

# Dickens the Crime Writer: a Reading of Dickens' Pioneering Crime Novels

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## **Abstract**

The context of crime and detection has always produced sensation amidst readers since the dawn of the genre of detective fiction in the eighteenth century. In line with other specific detective fiction authors, elements of suspense, thriller, mystery and crime are often found in the works of Charles Dickens. Though the presence of such literary forms in Dickens' writings are primarily a result of Victorian obsession towards crime, jail, prison and policing, Dickens is read more as a social novelist rather than a crime writer. A close analysis of Dickens' great body of work including both fiction and non-fiction marks the evolution of crime fiction from the initial success of the detective story to the height of Holmes' popularity in the early twentieth century. In spite of this insight, Dickens' crime writing is perhaps an undervalued aspect. In this paper, therefore, we propose to read Dickens, as a crime writer with reference to his revolutionary crime novels and try to find a reason for undervaluing his aspect of crime writing which in a way would attempt to prove either his success or weakening of his ability as a crime writer.

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Crime and its detection; criminals and their motives behind it; victims and their predicament; investigation and its outcome: such elements produce the sensation that has always mesmerized the imagination of the readers. The enthusiastic audience was never turned down rather catered with caution by specialized writers since the dawn of this genre in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The popular psyche that sometimes gets tired of other literary forms never really finds it too much to digest suspense, thriller, mystery and crime that usually involve the dark secrets of human hearts. This may be the reason why we still enjoy Dickens' writings for we often come across such elements in his writings. As we read Dickens more and more in the perspective of the Victorian age and its special obsession towards crime, jail, prison and policing, it is observed that he was drawn towards the secret that excites curiosity. Perhaps it is this element of secrecy that

renders his work as universal in nature and still provides the same pleasure experienced by his contemporary audience. A close analysis of Dickens' great body of work including both fiction and non-fiction marks the evolution of crime fiction from the initial success of the detective story to the height of Holmes' popularity in the early twentieth century. This is also perhaps the reason why even after two centuries, his works are so much in demand that they are reproduced in various media. In spite of this insight, Dickens' crime writing is perhaps an undervalued aspect. In this paper, therefore, we propose to read Dickens, as a crime writer with reference to his revolutionary crime novels and try to find a reason for undervaluing his aspect of crime writing which in a way would attempt to prove either his success or weakening of his ability as a crime writer.

If we leave behind Voltaire's "Zadig" (1748) which is often traced as one of the earliest examples detective fiction as a distinct genre begun in 1840s with the publication of Edgar Allan Poe's trio of Dupin tales. This genre's huge popularity has accounted for a great variety within itself which consists of detective fiction (including the classic whodunnit), legal thriller, courtroom drama, hard-boiled fiction, police procedurals, private Eye, suspense thrillers and any other sub-genre in which a committed crime triggers off the plot. This process of the evolution of detective fiction produced the legendary Sherlock Holmes, most celebrated of all fictional detectives, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Victorian age, also known as the 'Golden Age of detective fiction' thus saw the emergence of a good number of popular writers; British as well as American including some prominent female writers like Agatha Christie.

The detective personalities and their way of detection underwent serious changes in the hands of various writers. Yet, whatever be the variations in the personality of the detective, be it Dupin or Holmes or Poirot or even Chesterton's Father Brown, the difference in nature of the crime and investigation; the main ingredients of the detective stories remained common as the protagonists shared the same Victorian peculiarity. Crime literature before nineteenth century that focused on the criminal as the sympathetic hero, had actually changed as early as 1773, with the publication of the first *Newgate Calendar*,<sup>i</sup> and gave rise to a short lived sub-genre, the 'Newgate novel,' the fictional foil for the true crime stories. Although the focus was still on the criminal, the portrayal was far from sympathetic. As Stephen Knight points out in *Form and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, 'A short moral preface offered the stories as dreadful warnings; an early version recommended the collection for the educational purposes of parents and also - presumably as a diversion - for those going on long voyages.' Gradually the sympathetic portrayal of criminals became controversial and the focus shifted from the criminals to those who captured the criminals and the rise of a literature of detection.

Keeping in mind this short history of the evolution of detective fiction, we can obviously trace Dickens' both fiction and non-fiction to introduce him as one of the pioneers of detective fiction. It is true that Dickens did not set out to write crime fiction.

