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The Semiotics of Hair-Dickens' Art of Characterization

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Abstract

Before one begins to study the semiotics of hair in Dickens's novels, it will be useful to keep in mind a few things. By the time Dickens was writing, there was a distinct change in fashions of hair in England. Previously facial hair for men other than a modest whisker had been unusual. For instance, moustaches were usually associated with military men and, on civilians were considered to be signs of foppery and general want of principle. But after the Crimean War, the British officers returned covered with glory and hair and that changed the trend in fashion. The aim of this paper is to study the semiotics of hair in the novels of Dickens, and to find out the advantages and disadvantages, if any, of this method of characterization that travels from the outside to the inside. Obviously, while every attempt is made to include as many examples as possible, in a paper of this nature, one cannot be expected to be fully exhaustive.

Keywords: Semiotics, Hair, Characterization, Charles dickens, Novel

1. Introduction

One of the reasons why we must be ever thankful to Robert Browning is that he once and for all laid to rest the Petrarchan ghost that had been haunting English poetry since the time of the Elizabethans. Byron, in his own way, did try to de-Platonize love, notably in *Don Juan*. But questions like

Do you think had Laura been Petrarch's wife

He would have written sonnets all his life?

did not acquire the requisite seriousness, perhaps because of the predominantly satirical mode of that poem. Besides, apart from Don Juan, Byron's own love-poetry hardly moves out of the romantic enchanted circle of spirituality. It was, therefore, left to Browning to show in his poems the value and significance of the physical. Fra Lippo Lippi's bafflement at the Prior's injunction "paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms" is typical not only of painters but of writers like Dickens, whose imagination is predominantly visual. For Dickens, as for Fra Lippo Lippi, the outward and visible is like a sign-system which is to be read with one's own imagination. Basically associated with the study of signs, semioticians attempt to assess how meanings are made, exchanged and reified through representational practices (Bingell, 2002; Chandler, 2007; Danesi, 2002). Although Saussure's theory has important impacts on the fundamentals of semiotics, there is concern as to whether a theory fostered on the basis of linguistic signs can deal with the specificities of the visual (Rose, 2011).

2. The Semiotics of Hair in Dickens's Works

While castigating Jane Austen for not sufficiently describing the appearance of her characters, G. H. Lewes cites Dickens as his model of the novelist who is alive to "the subtle connections between physical and mental organization" (Lewes, 1859, p. 87). While a Janeite may not quite relish the magisterially condemnatory tone of Lewes, it must be admitted that the point about Dickens is well-taken. Stefan Zweig has a similar comment to make about Dickens's characterization: "His psychology into character by observation of the exterior" (Zweig, 1930, p. 77). Thus for Dickens, the physiognomy of a character, his or her dress and gesture are all outward and visible manifestations of moral and psychological essence. Not without reason is Dickens's first work called Sketches by Boz.

Dickens is, of course, neither the first nor the only writer, who suggests the inner being of his characters through the description of the external, physiognomic features. One of the methods Chaucer employs in delineating his characters is by describing their hair. Here are a few examples where Chaucer specifically mentions hair of his characters to telling effect. The Squire, who has many accomplishments to his credit as an eligible young man of fashion and who is as fresh as is the month of May has "Lokkes crulle, as they were leid in presse" (Kolve & Olson, 1989, p. 42). The physical hardihood of the Yeoman is suggested through

A not heed hadde he, with a brown visage.

The benevolence and munificence of the Franklin is similarly foreshadowed in the description of his beard and of his sanguine complexion.

Whyte was his berd, as is the dayesye

The shipman's beard is shaken by many a tempest. The cunning and disgusting vulgarity of the Miller comes out most effectively in the following lines.

His berd as any sowe or fox was reed

And thereto brood, as though it were a spade

Upon the cope right of his nose he hadc

A werte and theron stood a tuft of herys

Reed as bristles of a sowes erys.

But Chaucer's masterly use of description of hair to suggest the inner core of a character comes out in the portraits of the Summoner and the Pardoner.

1) A somonour was ther with us in that place

That hadde a fyr reed cherubinnes face

For sawcefleem he was, with eyen narwe

As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe

With scalled browes blacke and piled berd

Of his visage children were aferd

2) This pardoner hadde heer, as yellow as wex

But smothe it heeng, as dooth a strike of flex;

By ounces henge hise lockes that he hadde,

And therwith he hises huldres overspradde,

But thinne it lay, by colpons, oon and oon.

