

## ‘Should I feel a moment with you?’: Queering Dickensian Feeling

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Let’s queer the pitch slightly and consider how the bicentenary engenders negative feelings in people. Aside from the impassioned acclaim, the effusive eulogies, and the dazzling range of good-spirited festivities, what negative feelings about Dickens, his work and the bicentenary are perceptible underneath, alongside, and intermeshed with the more celebratory ones? From indifference, boredom, irritation, and exhaustion, to jadedness, anger, and shame, there are certainly undercurrents pushing against the tide of obligatory festivity, many of which express, recycle, and intersect with negative feelings about Dickens that have been circulating since his lifetime.

Among some scholars, we might detect, alongside enthusiasm and excitement, fatigue, boredom, and uneasiness about nostalgic representations of Dickens. The packed schedule of conferences, exhibitions, and celebrations is wonderfully overwhelming, and only the most energetic — and wealthy — can do more than cherry-pick. Alongside this is the (even more) ubiquitous presence of Dickens in popular culture, as the BBC screens lavish new adaptations of *Great Expectations* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.<sup>1</sup> Journalists pen fulsome eulogies whilst poring over insalubrious aspects of Dickens’s personality; thus, a hilarious *Sun* exposé characterizes Dickens as a drunken, wife-hating, adolescent-girl-chasing hell-raiser.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, an irreverent BBC documentary — *Mrs Dickens’ Family Christmas* — poked fun at Dickens and presented his treatment of Catherine as a startling revelation that tarnishes his reputation.<sup>3</sup> In the prominence given to Dickens’s marital troubles, we perhaps detect a gleeful cutting-down-to-size of this cultural giant, this literary Father Christmas.

The bicentenary also induces feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy in some people. Many of my bicentennial conversations with non-academics will feature embarrassed confessions that the other person hasn’t ‘read much’ or doesn’t ‘know much about’ Dickens (‘I’m ashamed to confess ...’). Others uncomfortably — or proudly — admit to finding Dickens’s work boring or difficult. If the bicentenary encourages new people to read and enjoy Dickens, it also makes others feel overwhelmed and humiliated, particularly as Dickens is elevated alongside Shakespeare to cultural colossus. The bicentennial emphasis on Dickens’s universality perhaps downplays the historical specificity of his work and elides moments of disjuncture, incoherence, and oddness that

may induce confusion, alienation, and exasperation in the reader. The bicentenary also provokes anger. For John Sutherland, Dickensian hagiography obscures the literary achievements of his contemporaries and ‘reflects a lack of balance in how we approach our literature’.<sup>4</sup> In the more democratic, chaotic and aggressive spaces of the Internet we easily find dissent. A quick search on Facebook reveals groups bristling with negative feelings towards Dickens. One such group — ‘I HATE CHARLES DICKENS!’ — exists solely for students who resent ploughing through his long novels.

Online objections to Dickens’s writing fall broadly into three categories: his wordiness produces disaffection, frustration and boredom; his plots are laughably implausible and his characters nauseatingly unrealistic; and he is sentimental, insipid, and clichéd.<sup>5</sup> In many ways, then, criticism of Dickens’s work has altered little since his lifetime. From contemporary readers who cried over the death of Little Nell, to Oscar Wilde, who notoriously found Nell’s sentimental demise ludicrous, Dickens’s work has provoked powerful and conflicting affects, and he has been simultaneously acclaimed and castigated for the feelings he engenders in readers. Dickensian sentimentality particularly rouses divided responses and is often viewed as sappy, cloying, and grossly manipulative. If Dickens’s literary greatness is now unquestionable, his uses of feeling remain a source of embarrassment, dismissiveness, and anger. Let’s shift focus, then, from how Dickens and his bicentenary can make us *feel bad*, to exploring how feeling in Dickens has been, and continues to be, regarded *as bad*. Key to this shift — and what binds the bicentennial and Dickensian sentimentality — is not merely that they are objects of negative and hostile affect, but that they also convey a sensation of compulsoriness, a mandated and naturalized obligation to feel in a particular, limited way. By queering Dickensian feeling, I argue, we can resist compulsory feelings, and think through, and appreciate, a wider, less constricted range of felt responses, as well as the queer ways in which feeling manifests itself between people.

