, The Experience of Clerks at the East India Company* (Boot, 1999 Vol. 52, No. 4, pp. 638 to 668) proves helpful. An analysis of the various factors which affected the salaries of East India Company Clerks, and comparisons with clerks employed in banking as well as their counterpart clerks in the legal profession reveals that several macroeconomic factors such as the deflation after the Napoleonic wars as well as the steadily increasing prosperity of the British economy in general during the period and the accompanying increases in the longevity of the earning population, helped to not only increase the absolute dollar amounts of the salaries, but also the absolute spending power of those dollars as well. From Boot:

“The effect was to lift the real salaries of clerks with 11 to 15 years of service from about £180 a year in the 1780s to £400 by the 1840s. Those clerks with 21 to 25 years of service saw their real salaries rise from about £200 to over £650, while those with 31 to 35 years’ experience received an average increase from £210 to over £900. Indeed, it is hard to find any but the youngest of the clerks who did not enjoy a higher real income between 1780 and 1840 than had been enjoyed by any group of clerks with similar work experience in the previous generation . . . being that the company wished to redress a growth in salaries that had exceeded levels anticipated when the schedule of 1815 was introduced, and to improve the pay of clerks in the early years of their employment” (Boot, 1999 pp. 642-643).

Table 1 is used to illustrate the growth of salaries over the period. Consulting the table reveals that longevity in station was clearly rewarded. The most prodigious lifts in pay occur between years fifteen and twenty, and as time goes forward, we see a diminution in amount following the war of 1812 during a period of deflation which, while causing a drop in absolute amount, actually resulted in an increase in spending power; a calculation inferred by Boot.

Table 2 is a brief details’ which shows that while the percentages of spending for necessities held at about the

**Table 1.** Schedules of salaries paid at the East India Company, 1770 to 1839 (5 year averages).

<b>Years of service</b>	<b>1801 (£)</b>	<b>1815 (£)</b>	<b>1831 (£)</b>	<b>1839 (£)</b>
1-5	50	66	92	112
6-10	88	146	170	192
11-15	112	220	250	272
16-20	138	340	330	352
21-25	162	440	400	400
26-30	188-	540	400	400
Total 20 yrs	2,090	3,840	4,210	4,580
Total 30 yrs	3,840	9,070	8,210	8,580

Source (Boot, 1999 p. 643).

**Table 2.** Middle class household budgets, London, 1823 to 1824.

<b>Budgets list</b>	<b>(Income £250) Percentage</b>	<b>(Income £750) Percentage</b>
Bread and flour	6.2	3.12
Potatoes and other vegetable	3.1	2.34
Meat	14.6	10.92
Butter, cheese, milk	6.5	4.94
Sugar and tea	5.7	3.12
Groceries	3.1	2.34
Drinks	7.3	6.07
Heating	3.9	2.6
Candles	1.2	1.15
Cleaning	2	1.62
Entertainment and holiday	3	3.44
Clothing	14.4	12.8
Furniture	0	0
Education	4.2	3
Rant	10	10
Taxes	5	5
Servants	6.4	10.83
Incidentals (postage, charity, pocket money)	0	3
Saving	8.1	8.33
Horse	0	8.78
Carriage	0	1.6
	100	100

Source (Boot p. 645).

same level as income increased in the household of a low level clerk, two spending lines increased significantly; discretionary spending for entertainment increased almost half a percent, and spending on "Incidentals" (postage, charity and pocket money) underwent a huge exponential increase from 0 to 3%. Doubtless

spending on these incidentals came to include spending on serial publications.

Judging by expenditures for items such as "Bread and Flour" or "Potatoes and other vegetables," spending for the essentials of life remained relatively flat in absolute amounts, thereby declining as a percentage of income. A

large increase in expenditures for “Servants” indicates that as incomes improved, the addition of more help in the household which had been an unlikely luxury became an actual priority and the addition of help in fact then followed. Spending for other of the capital outlays for an improved lifestyle such as “Horse and Carriage” show marked increases as well. But by far, the greatest increase in spending is in the area dubbed “Incidentals” which would have defined the target dear to every advertiser’s heart, impulse-spendable disposable income.

