

Dickens and Childhood, 18th June 2012, V&A Museum of Childhood, London

The Tour

To open the day we were given a guided tour of Bethnal Green (the area surrounding the museum). Whilst Bethnal Green is rarely mentioned in Dickens' work, it does get one prominent mention: it is the area where Bill Sikes and Nancy live in *Oliver Twist*. It is also an area with churches and schools founded and used in the nineteenth-century, the site of old workhouses and orphanages, and it retains many similarities with Dickensian London. The tour was rich insofar as it allowed us to get a sense of how London felt and looked in the period. For my own studies, it was interesting (although also a little startling) to see one of the schools still proudly bearing an overtly didactic and stereotypically Victorian motto: "Come in and learn your duty to God and man". How this learning of 'duties' did, does, and perhaps should, take place is a prominent theme in my thesis.



The Conference

The second part of the day was the conference itself and was comprised of both talks about and readings from Dickens.

The first talk was given by Peggy Reynolds. She highlighted that Dickens saw children as existing in a "little world", and it was this way of thinking that led him to be one of, if not *the*, largest contributor to today's popular representation of childhood. Reynolds also argued that Dickens was so infatuated with childhood not only because he was writing at a time heavily involved with the construction of the image of the child and childhood, but because of the psychological pressures of his own childhood. Interestingly enough, whilst Dickens explored childhood even in his earliest writings, it was not until after Charlotte Brontë gave a voice to a child in *Jayne Eyre* that Dickens did also. Reynolds asked the question; 'Why did Dickens wait for this "permission"?' Her answer was drawn from this personal psychological pressure. It is his close attachment to childhood, and his memories of and musings about it, that drove him to speak about it, but, paradoxically, that stopped him from speaking of his own and giving a voice to "what he knew so well" (*David Copperfield*). His journey to actually give the child a voice was thus a stuttering one.

The second talk was given by Michael Slater on Dickens and childhood mortality. Again Dickens' own experiences wove their way into the talk insofar as his loss of a brother, sister, cousin, nephew, and daughter, must have shaped at least some of his outlook. However, Slater wanted to ask just how well did Dickens actually present child death? When we turn to the death of Little Nell in 'The Old Curiosity Shop', for example, we do not need to look far

for criticism, whether it is Oscar Wilde's infamous quip or John Carey's denouncement of Dickens' depictions of these children as "adult amenities" or "plastic". Slater went on to defend Dickens both insofar as there are other child characters that give us a more individualistic and fleshed-out picture, and that even children like Little Nell reveal to us something about the potency of child death. The death scene sometimes has to be so overtly sentimental and idealised as it is part of the defence mechanisms every adult and parent needs. Indeed, it is this comfort for grieving parents that transcends the historical context.

We then moved to the parallel breakout sessions. I first attended the session given by Morag Styles on using Dickens to encourage creativity in the classroom. She read aloud to us a passage from *Great Expectations* and we were invited to give our thoughts on what is being said about childhood in the piece and what about such a passage appeals to children. There was plenty to say and I won't simply repeat a list here, but the power of Dickens' vivid settings and atmosphere, the fast pace, and his humour were all major points.

The second session I attended was a presentation by Marcia Williams about her experience of illustrating Dickens when she was bringing her book *Charles Dickens and Friends* to life. She felt that whilst turning Dickens' work into comic form was necessary in many ways for educative and imaginative reasons, she also felt that such a style could not do complete justice to the power of the original text. Thus, in the pictures, objects are often falling out of the frames, or stretching and breaking the borders. She also wanted to emphasise the child's point of view as much as possible and she pointed to pictures of adults as towering, giant-like figures in her rendering of *Oliver Twist* as examples of this. Such a tactics were meant to create an interactive, empathetic, and exciting experience for the child reader. However, whilst the book could work as a single, exciting experience of a certain rendition of Dickens, Williams hoped that they would also be inspired to go forward and read the original texts as well.



Between these talks we were read passages from Dickens' work by a fantastic group of enthusiasts who selected readings that complemented the day's thoughts perfectly. However, it was the performance by Pip Utton, dressed as Dickens, which really brought out the true power of Dickens' words. He came to us as Dickens preparing for one of his public recitals of *Oliver Twist*.

The piece he then performed was the unforgettable murder of Nancy by Bill Sykes. He left no spine un-chilled with his vivid enactment and drew us in with his powerful performance despite the fact that the projector light was still glaring upon him as none of the organisers seemed to know how to turn it off.

But a computer blue screen was not going to subdue the words of Charles Dickens in full flow!

Symposium

We then entered into the third part of the day, where we saw the presentation of prizes for work done in schools with Dickens and heard from a panel of authors on what Dickens meant to them. Marcia Williams spoke to us once again, and then Mick Manning and Brita Granström talked about their experiences of taking Dickens to schools and children around the world. It was quite inspiring to hear of how Dickens' work is still having a profound effect in education and on children and what brilliant things are being done with it by enthusiastic teachers and writers. Without a doubt, however, my highlight of the day was hearing from the spectacular Dame Jacqueline Wilson. She spoke of how she felt, and how others had seen, strong similarities between how she and Dickens write about "lost" children. Whilst she humbly rejected any comments that she was anywhere near as good as Dickens, I think many would have to agree that her talent for speaking to, with, and for the child is a powerful and exemplary one that surpasses Dickens'. The difference between her work and Dickens' represents a shift that many children's literature critics speak of: a shift away from an author writing about and exploring the child to an author writing *for* the child. She is, as Peter Hollindale has named it in his *Signs of Childness in Children's Books*, a writer of true "childist" texts.