As a literary form, sentimentality amplifies the methodological difficulties of studying feeling, particularly as it does not simply facilitate the expression of feeling but intensifies, delimits, and structures it. Indeed, sentimentality’s status as ‘real’ feeling is vociferously debated: is it an authentic expression of genuine feeling, or a corrupt, stage-managed form of insincere, ersatz, and self-indulgent feeling? As Nicola Bown observes, for some,

[s]entimentality is excessive feeling evoked by unworthy objects; it is falsely idealising; it simplifies and sanitises; it is vulgar; it leads to cynicism; it is feeling on the cheap; it's predictable; it's meretricious. In short, it's an emotional and aesthetic blot on the landscape.<sup>6</sup>

Many scholars, including Bown, defend and reclaim sentimentality as 'real', highlighting its power to make us feel, to sympathetically share emotional worlds and forge a common humanity. As Brian Wilkie declares, sentimentality asks, entices, coaxes, and even coerces us to be affected by its depictions; it is a form of aesthetic and imaginative self-projection.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the shared, collective experience of feeling is what often brings us together as a community of Dickens enthusiasts.<sup>8</sup> As Fred Kaplan observes, stimulating readers' feelings was central to Dickens's art as 'a moral force for individual rebirth and for communal health'.<sup>9</sup> Bown similarly highlights the central purpose and promise of Dickensian feeling: 'sentimental emotion works across time, collapsing the distance between reader or viewer, text or object or image, and the past worlds of thought, emotion, people and things.'<sup>10</sup>

Bown's illuminating defence of Dickensian sentimentality is thought-provoking and persuasive. Focusing on Little Nell's death, she locates sentimental catharsis in parental bereavement and elucidates how, through Dickens, '[w]e are involved in the griefs and sorrows' of mourning parents, while our responses 'are a sign of our human involvement with others to whose sufferings we can pay only the tribute of sympathy'.<sup>11</sup> From a queer perspective, though, such an emotion appears rather less universal and coercively binds the 'human' to parental grief. This is not to say, of course, that queer people have not sired, loved, cared for, and grieved over children. Instead, we might consider moments of sentimental feeling that adhere to queer characters, moments, and relationships in Dickens's work which are more tenuous, quirky, and elective: Joe's nursing of Pip; Edith's tenderness towards Florence; David Copperfield's love for Steerforth; and Nicholas's protection of Smike. As Holly Furneaux shows, a Dickensian community of feeling can be a decidedly queer affair.<sup>12</sup> If grief remains the exemplary sentimental feeling most resisted by Dickens's critics for its coerciveness, a queer analysis would not simply affirm positive over negative affect, or foreground a 'happiness' that, as Sara Ahmed shows, conceals a depressing imperativeness; instead, we might consider non-compulsory and awkward yet reparative sentiments in Dickens: recognition, gentleness, nurture, compassion, reconciliation, hope, and liberation.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, a queer approach might think anew about how feeling manifests itself in the spaces *in-between* Dickens's characters, potentially offering a reimagining of human agency and sociality.<sup>14</sup> As Juliet John convincingly expounds:

[Melodrama] demonstrates Dickens's political commitment to externalised aesthetics and to a [...] symbolic art of the visual that he associated with cultural inclusivity. The inwardly focussed individual in Dickens's work [...] is almost always deviant or at the least morally conflicted. To Dickens, mental and social health depended on directing one's energies away from the self.<sup>15</sup>

What may be most challenging and most queer — awkward, excessive, and counterintuitive — about Dickensian feeling is how it manifests itself between, rather than in, his characters, thus relocating intimacy and social bonds to the spaces between people. John short-circuits tortuous debates about Dickens's 'failed' realism, arguing that he was unconcerned with depth psychology and instead radically questioned 'how we know what we think we know about life beneath or beyond surfaces. The reality of innerness and depths is ultimately never empirically knowable'. Feeling 'never resides "in" people in Dickens; it manifests itself metamorphically through and between people and things'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, a Dickens character is not a multilayered repository of shifting but mature and empirically observable human feelings; rather, it is a medium through which feeling passes. As John puts it, 'Emotions are never residual or unambiguously "essential" in Dickens's work. They are dynamic, manifesting themselves metonymically and "superficially"'.<sup>17</sup>

