

## BOOKS

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# Dickens and his demons

How the novelist hid his cruel side – infidelity, bullying callousness, malice – in plain sight in his fiction.

BY [LYNDALL GORDON](#)

*The Mystery of Charles Dickens* is a biography ready to take risks. Wading away from the shore – where the crowd laughs at comic turns and weeps at the pathos of orphans – AN Wilson takes six deep-sea dives in search of the monsters of the lower waters. He is after the darker things Dickens could conceive, and the question is how much of Dickens himself went into what appear distorted fantasy creatures moving about in the murk and preparing to injure others.

The first of these dives ventures to seek out the truth of Dickens's death, at the age of 58, on 9 June 1870. This dive comes up with money: £22 cashed at an inn the day before. What might account for £15, 13s and 9p missing from the author's pocket after he died? Wilson suggests a secret visit to a young mistress, Ellen Ternan – Nelly – whom Dickens had placed in the London suburb of Peckham, about an hour from Gad's Hill, his Kent home near Rochester. Notionally, he could have supplied Nelly ("N" in his notes) with housekeeping money.

At the age of 45, he had fallen in love with an 18-year-old in a theatre family. Nelly's Irish father had died when Nelly was a child actor and the family's situation was precarious, though her mother Frances (Fanny) Jarman had been a minor star, playing Desdemona to Edmund Kean's Othello, and Ophelia to Charles Kemble's Hamlet. Nelly, all agree, took some time to respond to the flattering ardour of the famous novelist. He bought her family a house in Camden Town, and under various false

names, like “Charles Tringham”, paid for Nelly’s separate lodgings at Slough, then Peckham – insignificant railway stops conveniently near London. Dickens’s obsession with Nelly led him to cast off his wife with public slurs. In 1857-58 the break-up of his family was a scandal, but his affair did not surface. It makes sense to connect this invisible life with fictional characters who sit on secrets and with fictional plots so mysterious that their emotional ties remain for a long time undisclosed.

At the time of his death Dickens was at the pinnacle of his fame, adored by millions all over the world. But at the opening of this biography he is placed in a more furtive light as an “over-sexed” and “whiskery” little man whose arousal – it’s hinted – did for him. For the sake of respectability Dickens had to die at home, so this scenario has Nelly hiring a vehicle to carry her ill lover back to Gad’s, where his life ended the following day. Public veneration ensured his burial in Westminster Abbey.

Freeing himself of the narrative path of chronology, Wilson begins with death linked to the mystery of the mistress, and then turns to five other mysteries: those of childhood, charity, marriage, public readings, and the last, unfinished novel from which this biography takes its title, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. In place of the baggy, inclusive tome, here is a more shapely and original approach that invites a biographer to explore the truth at spots where life and work are known to converge.

Among many fine biographies of Dickens, my favourites explored two of these spots with empathy for the women involved. One is *The Invisible Woman*, where Claire Tomalin traced and verified beyond doubt the existence of the young mistress during the last 12 years of Dickens’s life. Tomalin opened up the Staplehurst railway crash in 1865, when disclosure of the affair was a near thing. It could not be concealed that Dickens was aboard, as was Ellen Ternan and

her mother, returning from France. Wilson accepts Tomalin's idea that Nelly had been there to give birth in secret.

Another favourite, not in the bibliography, is the incomparable *Parallel Lives* by Phyllis Rose, with her record of the cruelty this celebrator of family values inflicted on his wife and nine surviving children. Wilson deems this cruelty to be "insane". Like previous biographies, *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* pursues contradictions in this author's treatments of women, but Wilson's own intriguing pursuit is the nature of evil.

This goes beyond the obvious evils of public institutions: Chancery in *Bleak House* and the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*. The focus is on private malice. The grotesques in Dickens – the goblin-like Quilp, a "monster husband" in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, or the "opium fiend", John Jasper, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, who mesmerises his music pupil, Rosa Bud – appear figments of the imagination, but they prove truer to life than we like to think. Like distorted figures in fairy-tales, they embody evils in human nature: envy, resentment, greed, bullying, sexual abuse and paedophilia.

