



CHARLES DICKENS 200:  
TEXT AND BEYOND

A COMMEMORATIVE VOLUME

Edited by  
Gabriella Hartvig and  
Andrew C. Rouse

## Table of Contents

- 1 *Andrew C. Rouse*  
Foreword
- 5 *Michael Hollington*  
*The Cricket on the Hearth* and its Operatic Adaptations
- 21 *Géza Marácz*  
A Dickensian Poetics of Love: Géza Ottlik's Aesthetics of the Novel
- 45 *A. D. Townsend*  
Ballads, Ballrooms and Bounders: The Musical Life of Dickens's World
- 61 *Andrew C. Rouse*  
Dickens and the Turk
- 73 *Anna Kérchy*  
The Street Urchin as an Iconic Agent of Childish Imagination in Dickens's Fiction and its Victorian and Postmodern Visual Adaptations
- 85 *Gabriella Hartvig*  
'Time is an insurmountable obstacle': Dickens and the Serialized Novel
- 97 *Ian Keable*  
Dickens, Spiritualism and the Cock Lane Ghost
- 111 *Mária Kurdi*  
Not So Strange Bedfellows: Dickens and the Modern Irish Writer
- 123 *József Andor*  
Light Verbs vs. Full Verbs in the Language of Charles Dickens
- 135 *Rudolf Nyári*  
Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*

Charles Dickens 200: Text and Beyond

A Commemorative Volume

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Francis Alexander (1800 – 1880)

*Charles Dickens*, 1842

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**Kérchy Anna**

***The Street Urchin as an Iconic Agent of Childish Imagination in Dickens' Fiction and its Victorian and Postmodern Visual Adaptations***

Scholarly studies on the lifelong leitmotif of children and childhood in Dickens' work explain the author's relentless interest in the infantile with a combination of *biographical* and *social* reasons. The canonized critical consensus records as a major influence on the one hand the personal traumatic-formative experience of young Charles' juvenile tribulations at 'the blacking warehouse that permanently wounded [his] mind and helped him make a great novelist' (Carey 1973: 147 in Andrews 1994: 3). On the other hand, the source of Dickens' concern is assumed to reside in the controversial and troubling, public social status of nineteenth century English children, collectively treated as cultural Othereds, alternatively through their sentimental cherishing or abusive exploitation, fantasmatic/ideological strategies depriving children of autonomy and agency in ways tailored to their class belongings (see Cunningham 1991 and 1995: 41).

Angus Wilson (1970: 202) nuances further the range of inspirations possibly affecting Dickens' preoccupation with the child by emphasizing the significance of a so-called *metaphysical-historical* source that summoned the author, like many of his contemporaries, into a polemic dialogue with a rather ambiguous meaning of childhood inherited from the Romantics. Like Blake and Wordsworth, Dickens was fascinated by the mysteriously enchanting juvenile state simultaneously saturated with sensibility and savagery. The uncultivated, frank, intuitive, innocent free-spirit of the child was believed to be inevitably left behind with maturation, when the grown-up acquires social power and rational intellect that will nevertheless compensatorily allow him to artistically reflect upon the nostalgically worshipped imaginative frenzy of his lost childhood.

