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Moral And Aesthetic Ideals In Dickens's Fiction: Problems And Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the moral and aesthetic ideals in Charles Dickens's novels, emphasizing the tension between human virtues and social constraints. Using critical realism, Dickens portrays characters whose simplicity, compassion, and ethical integrity are both affirmed and challenged by societal injustice, class divisions, and human weakness. Through the typology of "eccentric characters" and "honest gentlemen," he constructs a complex moral universe: the former embody heartfelt devotion and humanity, while the latter combine intellect, social awareness, and ethical deliberation. Figures such as Joe (Great Expectations), Mr. Boffin (Our Mutual Friend), and John Harmon exemplify the interplay between personal virtue, social experience, and collective action. Dickens employs irony and narrative nuance to show both the strengths and limitations of human morality. Ultimately, his novels suggest that the realization of moral and aesthetic ideals requires not only individual virtue but also knowledge, social engagement, and communal solidarity, reflecting the ethical and social challenges of nineteenth-century England.

Keywords: Moral evolution, social critique, literary symbolism, ethical philosophy, psychological realism, character typology, Victorian social context.

INTRODUCTION

As nineteenth-century classical art refined its methods of critically apprehending reality, it accumulated considerable experience in shaping moral and aesthetic values. "The experience of nineteenth-century critical realism," as N. Yastrebova rightly observes, "is based on the necessary synthesis of two principles: an artistically complete and truthful representation of reality as it is, and an evaluative attitude toward existence grounded in ideal criteria."

In the works of Charles Dickens, a distinctive synthesis of realism and elements of fantasy becomes evident; alongside a critical interpretation of social reality, there is a persistent aspiration to affirm enduring moral and aesthetic values. Particularly in the novels written during the 1860s, the author elevates the artistic expression of ethical ideals such as humanity, honesty, compassion, and self-sacrifice to a new stage. In this process, the system of "benevolent" characters emerges and develops as a central artistic device.

These characters created by Dickens play a significant role in articulating a shared moral ideal. However, their individual characterizations differ markedly from one another. For this reason, scholars conventionally classify them into three groups.

1. The group of "eccentric characters"

This category includes such figures as Jo (the child grave-digger), the Boffins (humble working people), Reginald Wilfer, Hlyup (Halilbek Hlyup), Mr. Venus, and others. These characters are typically drawn from the lower social

strata and are portrayed as unconventional—sometimes even grotesque—in their appearance, behavior, and manner of speech. Nevertheless, they possess profound human virtues: sincerity, honesty, kindness, and a readiness to help others. Embodied in these figures are a form of simple wisdom, devout plainness, and moral resilience in opposition to a spiritually faithless age.

These figures appear as early as Dickens's first novels (for example, Pickwick and Grimwig in The Pickwick Papers, and Mr. Brownlow in Oliver Twist) and continue the English literary tradition of the "simple sage." They typically function as moral points of reference amid social conflicts.

2. The group of "honest gentlemen"

The representatives of this group—Herbert Pocket, John Harmon, Tartar, and the gentlemanly clergyman Crisparkle—are characters that correspond to Dickens's concept of the "voluntary ideal." Despite their belonging to the upper social strata, they strive to distance themselves from hypocrisy, duplicity, and self-interest prevalent in society. Their moral conduct, patience, intellectual cultivation, and benevolence elevate them to the role of ethical pillars within the social order. These figures are created by Dickens as embodiments of an idealized bourgeoisie, demonstrating that social harmony can be achieved through labor, education, and moral integrity.

3. The group of "those aligned with goodness"

These characters—Pip (Great Expectations), Magwitch (the former convict), Jenny Wren (the disabled seamstress), and Riah (the businessman)—initially traverse a complex path shaped by internal conflicts and social pressures. Their inner lives are marked by constant struggle: between good and evil, selfishness and self-sacrifice. However, through a succession of trials and events, they attain moral renewal and spiritual elevation. Through these characters, Dickens affirms his belief in the potential for transformation inherent in human nature and in the possibility of spiritual purification under any circumstances.

Dickens's system of "benevolent characters" constitutes not merely a collection of artistic images but a central component of the writer's moral and aesthetic conception. Each group articulates a distinct set of ethical ideals: through the eccentric figures, honesty and humanity are foregrounded; through the gentlemen, moral harmony and civic responsibility are emphasized; and through those aligned with goodness, the mutable nature of human character and the individual's capacity for self-improvement are explored. Taken together, this system of characters serves the fundamental ideological aim of Dickens's творчество—his aspiration toward the construction of a just society.

In Dickens's oeuvre, the figures of the "kind-hearted eccentrics" perform a distinctive artistic and aesthetic function, frequently operating as vehicles for the embodiment of moral ideals. At the same time, despite being marked by such elementary human virtues as simplicity, honesty, sincerity, and compassion, their capacity to resist evil and social injustice remains limited. It is precisely against the backdrop of such contradictory circumstances that Dickens employs a characteristic mode of ironic expression.