He was more inclined towards representing Victorian society as a social writer and journalist. In fact Dickens was always with the trends of the market. Thus with the publication of *Newgate Calender*, as Newgate novels became popular, Dickens gave his readers *Oliver Twist*. Though published initially as a series from 1837-39,<sup>ii</sup> *Oliver Twist* is an extremely successful and highly controversial novel where perhaps for the first time Dickens profoundly focused on the master criminal Fagin, who seduces young homeless boys and turns them into criminals, and introduced to his readers his inclination towards writing crime fiction. Through the character Fagin, Dickens develops his report on court cases involving vagabonds, thieves and murderers and also the portrayal of the London underworld with a touch of sympathy. It is interesting to note here that in 1836, just before penning *Oliver twist*, Dickens had visited the notorious London prison at Newgate and had written an article "A Visit to Newgate" and published in *Sketches by Boz*.<sup>iii</sup> In this article Dickens described some actual scenes that he had seen of men, women and children imprisoned there and also concluded the article with an imaginative scene describing what it must have been like to have been a condemned man in the last night before execution. It is this imaginative scene that forms the base of Fagin's character in *Oliver Twist*. The description of Fagin's crippled appearance in chapter two of the novel is a visual indication of his criminal nature. Again as the plot of *Oliver Twist* progresses, the description of Fagin's gang, his criminal involvements and finally Fagin's execution, all does have a direct hint towards Dickens' close observation of the world of crime. It is needless to say that it is not the character of Oliver, the protagonist, but Fagin, the antagonist, that has made the novel even more popular. 'Fagin' as a character has become so popular that the word 'fagin' itself has entered the word dictionary referring to 'one who trains others specially children in crime'; has caused 'kidsman' to be renamed 'fagin' in some crime circles or on adult who teaches minors to steal and keep a major portion of the loot. Though there are evidences suggesting that Dickens may have drawn Fagin on a sixty year old child stealer called Henry Murphy<sup>iv</sup> or perhaps Iky Solomon<sup>v</sup>, it is for sure that crimes and criminality was one of the prime concerns for Dickens as early as 1830s.

Crime during the Victorian age was an inescapable social problem. So as a social novelist, Dickens tended to view crime in his novels more liberally. Not only *Oliver Twist*, but even in *Great Expectations* Dickens' dissatisfaction with the prison system as well as a sympathetic portrayal of criminals is suggested.

"We were at Newgate in a few minutes, and we passed through the lodge where some fetter were hanging up on the bare walls among the prison rules, into the interior of the jail. At that time, jails were much neglected, and the period of exaggerated reaction consequent all public wrong-doing . . . was still far off . . . and a frouzy, ugly, disorderly depressing scene it was." (246; ch. 32 *Great Expectations*)

Further evidence of Dickens' concern can be found in another extract from *Great Expectations* where Pip reacts to the Debtor's Door of Newgate Prison saying,

"out of which culprits came to be hanged: heightening the interest of that dreadful portal by giving me to understand that "four on 'em" would come out at that door after to-morrow at eight in the morning, to be killed in a row. This was horrible and gave me a sickening idea of London." (163; ch. 20)

On the contrary, as a journalist, Dickens' non-fiction took a more conservative stance towards crime where he suggested that it was more important to focus on the punishment of criminals rather than giving them a second chance to redeem themselves. This becomes even more clear on a close scrutiny of the description of inspector Charles Field and his detection in his short article "On duty of Inspector Field" (1851)<sup>vi</sup> and Mr Bucket from *Bleak House*.(1852) During the 1840s and 1850s, the detectives were coming up as a new law enforcer in England. This historically new phenomenon of Metropolitan policing by the new force completely wiped away the old and more less-efficient form of policing. Unlike the old police, this new police did not rely on force and was not even corrupt. They are much more ordered and the power laid much more in what they discriminate between people merely by looking into them. Quite efficiently Dickens takes on this formula to describe the character inspector Field in his non-fiction.

As it was not a commonly defined genre during his lifetime, Charles Dickens didn't become famous as a writer of mystery/detective fiction. But as we look back, he was definitely a master of the craft. Thus based to some extent on the figure of Inspector Charles Field of the London Detective Force, Dickens draws the character of Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* and quite skillfully brings in the element of mystery and a detective. Inspector Bucket solves the murder of the lawyer Tulkinghorn, and like Dupin, has an air of omniscience, and while not quite arrogant, his confrontation of Sir Leicester Dedlock during the course of his investigation is certainly self-assured. Yet there is not the same emphasis on purely intellectual detection; Bucket is only able to solve the mystery because he knows the city of London intimately, and can cross the boundaries the text presents, not only socially but in terms of the novel's structure of two narrations. In fact, it should be noticed here that while Inspector Field was quite straight forward in his detection, Mr Bucket in his final chase actually fails to intercept Lady Dedlock and therefore ends up in drastic consequences.