These families very likely spent some of their “Incidentals” pocket money on Dickens’ work, even in the face of condemnations from some influential members of the British and American press who coincidentally were not Dickens’ competitors in the industry driven by men who bought ink by the barrel (condemnations then, which very likely would be seen as laudatory today). For example, Slater reports:

“Also on 6 September (1867) his old enemy the *New York Herald* belittled him as a ‘Homer of the slums and back alleys.’ The paper’s owner James Gordon Bennett, told Dolby that if ‘Dickens would first apologize to the American public for the “Notes” and “Martin Chuzzlewit”, he would make a large amount of money’. Dickens had no intention of apologizing but . . . calculated on making a substantial amount of money nevertheless” (Slater, 2009; p. 572).

Dickens, along with the many others in the publishing distribution chain (including plagiarists of all kinds who generated and shared in the multi-tributary profit river flowing through the popular news and fiction publishing industry), were the beneficiaries of this increased spending. However, with fast profits made from this new publishing industry, came stowed away the inevitable unscrupulous profiteers.

Those free-flowing profits attracted outright plagiarists. That particular group of “vagabond pirates” caused Dickens much financial grief. His efforts to strike back at the numerous plagiarists of his work (most notably those who preyed on *A Christmas Carol*) led Dickens on a journey which absorbed a great deal of his daily life for years, and (though we might in retrospect say, all the better for his creative genius), into the misery of the despised legal subculture of Chancery.

Again, from Slater:

“when on January 6, there appeared in Parley’s Penny Library something called ‘A Christmas ghost story’ re-originated from Charles Dickens’ original, he instructed Mitton\* to instigate Chancery proceedings against the publishers and the ‘reoriginator’. He thereby plunged himself into a

world of injunctions, motions, for dissolution, affidavits, vice-chancellors, and other such intricate and costly legalities from which he eventually emerged having won his case, but facing a substantial bill for costs (The ‘vagabond’ pirates escaped scot-free by declaring themselves bankrupt). Eight years later, with bitter remembrance of his own experience, Dickens would write in the opening chapter of *Bleak House* that all Chancery lawyers who were also men of honour advised potential clients to ‘suffer any wrong that can be done to you, rather than come here!’” (Slater, 2009 p. 221).

*\*Thomas Mitton, Dickens’ long-time friend, confidant, business advisor and sometimes Solicitor. (my note)*

Here we see that merely by being immersed in the publishing industry itself, and subject to the resultant business outcomes from his success in it, Dickens generated an even greater, more highly-engaged audience for his work—Barristers, Solicitors, articulated clerks, copiers, stationers, bailiffs, filing gnomes, and, in truth, the entire subculture (today’s marketers would call it an “eco-system”) of various practitioners within the creaky, lurching, grinding apparatus of the British legal system. Robert Donald Neely describes the activities Dickens engaged in when he worked as an “office boy” and as a reporter, and it may be inferred that those who practiced these activities became a part of Dickens’ ballooning audience:

He was obliged to visit courts of law of all types, to serve subpoenas and copy writs, to prepare statements of fact and copy folio after folio of lengthy documents, such as briefs and pleadings. Later on in his career, he was plaintiff in five Chancery suits against certain publishers who had pirated *Christmas Carol* (sic). Thomas Noon Talford, a well-known lawyer of that day, and author of the first Copyright Act, acted as one of his counsel in the copyright suits and revised the trial scene in *Pickwick Papers* for him. It is not surprising therefore that Dickens should have employed his wonderful powers of observation on the pageant of the law. One of his most marked prejudices was his dislike of lawyers and all that pertained to the machinery of government (Neely, 2001 p.7). (R)

The numerous characters in Dickens’ writing either working in or around the legal system run the gamut from such nefarious louts as Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*, and Mr. Vholes and Mr. Tulkinghorn in *Bleak House*, to the benign and damaged such as Mr. Wickfield in *Copperfield*. This group of characters, all involved either

directly or peripherally in the “machinery of government,” became a vital portion of his popular audience; all, one may infer, with the means to spend a shilling on a good read.