However, the Dickensian portrayal of youngsters goes way beyond the elitist, retrospectively and patronizingly idealized, one-sided image of the child seen as a Noble Savage dwelling in the enviably simple joys and dreams sprung from his uncorrupted poverty and powerlessness, providing a stimulus for Romantic imagination. Although Dickens' fiction does have the indubitably sentimental quality celebrating the gift and rewards of a 'good heart's' self-sacrificial altruism, but the exaggerated emotions he depicts and the calculated affective reactions of readers he strategically provokes – famously parodied by Oscar Wilde, as 'One must have a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of Little Nell.' – suggest that his representation of sentiments might have also fulfilled a social critical role (Purton 2012: 1-19) shedding light on the hypocrisy of his contemporaries' compassion-craze. Dickens the social realist novelist was also thoroughly aware that the Cult of the Child was the product of an era when London, the most advanced centre of civilisation in the world was roamed by 'a fearful multitude' of an estimated 30000 naked, filthy, lawless, untutored, delinquent, brute, little city savages, street-children whose marginalized, dehumanized status was reflected in their common denominations 'ownerless dogs', 'street urchins', 'gutter snipe', 'Hottentots' or 'street Arabs' (Cunningham 1991: 104, Andrews 1994: 29). Dickens' multi-dimensional image of the child also has exciting gender implications: poor heroines are idealized as angelic and even Christ-like amidst their unselfish sufferings, while more resourceful poor boys are criminalized as hideous victims of a negligent society.



'Please Give us a Copper', c 1860  
Photograph by Oscar Gustav Rejlander  
Public domain image



Victorian street urchins, c 1860s  
Anonymous photographer  
Public domain image

However, as Malcolm Andrews highlights the most significant distinctive feature of the Dickensian child is its unchildishness manifested in his oxymoronic figures of the 'grown-up child' and the 'young-at-heart adult' that take multiple various forms including the professional infant (Miss Ninetta Crummles, the Infant Phenomenon from *Nicholas Nickleby*), the case of arrested development (Barnaby Rudge and Maggy in *Little Dorrit*), the childlike adult as a paragon of virtue (Joe Gargery from *Great Expectations*), and the prematurely adult child idealized (Little Nell in *Old Curiosity Shop*) or criminalized (the Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist*). (1994: 73) Andrews argues that the ambiguous figure of the grown-up child as well as Dickens' inconsistent depiction of it (either in terms of a monstrous hybridity attesting to the corruption of modern society or in terms of an intergenerational prodigiousness retaining within the rationalized mature self the infantile imaginative spirits celebrated by the cult of immaturity) are perfect illustrations of the author's hesitant oscillation between incompatible standpoints of 'primitivism' versus 'progressivism' – polarities of his times' unresolved cultural debate he tries to reconcile by fictional means. (1994:39)

In Coveney's view, quoted by Andrews, the debate boils down to a question concerning elementary education: whether children's natural imaginative faculties and spiritual sensitivities should be allowed to develop freely, liberated by romance and fairy tale or should they be strictly disciplined conforming to the real world's utilitarian demands for a mature rationality. (Andrews 1994: 17) In his essay 'Frauds on the Fairies' published in an 1853 issue of his weekly journal *Household Words*, Dickens quite affirmatively protects children's right and need for imagination and calls fairy tales and literary fantasies 'nurseries of fancy' which must be 'preserved in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact' (97). His is a vehemently satirical counter-reaction against his times' popular moralistic renderings of literary fairy tales which advocated the temperance movement by warning innocent children of the evil effects of alcohol, sexuality, and debaucherie, teaching them humility, good behaviour, and a 'middle-class sense of property and propriety' in rationalized, didactic, plausible story-sequences akin to the era's social realistic novelistic trend. Dickens' old friend and colleague, illustrator George Cruikshank excelled in these sanitized revisions of faerial imagination--both on his graphic plates for cautionary narratives of fall and redemption (like *The Drunkard's Children* (1848) and *Our Gutter Children* (1869)) and in his adaptations of Perrault's classic tales. His Cinderella, 'who never in her life had touched a drop of alcohol' and a clear 'model of temperance' finally 'persuades the King