The "eccentric" characters in Dickens's works—such as Joe (the blacksmith)—are presented as embodiments of human moral integrity; however, they are deprived of such instruments as intellectual acumen, experience, and social awareness in their struggle against evil. As a result, although these figures are portrayed by the author with affection and compassion, the narrative situations associated with them frequently carry an ironic undertone. This irony encourages the reader not only to appreciate the character's moral virtues but also to recognize his social limitations.

For example, in the novel Great Expectations, Joe is described as follows:

"Between one Sunday and the next, he never remembered anything or acquired even the smallest fragment of knowledge."

(Vol. 23, p. 118)

While this passage acknowledges the moral purity of Joe's character, it simultaneously reveals—through irony—his intellectual passivity and his vulnerable position within the social system. Even the most elementary forms of functional communication appear complex to him, which further restricts his capacity to resist those who wield social and institutional power.

Through such figures, Dickens constructs a moral ideal; yet

this ideal often appears fragile when confronted with the real forces of social life. These tensions reflect the writer's commitment to a realist mode of representation—that is, to depicting reality in the fullness of its positive and negative dimensions.

By portraying Joe and similar characters, Dickens exposes the social injustices, class disparities, and cultural illiteracy of his age. At the same time, through these figures he elicits sympathy and reflection in the reader: kindness and simplicity are shown to be valuable moral qualities, yet they are insufficient in themselves to secure social equality and justice. In this sense, such characterization functions as an artistic means of expanding moral and social consciousness.

Charles Dickens's literary method, grounded in critical realism, is distinguished by a profound artistic examination of the complex tensions between human virtues and social vulnerability. In particular, the writer's simple-hearted, benevolent, yet fragile characters in the face of life's trials occupy a central position in articulating his moral and aesthetic worldview. Through these figures, Dickens frequently exposes the moral crisis and social inequality characteristic of contemporary society.

In Great Expectations, the figure of Joe embodies genuine human simplicity and humility. From the very moment he enters Satis House—the residence of representatives of a socially elevated class—Joe experiences a sense of alienation and discomfort:

"Estella, who always opened the door, came out, and the moment Joe saw her he took off his hat and began turning it round in his hands, holding it by the brim as though he were weighing something heavy, as if afraid it might be an ounce short."

(Vol. 23, p. 108)

Through ironic expression, these lines depict Joe's sincere yet excessively naïve attempts at proper conduct. His behavior simultaneously reflects the aesthetic idealization of simplicity and the direct confrontation between distinct social strata. As a representative of the common people, Joe proves incapable of adapting to the prevailing social order; nevertheless, he remains morally superior to it.

In Our Mutual Friend, the character of Mr. Boffin presents another manifestation of simplicity, rendered in a different form. Although materially wealthy, Boffin is intellectually naïve and socially inexperienced. His own confession offers clear evidence of this:

"I am entirely unacquainted with print," he admits to Silas Wegg(Vol. 24, p. 65).

Such simplicity becomes particularly perilous in terms of susceptibility to social manipulation. Silas Wegg immediately recognizes Boffin's vulnerability and seeks to exploit it:

"The old fellow is remarkably simple (…) it would be sinful to let such an opportunity slip (…) much more profit may be extracted from this than they have yet calculated."

(Vol. 24, p. 69)

Here Dickens employs irony to illuminate the tension between social foolishness and moral purity. Boffin's material superiority does not enable him to grasp the truth; on the contrary, it renders him even more vulnerable to deception.

Through the figures of Joe and Boffin, Dickens seeks to demonstrate the positive moral force of such human qualities as simplicity and kindness. At the same time, he reveals how these virtues prove fragile when confronted with the realities of modern social life. Although these characters embody the writer's moral ideal, they also serve to expose social indifference and the obstacles hindering the pursuit of truth within society. Thus, for Dickens, simplicity is not an absolute ideal but rather a phenomenon subjected to trial and requiring critical evaluation on the path toward an ideal.

In Dickens's socio-philosophical novels, positive characters differ from one another in temperament, experience, and worldview; nevertheless, through their actions the writer articulates his response to the problems of his age. In particular, the issues raised within the typology of the "eccentric characters" and the "honest gentlemen" reveal key conceptual foundations of Dickens's social philosophy and moral ideal.

In Our Mutual Friend, the evolution of Mr. Boffin guides the reader from the vulnerabilities associated with simplicity toward a stage of intellectual and social awakening. In the initial phase, Boffin is depicted as a naïve and trusting individual, deceived by the swindler

Silas Wegg. However, over time, he gains social experience and begins to make more discerning decisions. For instance, in a subsequent episode concerning the will, Boffin successfully defends himself by outwitting Wegg. This development reflects Dickens's intention to portray simplicity not merely as a romanticized trait, but as a dynamic and mutable quality.