The pervasive question in *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* is whether his monsters offer clues to the darker side of Dickens himself. This calls for a portrait of a divided being, whose public face is kept intact and separate from what the submerged self does, and yet, as an imaginative writer, Dickens has the courage to recognise and use it.

Wilson scorns shallow connections between life and work: is Pemberley really Chatsworth? This won't illumine a writer's greatness. Instead he dares to encounter a writer in his deepest undersea habitat. He discovers that what Dickens concealed is, in fact, visible on the page for every eye to see, disguised as fictions.

The second dive goes in search of hatred. Dickens's mother dispatched her little son into a callous commercial world that exploited child labour. With his father in prison for debt, and

even after his father's release, Charles, the second child, aged 12, was put to sticking labels on bottles at Warren's Blacking off the Strand.

None of the other Dickens children were subjected to this trauma of being sent out alone in a "pitiless" city with no "safety nets". On his 40-minute walk southwards from his Bayham Street, Camden Town lodgings to the factory, the child would stare hungrily through the windows of pie-shops. The reader of the biography will be wrenched by a reproduction of a Victorian drawing: a boy bent in hopeless misery over his worktable. Of course, it was this trauma that infused Dickens's fellow-feeling for what the poor have to endure and his understanding that kindness is the highest of values.

It's plausible, too, that this memory, carrying its burden of hatred in the adult Dickens, should animate the grotesquely unloving mother figures in his novels: frozen Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit*, neglectful Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House* and the harridan sister, Mrs Gargery, scolding the already terrorised little Pip in *Great Expectations*. Wilson's own childhood, he tells us, was one of "abject misery" at the mercy of "perverts" in his prep school, including a headmaster who masturbated while thrashing pupils. For these there was a worse humiliation devised by the headmaster's wife, who would shut up a boy for hours and then bring an audience to watch when he wet himself. As one of those boys, Wilson speaks with passion about the "monstrous cruelty" of the respectable professions. At school he found "salvation" in reading Dickens. This is a case of intense identification with the childhood suffering that was a prime source of inspiration.

Wilson's next dive into "The Mystery of the Cruel Marriage" brings up the novelist's need "to de-sex [women], to eviscerate them sexually, emotionally, imaginatively". There's David Copperfield's child-wife, Dora, and his sisterly second wife, Agnes Wickfield – though I can't agree that Esther Summerson, the sensitive narrator of *Bleak House*, belongs in "the gallery of

submissive, sexless-seeming wifelets and nymphs and half-child-brides, who tiptoe through his pages". I see it rather as one of Dickens's triumphs to convey the nature of goodness through Esther and then Little Dorrit, who are strong in their emotional generosity, not "wet".

Wilson rightly puts forward the goodness of the uneducated blacksmith, Joe Gargery (married to Pip's cross sister). It's no common feat for a novelist to make perfect virtue convincing. Jane Austen did it with Fanny Price when Fanny cannot bring herself to marry the faithless Mr Crawford, even though she owes his backer, her uncle, a debt of gratitude. And Little Dorrit cannot marry John Chivery to prop up the father she loves despite the faults she sees but does not judge. Neither yields her integrity to a man who rules her life. Dickens can create the pure of heart and their humility as a counterpoise to the evil that Wilson investigates with keen acumen.

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One of the insights is that Dickens's eventual hatred for his wife was linked to his hatred of his mother, so that his ill-treatment of his wife was a way of punishing his mother. Yet some judgements of Mrs Dickens – as "fat", in her forties, and so often a mother as to make her "less and less of a lover" – offset the biographer's appalled sense of Dickens's cruelty with a sense of "inevitability that one day he would meet a young woman and discard his wife". If Mrs Dickens was less of a lover, might there be other reasons for this, including her husband's behaviour?

Given ten births as well as miscarriages, it may be worth considering if Mrs Dickens suffered from postpartum depression. It's impossible, of course, to know, but, were it so, it would explain her lassitude and alleged inability to relate to her children. Her sister, Georgina Hogarth, took over the childcare and remained a companion to Dickens. Wilson justly

balances Georgina's unfailing loyalty to Dickens against disparagement of her sister.