to abolish the free-flowing wine fountains traditionally enjoyed by the populace at royal marriages and to make a public bonfire of all the liquor in the palace in lieu, perhaps, of proper fireworks' (Hubert 2011). Dickens with hilarious humour calls Cruikshank a Whole Hog treading into the fairy flower garden (97). Through his own conservative rewriting of Cinderella he demonstrates how 'frauds on fairies', this censorship on imagination does not only result in absurdity ('six lizards, which she changed into six footmen, each with a petition in his hand ready to present to the Prince, signed by fifty thousand persons, in favour of the early closing movement' (99)) but also tyranny ('All the people who ate anything she [Cinderella] did not eat, or who drank anything she did not drink, were imprisoned for life. All the newspaper offices from which any doctrine proceeded that was not her doctrine, were burnt down.' (100)). Dickens calls the enchanting fairy literature 'sligh channels' of 'gentleness and mercy,' powerful yet peaceful aids that naturally nourish in the child's mind virtues as 'forbearance, courtesy, consideration for poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force', circumscribing 'a slender track not overgrown with weeds' where adults and children can 'share delights' (97). In his view, faereal fancy should be respected especially in a utilitarian age as his own, because 'a nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun' (97). Thus, he implies that besides offering a democratically communal feel of marvellous enchantment, tales teach humanitarian values and the respect of tradition and of a common cultural heritage, while they foster individual imaginative creativity, and provide a 'precious old escape' (100) from the tyranny of hegemonic rationalization.

Dickens' celebration of childish imagination can be detected on the rhetorical plane of his fiction too, in his embracing the narrative strategies of children's literature and fairy tales, identified by Elaine Ostry (2002) with the rationalist moralist, the Christian Evangelist, and especially the romantic fantasist discourses, Dickens blurs in his fiction. Here I wish to stress here the artistic –even *ars poetic* – implications of this blurring, by pointing out that the debate over the binary opposites of child vs. adult or primitivism vs. progressivism can be easily translated into the 'fancy' vs. 'fact' divide that was constantly sought to be harmonized by Dickens throughout his sentimental social critical writings.

Accordingly, based on this assumption, when tracing autobiographical inspirations in Dickens' fiction – besides the obvious character-choices like the rather sentimentally portrayed, suffering, innocent, androgynous child labourer Oliver Twist (or David Copperfield) – we should also examine his more worldly-wise sidekick friend, the grown-up-boychild, orphan *ingénue*, street urchin who embodies the author's potential clandestine fictional self-portrait<sup>1</sup> through functioning as a rational realist agent of social criticism and a romantic agent of inventive infantile imagination in one.

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<sup>1</sup> In Newsom's words: 'apparently diametrically opposed charaters as Oliver Twist and the Artful Dodger each reflect aspects of Dickens that lived side by side, so to speak, within him -- whether they coexisted happily or even whether they were conscious of one another would be very hard to say' (2001: 103).



Detail of George Cruikshank's engraving entitled "Oliver introduced to the Respectable Old Gentleman", showing the Artful Dodger introducing Oliver to Fagin. Illustration to *The Writings of Charles Dickens* volume 4, *Oliver Twist*, 1894.

This character is spectacularly impersonated in the figure of a most accomplished young pickpocket, the streetwise leader of Fagin's gang of childthiefs, called in tribute to his slippers skills The Artful Dodger, a name that has become a household term ever since standing for any clever trickster or con artist. The Dodger's character excitingly subverts and combines the two major contrary Victorian child-stereotypes. He is neither meek, molested angel nor beastly criminal prone to sin, but displays a bit of both aspects: he is dirty, unscrupulous, sly, and treacherous, but he also befriends and helps the runaway workhouse boy in need, saving Oliver from sure death. As James Kincaid points out, the Dodger is the harbinger of the modern naughty kid hero, 'the good-bad child,' never malicious but mischievous, a 'loveable barbarian' who cannot be held responsible for his misdeeds as he is fundamentally good at heart and only deviated from his naturally empathic self by his social circumstances (2000: 34). The Dodger's artfulness resides in making a living out of nothing, and cunningly finding out how to benefit from the opportunities of the capital, Dickens' London that is, in Noddy Boffin's and Pam Morris' words, a place of 'playful self-making for lower and working classes' who can assert 'through their convivial laughter, their sympathy, their nonhegemonic speech, and their imaginative exuberance' that 'life is not warfare against sin nor is it only competitive struggle,' 'without wealth or status they yet become imaginatively adept at exploiting language, gesture, and common reality to transform with a sense of ceremony, existences which would otherwise be overwhelmed by necessity and utility' (Morris 1991: 34-5 in Baumgarten 1998: 198).