Nevertheless, Boffin's ultimate triumph over malevolence is not the result of individual intellectual power but rather emerges through collective action—specifically, his alliance with John Harmon and other benevolent characters. For Dickens, this illustrates that positive outcomes in society are achieved through communal unity, mutual assistance, and compassion.

The "honest gentlemen" in Dickens's novels—John Harmon, Herbert Pocket, Tartar, and Grugius—are often portrayed as learned, morally upright, and intellectually capable. Yet, these characters frequently fail to direct their abilities and intellect toward socially meaningful or effective endeavors. Their activities tend to remain confined to family affairs or the pursuit of personal happiness.

For example:

- **Herbert Pocket** (Great Expectations) remains idle in his office for long periods and ultimately withdraws entirely into private life, leaving the country. Through this, Dickens critiques the social indifference of the English intelligentsia.

- **Tartar** (The Mystery of Edwin Drood) cannot confront real societal problems. He erects his idealized "hanging gardens," so beautiful and metaphorical that their existence in reality is nearly unimaginable.

- **John Harmon** (Our Mutual Friend), while relatively more active, confines his efforts largely to family matters and fails to combat social malevolence. Through Harmon, Dickens depicts the coexistence of moral perfection and social ineffectiveness.

- **Grugius** (The Mystery of Edwin Drood) may have been intended as a figure to oppose evil in the novel's dramatic climax; however, as the work remains unfinished, his role in this regard is left uncertain. This underscores that Dickens's later works leave the issue of moral authority open-ended.

In Dickens's social-ethical novels, enduring values such as humanity, compassion, conscience, and loyalty are advanced as central ideals. These values are realized through different character types: primarily, the "eccentric characters" (common folk) and the "honest gentlemen" (figures who combine human virtues with intellect, reason, and spiritual cultivation). Both groups strive to promote goodness in society; however, their effectiveness and their role in social action are often inconsistent and limited. This demonstrates Dickens's nuanced and multi-dimensional approach to the concept of moral ideal.

Although Dickens consistently presents his "honest gentlemen" in a positive light, their inactivity and inability to address fundamental social problems can be interpreted as a form of indirect critique. Characters such as Herbert Pocket (Great Expectations), Tartar (The Mystery of Edwin Drood), and John Harmon (Our Mutual Friend) are knowledgeable, morally upright, and enlightened, yet they are unable to resolve the profound socio-economic challenges of their societies. Their sphere of action is usually limited to personal or familial domains. Through this depiction, Dickens conveys that virtue alone is insufficient for achieving social justice; active engagement, social awareness, and collective solidarity are equally essential.

The "eccentric characters" are often depicted as figures emerging from ordinary society—benevolent, simple-hearted, yet capable of imparting profound moral lessons from a human perspective. While they may lack the courage to confront evil directly, they establish the foundations of goodness through their compassion, honesty, and selflessness. Characters such as Joe (Great Expectations), Boffin (Our Mutual Friend), and Reginald Wilfer, through their straightforward yet sincere outlooks, reinforce the reader's confidence in moral integrity.

Dickens presents these two groups of characters not as opposing forces but as complementary phenomena. When the heartfelt devotion of the "eccentric characters" harmonizes with the intellectual capacity of the "honest gentlemen," they become a tangible force capable of resisting social injustice. This interplay is particularly evident in Our Mutual Friend, where John Harmon serves as the "common friend" of all benevolent characters, coordinating their actions and symbolizing spiritual unity.

Through this narrative construction, Dickens conveys that the moral ideal is not merely a matter of inner purity, but

requires the will, knowledge, experience, and—most importantly—collective solidarity to defend it. Goodness achieves victory not in isolation, but through coordinated action.

The figure of Grugius in The Mystery of Edwin Drood warrants special attention: he is neither a fully "eccentric" nor a fully "gentlemanly" character in the classical sense. Combining the vigilance and analytical reasoning of a legal professional with the simplicity and attentiveness of an ordinary person, his character demonstrates a synthesis of popular wisdom and professional skill. Consequently, he appears as a potential force capable of opposing societal evil. Unfortunately, since the novel remains unfinished, the reader cannot witness the realization of this potential.

Through his portrayals of "eccentric" and "honest gentleman" characters, Dickens constructs a moral universe that transcends a simple didactic approach. He demonstrates the complexity of social and ethical ideals and emphasizes that there is no single path to their realization; rather, multiple strategies are required. A virtuous individual must not only be compassionate but also knowledgeable, self-aware, and capable of struggle. In this way, Dickens's artistic philosophy evolves into a universal message aimed not merely at moral education but at the cultivation of social consciousness.

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