It was part of Dickens's cruelty to cast his wife as a person of "confused", that is, unsound, mind. He blamed her for "insane jealousy" when, the story goes, a bracelet intended for Nelly Ternan came by mistake to his wife. Her daughter, Katey, found her mother with her bonnet on, sobbing in her room because Dickens had commanded her to visit Nelly to apologise for an accusation that Nelly was his mistress.

It's not lost on Wilson that he is taking the "psycho-bonds" of Dickens in what might seem the improbable direction of Henry James's tales of interior life. I opened one of James's stories of writers, "The Middle Years", and found there his image of an aquarium where a writer is "drawn down... to where, in the dim underworld of fiction, the great glazed tank of art, strange, silent subjects float". Writers do what they can, James defends them, and the rest is "the madness of art". Wilson is more explicit about the dangers of imaginative madness.

His riskiest and most rewarding venture is to detect a "mystery" in Dickens's popularity. In his later years Dickens swelled his already huge audience with public readings. The toll these took made him look in his fifties like an exhausted old man. There was the additional fatigue of travelling from city to city, night after night, in the US as well as the British Isles. But nothing could make him stop. That contact with readers, weeping and laughing, carried Dickens to the edge of collapse. During one of his performances he had a stroke.

It was more than acting; it became an addiction to playing on a crowd when Dickens found the power to mesmerise people en masse. Never was his addiction stronger than after 1868 when he introduced into his readings the scene where Bill Sikes murders his partner, Nancy, in *Oliver Twist*. This performance was hugely popular – rock-star popular, unprecedented in history – and, each time, the audience would be shocked into

silence at the end. Afterwards Dickens himself was silent. Spent, he would lie on the sofa in his dressing-room.

Once, he did his show in Cheltenham, off his beaten track, to perform for his aged friend, the Shakespearian actor William Macready, who had given a legendary performance – his farewell performance in Drury Lane back in 1851 – as the guilty killer, Macbeth. Afterwards, in Dickens's dressing room, Macready too was speechless, but finally said, "Two Macbeths!"

*The Mystery of Charles Dickens* invites us to encounter a Dickens bent on feeling the pulse of that violence. Literally, his pulse would go up from 72 to 112. Dickens liked to joke about his own "murderous instincts", as though the fictional violence rose out of himself. And then, exactly on cue, Wilson dives further afield towards TS Eliot's entrancement with that same scene in *Oliver Twist*, and the fearful line in Eliot's murder drama *Sweeney Agonistes* about any man wanting, needing to "do a girl in". It's a line I resist, distrust, don't want to think about, and yet it has a force to it like hot breath. Wilson insists we take that in, or take in the reality that Dickens, and Eliot after him, did, each in his secret self, acknowledge: a capacity for violence, in perhaps the same way that Kurtz, a coloniser deep in the Congo of *Heart of Darkness*, faces up to "The horror! The horror!" of savagery beating beneath a veneer of civility.

This chapter takes the link of theatre and violence as far as it will go: as far even as Hitler working up a heart of darkness in the masses. The more we think about the headiness of public performance as Dickens exercised his power to move audiences, the more fearful become the strange, dark shapes in the "glazed tank of art".

In stressing the sinister Quilp, Wilson points out that the name was a shortening of quill-pen. Quilp, Wilson suggests, is an embodiment of dark thoughts in the author, quill in hand.

Dickens's portrait of his father as the absurdly optimistic Mr Micawber was succeeded, after his father's death, by the darker image of his father as Mr Dorrit, the self-deluding "Father of the Marshalsea", as Mr Dorrit calls himself in the debtors' prison. The punitive energy of this portrait is consistent with a Victorian who mostly acted in kindness and charity but who also believed prisons existed for punishment. Dickens did not believe in rehabilitation. Though he deplored public hangings he did, in later life, reject any softening of prison conditions for the wicked.

To explore the nature of evil makes for an absorbing read and a subject that adds weight to biography itself. This is an ambitious and now and then strained attempt to lift the genre into line with the moral depth of Dante's *Inferno* and with Conrad's fictional counterpart lurching about a sepulchral city, almost maddened by his encounter with the "horror" of what lurks in men's hearts: "I daresay I was not very well at that time."

### **The Mystery of Charles Dickens**

AN Wilson

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