Due to his oxymoronic embodiment as a child-adult, the Artful Dodger's self-fashioned image bears a certain (tragic)comic quality.

He was a snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced boy enough; and as dirty a juvenile as one would wish to see; but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man. He was short of his age: with rather bow-legs, and little, sharp, ugly eyes. His hat was stuck on the top of his head so lightly, that it threatened to fall off every moment--and would have done so, very often, if the wearer had not had a knack of every now and then giving his head a sudden twitch, which brought it

back to its old place again. He wore a man's coat, which reached nearly to his heels. He had turned the cuffs back, half-way up his arm, to get his hands out of the sleeves: apparently with the ultimated view of thrusting them into the pockets of his corduroy trousers; for there he kept them. He was, altogether, as roosting and swaggering a young gentleman as ever stood four feet six, or something less, in the bluchers. (Dickens 1839: 123)

Despite his odd, awkward looks readers do not simply laugh *at* the Dodger, but rather laugh *with* him. We are invited to sympathetically identify with this 'spotless wicked' child's perspective (Newsom 2001: 93), even on the most extreme occasions, at the cost of taking a nearly perverse pleasure in grotesque versions of child abuse, such as while sharing the Dodger's and his gang's laughter when they mock Oliver's innocence pretending that the coaching session for the young pickpockets is just a curious game (Newsom 2001: 95). However, the most frequent source of humour comes from the Dodger's mocking defiance of the hegemonic and hypocritical social system's oppressive institutions, customs and codes of conduct. As Kincaid opines in his *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, the Dodger's 'whole life is a brilliant parody of social convention and dull, regularized conduct' (1971: 69). He is trialled for pocketing an unknown gentleman, stealing his handkerchief, that he found to be too old and 'deliberately put back again after trying it on his own countenance' (Dickens 1839: 174), he is sentenced to be sent to the colonies for his theft of a silver snuff-box, a symbol of bourgeois pretentiousness and social hollowness (Kincaid 1971: 69), and even after his condemnation he reposts the jury with a rhetorical agility, a sense of self-irony, and an individual political self-approval in his last words: 'this ain't the shop for justice!'

'Oh ah! I'll come on,' replied the Dodger, brushing his hat with the palm of his hand. 'Ah! (to the Bench) it's no use your looking frightened; I won't show you no mercy, not a ha'porth of it. You'll pay for this, my fine fellers. I wouldn't be you for something! I wouldn't go free, now, if you was to fall down on your knees and ask me. Here, carry me off to prison! Take me away!' With these last words, the Dodger suffered himself to be led off by the collar; threatening, till he got into the yard, to make a parliamentary business of it; and then grinning in the officer's face, with great glee and self-approval. (1839: 136)

Thus, the Dodger becomes a (tragic)comic alterego of Dickens the subversive social satirist, 'cleverly refusing to take this monstrous society seriously' in 'defence of the human spirit' (Kincaid 1971: 69-70). Although he is transported for life, with his verbal defiance of authorities (utopically procrastinated by Fagin: 'and he shall make a speech for himself too, if he likes; and we'll read it all in the papers—'Artful Dodger—shrieks of laughter—here the court was convulsed' (Dickens 1839: 124)) the Dodger 'establish(es) for himself a glorious reputation' (Dickens 1839: 137). Still Marah Gubar laments the gloomy fate Dickens accords to his child characters and notes that despite the promise of his unforgettability the Dodger fails to be ever mentioned after his trial on the remaining one hundred pages of the novel. Despite Gubar's criticism, the acclaim she provides for other works from the Golden Age of children's literature appears valid for me for Dickens' fiction too: far from idealization, children are depicted as 'socially saturated beings' shaped by disciplinary cultural morals and manners, and nevertheless indebted with a relative, limited agency, autonomy and resourcefulness they cannily acquire as dependent, accultured beings. (Gubar 2009: 3-4)



Watercolour of The Artful Dodger 'Kyd' (Joseph Clayton Clarke), 1890  
Public domain image.