John's emphasis on ambiguity, superficiality, excessiveness, and dynamic fluidity certainly lends itself to a queer analysis. I want to further queer her insights by reading them alongside Donald Winnicott's influential idea of the 'transitional space', a space 'between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people' in which 'intimate relationships and creativity occur'.<sup>18</sup> This is a space that is simultaneously internal and external, symbolic and literal, part and whole — an in-between space, which, Winnicott claimed, underpins our personal and 'cultural life'.<sup>19</sup> The transitional is an exemplary queer space, operating between and across multiple modalities of identity, including gender and sexuality. Queer analyses of Dickensian sentimentality can thus shift away from exploring feeling rooted in the individualized psyche to considering the spaces between psyches in which feeling, attachment, and sociality are manifested. For Michael Snediker, the transitional space offers an alternative, optimistic, and reparative queer trajectory, away from a constraining emphasis on self-shattering, masochism, and death.<sup>20</sup>

While the imperative to be happy and celebratory governs our responses to the Dickens bicentenary — and also shapes the global gay rights movement, with its emphasis on pride — queer theory affords an equal, converse prominence to negative affect. Following Ahmed, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Snediker, and Heather Love, among others, a queer analysis of Dickensian feeling might instead move away from ‘universal’ (that is, mandatory) affects — whether they are positive or negative — and towards more idiosyncratic, variegated, troublesome, risky, and censored feelings and attachments.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, if we reorient feeling to the transitional spaces in-between people, self and other, and inner and outer, we begin to appreciate the very queerness of affective life itself: ‘the open mesh’, as Sedgwick puts it, ‘of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements [...] aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’.<sup>22</sup> Dickensian sentimentality, then, provides an opportunity to reassess the operations of feeling between people, and between texts and readers, and highlights the quintessential queerness of affective life, showing us that while the queer ‘is relational, and it is strange’, the relational itself is strange — and it is queer.<sup>23</sup>

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Like many fortunate Birkbeck scholars, I was introduced to the study of Dickensian feeling by the extraordinary and much-missed Sally Ledger. Great thanks, also, to Holly Furneaux for reading and commenting on an earlier draft and helping me to clarify my thoughts.

<sup>1</sup> *Great Expectations*. Dir. Brian Kirk (BBC, 27–29 December 2011); *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Dir. Diarmuid Lawrence (BBC, 10–11 January 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Luke Heighton, ‘Revealed: The Dark Side of Charles Dickens’, *Sun*, 8 October 2011 <<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/3860664/Charles-Dickens-dark-secrets-revealed.html>> [accessed 27 April 2012].

<sup>3</sup> Broadcast on BBC 2, 30 December 2011.

<sup>4</sup> John Sutherland, ‘Enough with the Charles Dickens Hero-Worship’, *Guardian*, 6 February 2012 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/06/charles-dickens-hero-worship-bicentenary>> [accessed 27 April 2012]. Most of the readers’ comments strongly disagree with Sutherland, although complaints about Dickens’s wordiness are prominent.

<sup>5</sup> For a wide range of such opinions, see the readers’ comments posted after Matthew Davis, ‘Did Charles Dickens Really Save Poor Children and Clean up the Slums?’, *BBC News Magazine*, 7 February 2012 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16907648>> [accessed 27 April 2012].

<sup>6</sup> Nicola Bown, 'Introduction: Crying over Little Nell', in *Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality*, ed. by Nicola Bown (= *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 4 (2007)) <<http://19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/view/453/313>> [accessed 27 April 2012], p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Wilkie, 'What Is Sentimentality?', *College English*, 28 (1967), 564–75 (p. 566).

<sup>8</sup> As a co-organizer of Dickens Day (jointly run by Birkbeck, the University of Leicester, and the Dickens Fellowship) since 2005, I have been fortunate to witness and partake in just such a community of Dickensian feeling.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 40, as quoted in Bown, 'Introduction', p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Bown, 'Introduction', p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Bown, 'Introduction', p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 162.

<sup>14</sup> 'Affect is born in *in-between-ness*.' Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1–25 (p. 2, emphasis in original).

<sup>15</sup> Juliet John, 'Melodrama', in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 133–39 (p. 136).

<sup>16</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 121.

<sup>17</sup> John, *Dickens's Villains*, p. 120.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyrical Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 9–10; D. W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' [1951], in *Playing and Reality* (Avingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1–35.

<sup>19</sup> Winnicott, *The Family and Individual Development* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Making Gay Meanings' [1997], in *The Weather in Proust*, ed. by Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 183–89 (p. 182).

<sup>23</sup> Sedgwick, *Queer Optimism*, p. 189.