No berdhadde he, ne nevere sholde have,

The only example that immediately springs to mind, where Shakespeare equates the visible with the hidden is from *Julius Caesar*. At the feast of the Lupercal Caesar exhorts Antony that fat men like him should be around him for he distrusts thin men like Cassius, who has a 'lean and hungry look'. This equation that fat men have jollity and, what Fielding would call, the natural goodness of heart and thin men are potentially dangerous operates to a remarkable degree in Dickens too.

Luxuriant hair, particularly black and facial hair generally denotes sexual potency in Dickens's novels. The bald benefactors are safe and trustworthy precisely because they offer no sexual threat. The very idea of Mr. Pickwick, a man of polish mostly around his head, as a predatory male out to break the hearts of the Mrs. Bardells of the world is a hilarious joke. Jingle on the other hand whose "long black hair" escapes from under his hat "in negligent

waves" is an accomplished lady killer (Dickens, 1958, p. 114).

Exploiters of women are generally "hairy apes". Mr. Mantalini in *Nicholas Nickleby* (Note 1) is a prime example. He, on his first appearance, wears "whiskers and a moustache both dyed black and gracefully curled", along with his morning gown and Turkish trousers and slippers. Later on we learn something of the history of his facial hair: "He had married on his whiskers, upon which property he had previously subsisted in such a genteel manner for some years and which he had recently improved after patient cultivation by the addition of a moustache which promised to secure him an independence" (Dickens, 1939, pp.123-124). He lives luxuriantly off his hard working and adoring wife until he ruins her finally. Hugh of the Maypole in *Barnaby Rudge* (Note 2), who sexually harasses Dolly Varden has no need of artificial aids for his coloring as he has "a sun-burnt face and swarthy throat over grown with jet black hair" (Dickens, 1841, 86). A moustache in Dickens's time completed the outfit of a perfect devil. This suggestion is fully worked out in the character of Rigaud

in Little Dorrit (Note 3): "when Monsieur Rigaud laughed a change took place in his face. ...His moustache went up under his nose and his nose came down over his moustache in a very sinister and cruel manner" (Dickens, 1857, pp. 5-6). Rigaud is a devil, who is a wife-beater and possibly an uxoricide. Mr. Murdstone is a still more sinister figure. David first registers him as a "gentleman with beautiful black hair and whiskers" he connects the hairy growth of Mr. Murdstone with his power over women. "This ....made me think him, in spite of my misgivings, a very handsome man. I have no doubt my poor dear mother thought him so too" (Dickens, 1850, pp. 22). David's misgivings are subsequently proved to be correct for his mother does pay the price of her susceptibility rather to dearly. And she is apparently one of the conquests of Mr. Murdstone, for when David sees him later, "his hair looked as thick and was certainly as black as ever" and he is buying a marriage licence! (p. 476) The reader familiar with Dickens's semiotics of the hair finds Rosa Bud to be quite right to be afraid of Jasper with his "thick lustrous, well-arranged black hair and whiskers" (Dickens, 1870, p. 8).

J. Steerforth is another lady-killer whose hair is prominently mentioned. Though David does not mention Steerforth's hair in his boyhood, Phiz, the illustrator, shows him to be thick-haired and with more graceful curls than the other boys at Salem House. When David meets his school-day hero as an adult, Steerforth's characteristic gesture is shown to be to run "his hand through the clustering curls of his hair" (Dickens, 1850, p. 288). Even during the sheep-wreck, Steerforth is discerned as "one active figure with long curly hair" (p. 329). With such opulence of hair, seduction of Little Em'ly is child's play for Steerforth. David who has renounced his boyhood love for Em'ly is painfully conscious of his want of a beard. "Face like a peach", Miss Moucher teases him as she pinches his cherubic cheeks (p. 329).

Our Mutual Friend (Note 6) appeared in 1864-65. It duly registers the change in fashion. John Rokesmith is clean-shaven but sports a beard when in disguise. Wrayburn, the potential seducer, appears in Slones' illustrations with whisker and moustache. Lammle, with his bushy eye-brows, is a ruthless gold-digger and would domineer over his wife if he could. That he does not succeed in his evil designs is because he has only "ginger whiskers" while she has

"raven locks" (Dickens, 1865, 10) and has therefore to enter into an uneasy truce with her. Facial hair forms an important part in the Lammel story as it illuminates the motivation of fascination. Fledgeby, like Chaucer's Pardoner, has no beard nor is likely to have one. Naturally in a society Where luxnriant hair is flaunted as a sigh of masculine virility, Fledgeby is driven by envy and spends his time "taking an observation of Boot's whiskers, brewer's whiskers and Lammel's whiskers and considering which pattern of whiskers he would prefer to produce out of himself by friction if the Genie of the cheek would only answer to his rubbing" (p. 416).