Quintin F. Twiss as the Artful Dodger  
Photograph by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson  
Public domain image.

The Dickensian street urchin' ambiguous features also prevail in his contemporary, late 19<sup>th</sup> century visual adaptations inspired by this figure. 'Kyd' Joseph Clayton Clarke's watercolour presents him as more of a short, stout, heavy-browed young man piping, apparently in his late twenties. On Lewis Carroll's (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) photograph *The Artful Dodger* is personified by a fancy-dressed keen amateur actor Quintin F Twiss who was a Christ Church undergraduate, in his early twenties at the time of taking the photo. George Cruikshank's engraving presents him as a boy in his early teens with loose curls and naughty features and with the trademark top hat added by the illustrator as his most adultish attribute. It was the popular Victorian genre of the photographic *tableaux vivant* that took children for models on willing to represent the Dickensian child-adult. The most famous of these artwork, also technological feats of early photography, include some of Lewis Carroll's photos like *The Beggar Maid* he took of Alice Liddell, the muse of his novels on Wonderland adventures, but especially O.G. Rejlander's series thematizing working class, poor and homeless children's labour and leisure activities (*Please give us a copper!*, *Two Urchins Playing a Game*, *The Ragged Schoolboy*),<sup>2</sup> containing explicit allusions to Dickens' characters. Rejlander's extremely popular *A Night in Town* was often referred to as *Poor Jo* associated with the homeless street-sweeper from *Bleak House*. These photos were often criticized retrospectively for sentimentally aestheticizing painful poverty, ignorant innocence, and easy-to-abuse vulnerability. However, understanding the complexity of the Dickensian child-adult figure, that equally inspired Carroll and Rejlander alike, might shed on a new light on this largely misunderstood photographic genre. Their pseudo-realistic scenes were set within the frames of *tableaux vivants* or living pictures which clearly demanded a theatrical stage performance on the part of the child models enacting a make-believe scene. Basically what we see on these photos are not objectified children in pain, but children actively immersed in imaginative pretense play. In fact the photos can be regarded as visual arguments related to a highly controversial issue of the Victorian times: the agency or abuse of child actors; Dickens condemned all underage acting as yet another, albeit sophisticated form of exploitative child-labour but others, like Carroll opined that the young stage-stars' unique

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<sup>2</sup> See Stephanie Spencer. 1984. 'O. G. Rejlander's Photographs of Street Urchins', *Oxford Art Journal*, 7. 2: pp. 17-24

artistic skills are worthy of admiration and support with a carefully protection of their rights. Following Gubar, we might suggest that these photos of children happily acting out sorrow evoke, instead of a set scenario of victimization and voyeurism, ‘a sense of charged complicity between viewer and viewed’ (2009: 104).

It is the arch-urchin Artful Dodger’s paradoxically simultaneously being a victim and a hero too, and his heroism against the circumstances, that is celebrated both in the diegesis by his fellow gang-mates, and both in revisionary intertexts of recent literary rewritings that turn Dickens’ side-character into a protagonist such as in Alan Montgomery’s *The Further Adventures and Life of Jack Dawkins, also known as the Artful Dodger* (2010) focusing on the title character’s new life after his deportation to the US, including his ‘greatest and most dangerous adventure, falling in love’ or Terry Pratchett’s recently published *Dodger* (2012) described on the book’s blurb as ‘a breathtaking tale of adventure and mystery, unexpected coming-of-age, and one remarkable boy’s rise in a complex and fascinating world,’ that turns Dickens himself into a fictional character wandering an alternative Victorian London’s gutters to help the poor.