At every level of Victorian culture, money was being made and distributed, and clearly there could have been no popular audience without the means to purchase. In the midst of those already wrenching cultural changes, a new and powerful spending class emerged with the means to consume the content in popular publishing-women.

Margot Finn examines this class of new consumers in her monograph, *Women, Consumption and Coverture in England, c. 1760-1860*, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 39 No. 3, September 1996, Cambridge University Press, pp. 703-722. It is in the area of consumer purchasing by these women that two of Dickens’ principal preoccupations about the women in his audience, his *milieu* and in his writing come into focus; their frequent status as victims of their own moral failure, and their role in the ruination of the men in their lives.

As we have seen, during the pivotal one hundred year period from 1800 to 1900, the average Victorian woman for the first time began to have money of her own for “discretionary” spending, and that phenomenon had begun to be discussed and reflected upon in popular literature late in the preceding century.

Historians of English gender relations have long recognized the ideological force exerted in prescriptive literature by a close thematic articulation linking women, luxury and debt. Long before Thorstein Veblen had propounded his now classic formulation of the central role of leisured ladies in capitalist consumption, successive generations of English observers had condemned women’s increasingly visible and voluminous acquisitive activities as prime catalysts of male financial ruin (Finn, 1996 p. 703).

While he was clearly aware of the purchasing power of his female readers, and in no small way profited through the advertising that appeared in the pages of the serial editions of his books and elsewhere, Dickens also was acutely aware of the darker side of women’s overuse of their power of the purse:

Women constituted both an essential and a particularly dynamic sector of the new population of consumers that stoked and reshaped western markets in the eighteenth century, but their perceived independence in this capacity was freighted with alarming connotations for

contemporaries. The author of an article in the *Spectator* (reprinted in *The Matrimonial Preceptor of 1765*) was especially explicit in this regard. Denouncing the perils of female gaming, he argued that a married woman’s ability to pay her debts differed both quantitatively and qualitatively from that of her husband. For while “the man that plays beyond his income pawns his estate, the woman must find something else to mortgage, when her pin-money is gone: the husband has his lands to dispose of, the wife her person.” Sexual propriety and economic probity thus went hand in hand in the prescriptive literature of the consumer revolution: in this view, a woman’s uncontrolled economic power, like the untrammelled sexuality to which it was often linked, threatened the autonomy of the family unit and through it the very fabric of society (Finn, 1996 p. 704).

That Dickens understood this connection and, one may infer, was to a large degree conflicted by it can be seen in several of his most enduring female characters, and in his work with the *Urania Cottage*<sup>1</sup>. Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, Little Nell Trent and Mrs. Jarley in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Emily, and to some extent Dora Spenlow in *David Copperfield*, were all connected to some form of moral or commercial downfall through either their own or others’ immaturity of judgment, or their economic and/or sexual license.

While this might be construed as standard fodder for the “serial tale” of the period, it has particular implications for the purchasing audience for Dickens’ serial publications. Consider the following standard Victorian definition of the perfect woman from Eliza Lynn Linton’s, *The Girl of the Period* (1866) which is often used as an example of the prudishness of some Victorian attitudes towards women, but which also offers us a glimpse into the activities of the emerging liberation of women with the means to purchase the inventory hawked in the pages of one of Dickens’ serials:

Time was when the phrase, “a fair young English girl,” meant the ideal of womanhood; to us, at least, of home birth and breeding. It meant a creature generous, capable, modest; something franker than a Frenchwoman, more to be trusted than an Italian, as brave as an American but more refined, as domestic as a German and more graceful. It meant a girl who could be trusted alone if need be, because of the innate purity and dignity of her nature, but who was neither bold in bearing nor masculine in mind; a girl who, when she married, would be her husband’s