In his power-game his favourite victims are hairy men. He fires Lammel for the latter has a pair of whiskers which, he mutters to himself as Lammel departs. "T never liked ..... I'll bowl you down, I will, though I have no whiskers" (pp. 427-8). At last however Fledgby not only fails in his designs of a profitable marriage but is soundly thrashed by the "gentleman with whiskers" (p. 720). As for women characters, fair tresses in Dickens as in Pope, man's imperial race ensnare. Certainly hair constitutes one of the chief attractions of female characters. It is their crowning glory. Dora's curls captivate David. "There were never such curls," (Dickens, 1850, p. 394), He says. Luxuriant hair has its own tale to tell. In *Great Expectations* (Note 7) Molly, Jagger's house-keeper, Estella's mother and a murderess, has "a quantity of streaming hair" (Dickens, 1861, p. 201) which even seems to stir of its own power. Cutting of beautiful golden curls seems as sinister and as horrifying a violation as the rape of Belinda's locks. In *Bleak House* (Note 8) there is the old Krook who deals in girls' hair as though it were a substitute for their bodies and life blood. When the orphans in the Jarnadyce case visit his shop, he takes a tress of Ada's hair in his claw-like hand and exclaims "Here's lovely hair! ..... I have got three sacks of ladies hair below but none so beautiful and so fine as this. What color and what texture!" (Dickens, 1853, p. 51) At this point Richard intervenes. Certain manly women sometimes develop facial hair. Sally Brass in *The Old Cnriosiiy Shop*, whose forensic skills equal to those of her brother carried upon "her upper lip certain reddish demonstrations… which might have been mistaken for a beard" (Dickens, 1841, p. 245). Nature punishes the metallic lady of David Copperfield (Note 4), Miss Murdstone, "with very heavy eyebrows nearly meeting over her large nose, as if, being disabled by the wrongs of her sex from wearing whiskers, she had carried them to that account," (Dickens, 1850, p. 591).

Hair, of course, suggest more than sexuality. Dickens pays attention to the hair styles as signposts or indicators of certain moral positions. To begin with, he seems to be looking nostalgically to the 18th century fashion of powdered heads and wigs. Mr. Brownlow in *Oliver Twist* (Note 10) powders his head. But by the time Dickens came to write *Bleak House* he seems to have lost that fascination as is clear from the description of Mr. Tulkinghorn, who is "of what is called the old school- a phrase generally meaning any school that seems never to have been young" (Dickens, 1853, p. 203).

In general when Dickens mentions hair as being brushed or combed in certain directions he is making a slightly unfriendly observation that often suggests a stance of self-righteousness and pomposity. In *Barnaby Rudge*, Lord George Gordon, a fanatic protestant, has "long hair of reddish brown combed perfectly straight and smooth about his ears ..... without the faintest vestige of a curl" (Dickens, 1841, p. 266). Mr. Quale in *Bleak House* "seemed…to

brush his hair farther and farther back, until the very roots were almost ready to fly out of his head in inappeasable philanthropy" (Dickens, 1853, p. 203). Pecksniff and Podsnap, both hypocrites, like wise comb or brush their hair into a shape it does not grow in Mr. Peggotty's coiffure is much more natural and morally preferable. Dickens seems to have some particular affection for hair that is unmanageable. Traddles and Jerry Cruncher play second fiddles to their respective protagonists, but they help their heroes in a crisis and both of them have hair that will not lie flat. Traddles tells David "you have no idea what obstinate hair mine is, Copperfield, I am quite a fretful porcupine" (Dickens, 1850, p. 591).

These examples will hopefully show how we must pay attention to the way Dickens describes the hair of his characters as it clearly plays a significant role in the total presentation. One obvious advantage of the novelistic procedure that makes the outward a manifestation of the inner is that character becomes extremely vivid and picturesque. That perhaps is the reason why illustrators can do a better job with Dickens's novels. It is interesting to speculate how far the practice of illustration, in its turn, affected Dickens's characterization. Another advantage, especially so far as the semiotics of hair is concerned, is that such a procedure helps universalization. For instance, the belief in the intimate relationship between abundance of hair and sexual virility is fairly widely held. Therefore, a character like Steerforth can transcend his time and clime.