Modern filmic adaptations also prefer a more positive picturing of the Dodger. In Roman Polanski’s *Oliver Twist* (2005), a rather straightforward, matter-of-fact, textually-sincere adaptation, the Dodger first saves Oliver from starvation by giving him a nourishing free meal, then, although it is him and not Noah who is sent to ‘dodge’ (spy) on Nancy, but later on he is outraged at Sikes’ brutal murder of the girl, decides to take revenge and reveals to the police the location of the criminal who kidnapped Oliver, so he saves the title-character’s life again. Polanski’s film closes with people gathering around the gallows awaiting the hanging of Fagin who is to be punished for his murderous intents, but the Dodger’s friendliness to Oliver is rewarded by the script’s allowing him to get away free without a trial.

The most libertine cinematic adaptation celebrating solidarious camaraderie in cunning juvenile criminal offence against the oppressive social system is the 1968 musical version *Oliver!* Here Oliver quickly becomes friends with the Dodger who invites him to join Fagin’s ‘invented family’ where many a child-adults take care of (mother/father) each other. The two kids appear as matching good bad boys in their first duo singing:

Consider yourself at home.  
Consider yourself one of the family.  
We’ve taken to you so strong.  
It’s clear we’re going to get along.  
Consider yourself well in  
Consider yourself part of the furniture  
There isn’t a lot to spare  
Who cares?..What ever we’ve goin we share![...]  
Consider yourself our mate.  
We don’t want to have no fuss.  
For after some consideration  
We can state consider yourself  
One of us!

This fraternal belonging is pictured on the DVD cover image too, whereas Fagin’s figure acts as a sort of a comic patriarch who renders the den a much less fearful place of a utopian feeling of enjoyment. The final film-shots feature a ‘cheerfully pragmatic alliance’ (Geraghty 32) of Fagin and the Dodger as they dance off into the sunrise singing ‘Crime can pay!’

Perhaps the most exciting modern revisiting of the Dodger's figure surfaces in Charlie Chaplin's streetwise duo, the Kid and the Tramp, who split Dickens' original child-adult figure into two distinct but co-dependent embodiments, two sides of the same coin. The Tramp is the childlike, bumbling, goodhearted vagrant who tries to put on honest gentlemanly airs, does not shy away from hard work, but also uses his cunning to survive and 'escape authority figures who will not tolerate his antics,' while the Kid is the premature infant who mischievously partners his adoptive father to make a living out of petty crime: he throws rocks at windows so that Charlie can appear immediately after as an itinerant glazier. The similarities between Chaplin's and Dickens' works are stunning:<sup>3</sup> both are of autobiographical inspiration, both combine artfully touching dramatic pathos with invective slapstick comedy and social commentary, the fact that both became blockbuster successes of their times and are still widely enjoyed today, is certainly also due to their featuring the memorably iconic figure of the *grown-up child*.

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Weissman (2008) insists on Charlie Chaplin's art and artistic persona having been considerably inspired by 'his all-time favorite author Charles Dickens' and especially *Oliver Twist*. His 1915 (uncompleted) social realistic burlesque film *Life* posed, in a rather Dickensian vein, the question: *Who are the real criminals?* Moreover the film heavily relied on Chaplin's own boyhood memories of misery he also summarized in his 'colorfully exaggerated and theatrically dramatized newspaper interviews' – published in 29 parts in the *San Francisco Bulletin* in the summer of 1915 and later re-published as *Charlie Chaplin's Own Story* – in which he constructed his narrative self-identity very much along the lines of the 'Dickensian adventures' of 'an Oliver Twist-like innocent and Artful Dodger-type trickster'. These themes resurfaced in the 1921 *The Kid*, too.

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