<sup>1</sup> see: Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women, Jenny Hartley, Methuen, 2009.

friend and companion, but never his rival; one who would consider his interests as identical with her own, and not hold him as just so much fair game for spoil; who would make his house his true home and place of rest, not a mere passage-place for vanity and ostentation to pass through; a tender mother, an industrious housekeeper, a judicious mistress . . . The Girl of the Period envies the queens of the *demi-monde* far more than she abhors them. She sees them gorgeously attired and sumptuously appointed, and she knows them to be flattered, fêted, and courted with a certain disdainful admiration of which she catches only the admiration while she ignores the disdain. They have all that for which her soul is hungering; and she never stops to reflect at what a price they have bought their gains, and what fearful moral penalties they pay for their sensuous pleasures (Linton, [http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic\\_2/linton.htm](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_2/linton.htm)).

By the time Dickens had his publishing engine revved up enough to be carrying adverts for smoking implements, Parr's Life Pills, and Warwick Brothers Cough *JuJube* Lozenges, he was distributing serially published materials alongside those which also carried advertising targeted specifically to young female admirers of the *demi-monde*, such as those women later portrayed in the frequently semi-lurid lithographs for Pear's Soap.

The women in Dickens' audience, whom we see reflected in all their role-diversity in his stories, had the means, and if we are to understand Linton correctly, the fervent desire, to acquire them, read them, discuss them, peruse the advertising within them and, as Dickens must have surely intended, gleaned the moral and ethical lessons within them.

Lori Anne Loeb speaks to the ideal of women portrayed in Victorian advertising of the time:

"She is no passive sexual object. Like the sleeping beauties explored by Adeline Turner and Susan Casertas in Victorian art, her veiled eyes and supine posture betray a sensuality about to be awakened. In advertisements she is fanned as she lies upon a bed of roses, a creature of pleasure who commands the most slavish devotion" (Lori Anne Loeb, 1994, pp. 36 to 37).

Pushing back against the crumbling of the ideal of Victorian female virtue, in *Bleak House* for example, is stalwart Esther Summerson, in whom lie resident all the virtues of persistence, loyalty, friendship, dependability, modesty, gentility, humility, motherliness and devotion to others, and, especially, to spousal responsibility. The close of Esther's narrative serves, "I know that my

dearest little pets are very pretty, my darling is very beautiful, my husband is very handsome, my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me, even supposing" (*Bleak House*, Penguin Classics, p. 989).

Hence, we conclude that the perfect storm which broke open Victorian publishing and made possible the commercial viability of the serialization of Dickens' work to a mass audience (At the time of Dickens' death direct circulation of *All the Year Round* was 300,000 and the "pass-along" circulation was at least two and probably much higher), also gave him a platform to not only entertain (delight), but also to instruct.

As we see in *Great Expectations*, Pip and Estella gave Dickens an opportunity to explore with his audience a subtly different set of consequences to the behavior of men and women through their moral or commercial downfall (arriving laden with advertising in weekly installments).

In his depiction of the convoluted relationship between Pip and Estella, Dickens moves beyond the popular "flat" appellation justly earned by so many of his earlier characters. Pip and Estella have a highly complex, serpentine journey through the narrative together. It is abundantly clear though, that Dickens' Estella represents, either intentionally or unconsciously<sup>2</sup> the emerging virile Victorian female, a far cry indeed from "The Girl of the Period." Estella, in high contrast to Esther Summerson for example, is a woman of many worldly dimensions, all of which fall on the twentieth century side of the era. She is decidedly not the *Proverbs 31:10-31* (KJV), or *1 Corinthians 13* (KJV) early Victorian ideal of a woman.

Estella is the post-1850 young woman who has become a committed consumer. She is the embodiment of the highly manipulative, crass heart-breaker, soul-torturer woman, a character not theretofore much seen in popular British fiction.