Contrariwise, in our age of Freudian complexities, such a characterization may appear to be unduly reductive. And, indeed, in the early novels, Dickens does seem to employ rather simplistic equations. Beauty and goodness go together and ugliness and evil are inseparable consorts. For example, Oliver, whose misfortune and hardships might be expected to make him coarse, remains beautiful. Dickens in this novel does not seem to agree with Dr. Losberne's opinion "who can say that a fair outside shall not enshrine her (Vice)?" (Dickens, 1837, pp. 2l6-7). In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Ralph Nickleby who declares "I am not a man to be moved by a pretty face .... There is a grinning skull beneath it," (Dickens, 1839, p. 400) is a villain. In later novels like Great Expectations and Bleak House we see cold and heartless beauties like Estella and Lady Dedlock, although Dickens takes pains to show that there are not by nature so.

The question, therefore, arises whether Dickens is sacrificing realism for the sake of vividness. Are his characters to be taken as allegorical figures? If physical ugliness and evil go hand in hand, what about cripples and the physically deformed? This point was put to Dickens by the original of Miss Moucher the dwarf hair-dresser who recognized her portrait and complained bitterly. As a sort of penance Dickens rehabilitated her character and included her complaint in David Copperfield. "Take a word of advice even from a three foot nothing. Try not to associate bodily defects with mental, my good friend, except for a solid reason" (Dickens, 1850, p. 464). In early novels Dickens might have thought his reasons solid enough, but as he progressed in his career his equations became more subtle and complex. Perhaps the advice from a three foot nothing had gone home. For example if luxuriant hair bespeaks virility and villainy, Want of hair does not necessarily denote angelic goodness. Scant hair also has some unpleasant sexual connotations. The senile and toothless Arthur Gride in *Nicholas Nickleby*, who plans a forced marriage on Madeline Bray has remnants of

hair that suggest worn- out lasciviousness. Uriah Heep, the sexual rival of the hero, has no eyelashes and hardly any eyebrows and hair "cropped as close as the closest stubble" (p. 219). Such figures despite of their scant hair are lecherous and sexually repulsive.

In *Nicholas Nickleby* Ralph "wore a sprinkling of powder upon his head, as if to make himself look benevolent, but if that were his purpose, he should perhaps have done better to powder his entire countenance also, for there was something in its very wrinkles and in his cold restless eye, which seemed to tell of cunning that would announce itself despite of him" (Dickens, 1839, 7). Mr. Pecksniff's portrait is similarly filled with subtler signals. Pecksniff takes care to create an image of probity and goodness, but his description, as it were, expresses him better. "His very throat was moral ..... It seemed to say…'Ladies and gentlemen, all is peace, a holy calm pervades me'. So did his hair, just grizzled with an iron-grey, which was all brushed off his forehead and stood bolt upright, or slightly drooped in kindred action with his heavy eyelids. So did his person, which was slick though free from corpulency. So did his manner, which was soft and oily" (Dickens, 1844, p. 13).

Apart from the tone, what alerts the reader is the network of physiognomic semiotics here. If one is inclined to take Pecksniff at his 'throat value', one is alerted by the heavy eyelids, by the hair that droops in suspicious consent with them. Pecksniff being 'free from corpulency' is again an indication, for fat men are generally good in Dickens. By the time we come to his soft and oily manner, the portrait of a hypocrite is complete. What, therefore, one has to do is to understand that the description of physical appearance of characters in Dickens' novels is some kind of a *gestalt*. And one must learn to read Dickens' body-language in all its ramifications, before one charges him with moral reductionism. As in a book of mathematics, so in Dickens' total output, the early examples might be simple but as one advances, the examples become more and more complex. Perhaps, that is where the secret of Dickens'characterization lies.

3. Conclusion

What saves Dickens from the charge of moral reductionism is (l) that the instances where he shows extremes of good and evil through beauty and ugliness are few and (2) hair happens to be just one part of the total human physiognomy and in later novels Dickens does evolve a sophisticated semiotics by working through the whole gamut of the permutations and combinations of the body-language so that hair may be alright but the eyes might tell a different tale.

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Notes

Note 1. *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839, 123-4, 400, 7

Note 2. *Barnaby Rudge*, 1841, 86, 266

Note 3. *Little Dorrit*, 1857, 5-6

Note 4. *David Copperfield*, 1850, pp. 22, 288, 394, 591, 464

Note 5. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 1870, 8

Note 6. *Our Mutual Friend*, 1865, 10

Note 7. *Great Expectations*, 1861, 201

Note 8. *Bleak House*, 1853, 5l, 203

Note 9. *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 1841, 245

Note 10. *Oliver Twist*, 1837, 2l6-17

Note 11. *Martin Chuzzlewit*, 1844, 13