Just as Fagin in *Oliver Twist* became a popular character through the sympathetic portrayal, Dickens' contribution is worth mentioning in creating the prototype of the literary detective as well. Though he did not set to write crime fiction, there is always at least one puzzle to be solved in a Dickens novel and the crime and justice system often comes in for castigation. This is exactly what comes out from the characterization of

both Inspector Field in his non-fiction as well as Mr Bucket in *Bleak House*. In spite of the basic differences in characterizing more black and white characters for his non-fiction than in fiction, such characters of Dickens are no doubt presented before us as very effective super detectives and are definitely pre-Sherlock Holmes.

Dickens' fascination with the practice of detection continued in more articles for *Household Words* on the detective force, and in his later novels. The unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), of which there had been numerous assumed solutions, in particular represent a move towards the detective fiction of the late nineteenth century. Dickens was not only drawn towards the secret that excites curiosity, he loved to introduce the game of hide and seek with the reader who tried to anticipate the solution of the secret. It is perhaps the demand of his readers as well as his keen interest and obsession with crime and policing that he intended to write a mystery story that would reveal the secret to his readers at the end. Unfortunately, Dickens died half way before solving the mystery. Though there are various assumptions regarding the final solution, the secret of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* remains a mystery unsolved declaring only the fact that Dickens through his literary skill at least attempted to draw a line showing the progress of development of Victorian Detective Fiction.

Dickens' characters agreeably expose his thinking and writing on crime as well as his enduring fascination with the darker side of human nature. In almost all his literary output what exactly get focused are his contradictions. On the one hand, he tried to portray through his descriptions and characters an Empire of progress and possibility while on the other hand, through indulging of secrets and plots that are always complex, full of clues and red herrings, an Empire of cash, violence and force that sustains possibilities. Thus when we focus on the literary skill of his pioneering crime novels, we find that he displayed a shrewd insight into the criminal character, meanwhile demanding harsh penalty for those who broke the law. This is also primarily the reason why we intend to call *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House* and finally the unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, his pioneering crime novels and locate the gradual development of the genre through these novels. At one stage attracted to a career as a metropolitan magistrate, Dickens turned instead to fiction and discovered there a vent for his thieves, cheats and murderers people the pages of his novels, all accused of some or other heinous crimes. In these novels specifically we find the treatment of crime for Dickens was far more than an authorial device: it was a focal point for his deep concern with social problems and played a vital role in his attempt to understand these ills.

Dickens' combining of the savage satire of the evils of his time with the need to entertain his readers is perhaps the reason for undervaluing Dickens as a crime writer. Owing to the wonderful social descriptions of England and Victorian London in particular, Dickens is read more as a social novelist than as a crime writer. However, the

way Dickens is still received, read and adapted into other medias in the present age surely prove that it is not just the representation of the Victorian obsession that keeps the Dickens demand still alive. Rather it is this element of crime writing that can be further experimented, adapted and represented in various medias that draws so much attraction towards Dickens and his writing. Surely this itself is a proof of his success as a crime writer and a path finder for his followers of detective fiction. So, while we consider Dickens to be a writer who wrote many classics of English literature during his prolific lifetime, it's important that we don't forget his steadfast contributions to crime and detective fiction during the very early days of the genre.

### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> *Newgate Calendar* was originally a monthly bulletin of executions, produced by the keeper of the Newgate prison in London during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

<sup>ii</sup> *Oliver Twist* was serialized in *Bentley's Miscellany* from 1837 to 1839,

<sup>iii</sup> *Sketches by Boz* (1836) is a collection of Dickens' early stories that had been published in *Monthly Magazine*, *The Morning Chronicle* and other periodicals. The sketches provide delightful glimpses into life in early Victorian London. Dickens later commented on *Sketches* saying "They comprise my first attempts at authorship. I am conscious of their often being extremely crude and ill-considered and bearing obvious marks of haste and inexperience."

<sup>iv</sup> A newspaper cutting from *The Times* on Jan 14 1834, reports the case of Edward Trabshaw, an intelligent boy aged 10yrs who had run away from home and fallen in with Murphy's gang.

<sup>v</sup> Iky Solomon was a fence at the centre of a highly publicized arrest, escape, recapture and trial.

<sup>vi</sup> "On Duty of inspector Field" (1851) was published In *Household Words*, a weekly magazine that Charles Dickens wrote and edited from 1850 to 1859. Another such short piece where he explored his fascination with professional detectives is "The Detective Police"

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