Dickens' depiction of the young female of the *demi-monde* in Estella simply mirrored the cutting-edge popular modern female type of the time; Young, beautiful, pampered, complex, heartless, manipulative and unabashedly seductive, yet, somehow, self-destructive and clearly dangerous. In Dickens' incarnation of her, she could plan to marry a misogynistic brute the likes of Drummle, while toying heartlessly with Pip, calling forth his most deeply held feelings, only to crassly ignore them:

"You will get me out of your thoughts in a week."

<sup>2</sup> see: Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman, David Holbrook, New York University Press, 1993, p.126-146, for an interesting, though somewhat dated treatment of Dickens' Estella from a Freudian/Jungian perspective)

“Out of my thoughts! You are part of my existence, part of me. You have been in every line I have ever read, since I first came here, the rough common boy whose poor heart you wounded even then. You have been in every prospect I have ever seen since—on the river, on the sails of the ships, on the marshes, in the clouds, in the light, in the darkness, in the wind, in the woods, in the sea, in the streets. You have been the embodiment of every graceful fancy that my mind has ever become acquainted with. The stones, of which the strongest London buildings are made, are not more real, or more impossible to be displaced by your hands, than your presence and influence have been to me, there and everywhere, and will be. Estella, to the last hour of my life, you cannot choose but remain part of my character, part of the little good in me, part of the evil. But, in this separation I associate you only with the good, and I will faithfully hold you to that always, for you must have done me far more good than harm, let me feel now what sharp distress I may. O God bless you, God forgive you!”

Dickens, Charles (08-10-2010). Ignatius Critical Editions: *Great Expectations* (p. 436). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

Is this the new woman for whose attention purveyors of trinkets, remedies, appliances, garments, ablutions and all sorts of what are now so well known as “consumer goods” compete in the pages of Dickens’ and other popular serials? Undoubtedly so.

She is not poor Nell, not poor Nancy, not poor Emily, not steadfast Esther; the woman for whom the hawkers of the 1850s compete is Estella, fey and cold, yet maddeningly compelling. In short, a modern woman of many shades and many facets. A woman of means beyond her original station—indeed, whose “station” no longer even applies because the overtly leveling message of popular advertising is and has always been that “station” itself is irrelevant. It is things, goods, items and lucre that matter.

“Your own act, Estella, to fling yourself away upon a brute?” “On whom should I fling myself away?” she retorted, with a smile. “Should I fling myself away upon the man who would the soonest feel (if people do feel such things) that I took nothing to him? There! It is done. I shall do well enough, and so will my husband. As to leading me into what you call this fatal step, Miss Havisham would have had me wait, and not marry yet; but I am tired of the life I have led, which has very few charms for me, and I am willing enough to change it. Say no more. We shall never understand each other” (*Great Expectations* p. 435).

Change it for a different set of “charms”; the charms of things and possessions, rather than the supposed charms of station and position, the “charms” of the popular life. It is not even up for discussion that Estella’s destiny is to “fling” herself away. In her vision of the world, it is only a matter of to which “station” she will be flung, and she chooses the life of a consumer.

Taking this view, Miss Havisham, then, may be thought of as representing the literal British woman of old, no less cold and manipulative than the new one, but become the skeletal remains of a culture whose death is not yet known even to itself.

Just as Dickens’ male readers in all their various segments must have devoured every installment to discover how Pip’s journey to the fulfillment of his expectations would turn out, so every British woman, either of the new order, or secretly desiring to become at least a small participant in the new order, must have, with the private joy of indulging a guilty pleasure, poured over and endlessly discussed with her confidantes, every installment, and doubtless every “advert,” as well. How else could Dickens have achieved a regular circulation of over 300,000 with the likes of *Great Expectations*? Audiences identified with the characters, and a great percentage of those audiences were these new women with the power to in a myriad of ways consume content and goods.

As we have seen, then, the perfect storm of industry, literacy and cultural change broke on the Victorian culture and economy at the optimum time for Charles Dickens to become a wholly new kind of creative artist; one with not only the creative genius required to produce works adored and clamored for by a huge audience with the means to purchase and consume it, but an artist who came to control every step of the means to deliver that art to those clamoring masses.

Here is an excerpt from *All The Year Round* (Exhibit 1) in which Dickens reflects upon his enterprise with a genuine sense of love and awe. He does so in the most Dickensian of ways by describing the “orderly Pandemonium” in rich detail:

The machine-room of my journal is a vast whitewashed hall, with three enormous clanging, plunging, whirling, metal demons in the midst of it . . . So the demons go clanging through the night until they are supposed to have had as much as is good for them, and their fires are raked out, their steam let is off, and machinists and feeding boys go home to the howling at an Irish wake is silence . . . the last load has been carried to the van, the last boy has rushed off with his arms full of damp literature, and the starters by the Parliamentary for Liverpool at seven have my journal on their knees, while merchant princes resident at Brighton and coming



The machine-room of my journal is a vast whitewashed hall, with three enormous clanging, plunging, whirling metal demons in the midst of it, attended by priests and devotees, half of whom are employed in administering to their idols' appetites by feeding them with virgin paper, while the other half wrenches from them the offering after it has passed through the ordeal. In plainer language, the demons are three of Hoe's most powerful printing machines, containing together twenty-six cylinders, and in attendance upon them are eighty men and boys, half of whom feed the machines with fresh paper, while the other half receive the sheets after they have passed under the cylinders. The cylinders in these machines make one million four hundred and five thousand revolutions in the course of one night, and, for a single day's circulation, travel at the rate of nearly nine hundred and eighty-five miles. When its machines are in full swing, my journal is produced at the rate of eight hundred and eighty-four copies per minute. The length of paper used in one day in my journal, will make a path one yard wide and nearly one hundred and sixteen miles long; one day's circulation placed edge to edge would closely cover a piece of land of nearly forty-three acres; one week's circulation, placed one on the top of the other, would make a column three hundred and nineteen feet high. The weight of paper used in one day's circulation of my journal is seven tons thirteen hundred-weight two quarters and twenty pounds; there are also three hundred and ninety-six pounds of ink consumed in one night's printing; and the length of tape used upon the machines is a little over four miles. In the midst of all this whirling dazzling confusion, accidents very seldom occur; the ringing of a bell, the movement of a handle, and the rotation of the engine ceases instantaneously. To a stranger, the vast room, with its glare of gas, its smell of oil and steam, and its whirling engines, is a kind of orderly Pandemonium. There are galleries whence he can survey all that passes; but a few minutes must elapse before his eyes become accustomed to the tearing of the engine, and his ears to the clanging discord; though those employed seem thoroughly habituated, and pursue their avocations as though they were in the quiet composing-room itself. Indeed, the head engineer, who acted as my guide in this department, took such interest in his work, that he told me he seldom

took a holiday or absented himself from his post. He evidently regarded those who did not ordinarily spend their evenings in the company of his machines as inferior beings.

So the demons go clanging through the night until they are supposed to have had as much as is good for them, and their fires are raked out, their steam let is off, and machinists and feeding-boys go home to bed, whither the compositors and the sub-editor have long since preceded them. Then, the advanced guard of the day establishment, in the persons of the publisher and his staff, appear upon the scene. The street outside is lined with light spring carts, with those peculiarly bony horses which always seem to come into newsvendors' hands; crowds of men and boys fight up the passage to the publishing office, while inside there is a hulla-baloo compared to which the howling at an Irish wake is silence, and the parrot-house at the Zoological Gardens a quiet retreat. Right has very little chance against might in such a medley as this, and the weakest usually goes to the wall; but eventually the big wooden tables are cleared, the last load has been carried to the van, the last boy has rushed off with his arms full of damp literature, and the starters by the Parliamentary for Liverpool at seven have my journal on their knees, while merchant princes resident at Brighton, and coming thence by the "daily bread" express at a quarter to ten, find it on their breakfast-tables at half-past eight.

Taking such things into consideration, is it wonderful that I regard my newspaper as a marvel, and that I from time to time lay it down, to ponder over the capital, talent, and energy involved in its production?



Exhibit 1. excerpt from *All The Year Round*.

thence by the “daily bread” express at a quarter to bed, whiter the compositors and the sub-editor have long since preceded them . . . crowds of men and boys fight up the passage to the publishing office, while inside there is a hullabaloo compared to which ten, find it on their breakfast-tables at half-past eight. Taking these things into consideration is it wonderful that I regard my newspaper as a marvel, and that I from time to time lay it down, to ponder over the capital, talent, and energy involved in its production? (Dickens, 1864 p. 476).

Charles Dickens, the genius of story and plot, of character and contrivance, was also undeniably the genius of operations and distribution, of marketing and management, of commerce and capital. Upon his death in 1870, Dickens bequeathed to his son a prospering publishing empire that had run since 1850 with the launch of *Household Words*, and would continue as *All The Year Round* until 1893.

Dickens' reputation and legacy as an artist, a speaker, a humanitarian, and a businessman could not have grown to its unprecedented size and scope had not a critical mass of literate readers with the means to, the desire to and the leisure time to read for pleasure emerged, had not all the requisite vectors of technology and distribution matured enough to make possible the industry of mass-market publishing, and had not a thoroughgoing “change of phase” shot throughout every aspect of Victorian culture. That they all crested simultaneously; literacy, culture and industry-produced the pluripotent troika of Dickens' own perfect storm.

## REFERENCES

- All The Year Round, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9691>.
- Bleak House, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, Ltd., London Boot, H. M., The Experience of Clerks at the East India.
- Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens, Ed. John O. Jordan, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Company, The Economic History Review, (New series, November, 1999, 52(4): 638-668.
- David Copperfield, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, Ltd., London Dickens, Charles.
- Eisenstein, Elizabeth L (1997). The Printing Press as an Agent of Change : communications and cultural transformations in early modern Europe, Cambridge University Press, pp. 702-706.
- Finn, Margot, Women, Consumption and Coverture in England, c.1760-1860 (The Historical Journal, Vol. 39 No. 3, September 1996, Cambridge University Press, pp. 703-722).
- Forster, John, The Life of Charles Dickens, Vol. I-III, Complete, 07-15-2008, Optal eBooks, Kindle Locations 358-359, Kindle Edition).
- Great Expectations, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism, Ed. Janice Carlisle, Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996.
- Great Expectations, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, Ltd., London Grubb, Gerald Giles, Dickens' Pattern of Weekly Serialization, ELH, Vol. 9, No. 2, Jun., 1942.
- Hartley, Jenny, Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women, Methuen, 2009.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy, Studying the Novel: An Introduction, Edward Arnold Publishers, Second Edition, 1992.
- Holbrook, David, Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman, New York University Press, 1993, p. 126-146.
- Household Words, Bradbury and Evans, printers, 1859, Google Books, [http://books.google.com/books/about/Household\\_words.html?id=\\_5FBER6rA34C](http://books.google.com/books/about/Household_words.html?id=_5FBER6rA34C)
- <http://www.bu.edu/buniverse/view/?v=a0R7b5b> (A Conversation with Sumner Redstone) <http://www.victorianweb.org/>
- Linton, Eliza Lynn, The Girl of the Period, [http://www.wnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic\\_2/linton.htm](http://www.wnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_2/linton.htm).
- Loeb, Lori Anne, Consuming Angels, , Oxford University Press, 1994
- Neely, Robert Donald, The Lawyers of Dickens and their Clerks, The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd. Clark, N.J., 2001, originally published Boston, Christopher Publishing House, 1938, p. 7).
- Oliver Twist, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, Ltd., London.
- Slater, Michael, Charles Dickens, Yale University Press, 2009.
- The Old Curiosity Shop, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books, Ltd., London.
- Webb, Robert K., Working Class Readers in Early Victorian England, The English Historical Review, Vol. 65, No. 256 (Jul., 1950), pp. 333-351, Oxford University Press.