

# The campaign to smear novelist Charles Dickens as a racist

By David Walsh  
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Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was one of the greatest novelists of the 19th century and a world-historical literary and cultural figure. In the English language, he is perhaps second only to William Shakespeare in enduring significance and popularity.

His imperishable works include *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend* and, of course, the novella that introduced the reading public to Ebenezer Scrooge, *A Christmas Carol*.

In late June, the Dickens House Museum in Broadstairs, in East Kent, England, was vandalized by an individual who sprayed “Dickens Racist” on the building. The perpetrator, Ian Driver, is a former Green Party councillor.

Unrepentant, Driver subsequently indicated he targeted the museum because it represented “the deep-rooted institutional racism of Broadstairs Town and Thanet District councils.” In a statement, he deplored the celebration of “genocidal racists such as Charles Dickens and King Leopold of Belgium.”

Driver may be an eccentric or unstable individual, but his actions fit a general pattern. In the US, statues of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant have been removed, defaced or threatened.

Moreover, a campaign against Dickens as a misogynist, imperialist, anti-Semite and reactionary defender of law and order has been under way for decades in pseudo-left, feminist and postmodernist academic circles.

Inspired by the postmodernist Michel Foucault in particular, D.A. Miller, an American academic, in *The Novel and the Police* (1988), for instance, asserted that “Few of course would dispute [!] that, with Dickens, the English novel for the first time features a massive thematization of social discipline.” A headline in the *Daily Mail* this May read “Charles Dickens the misogynist,” with a subhead that continued, “He championed family values—yet the novelist was cruel to his wife, hated his mother, had an affair ...”

The anti-Dickens banner has attracted some detestable personalities. The late journalist-scoundrel Christopher Hitchens, with all the moral grandeur of someone who gravitated from the upper middle class “left” politics of the International Socialists group in Britain to the Bush war camp in the early 2000s, eagerly cheering on the criminal, murderous invasion of Iraq, informed his readers in 2010 that Dickens was “the worst of men.”

This is all extremely reactionary and stupid, the worst sort of myopic, ahistorical moralizing, and, to the extent such an effort has gained any traction, it reveals or confirms the intellectual and moral rottenness of these affluent petty bourgeois layers.

Dickens is a beloved figure, first of all, because of the deep sympathy in his novels for those mistreated and oppressed by official, respectable society, especially children. It is difficult to think of another writer who

conveyed such sympathy in significant fiction, with the possible exception of Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist. Dickens, of course, enjoyed the “advantage” of having suffered poverty and abuse as a child, including during his stint, at 12 years old, working ten-hour days at a blacking (boot polish) factory while his father was locked up in a debtors’ prison.

Second, and related to that, Dickens was second to none in creating scathing portraits of hypocrites and sophists, especially those who prosper from the misery of others, while offering high-minded advice to the down-trodden on their ostensible moral and religious obligations. Karl Marx included Dickens among the “present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England” who were painting the various layers of the English middle class as “full of presumption, affectation, petty tyranny and ignorance.”

The novelist’s satire—as British writer George Gissing noted, in a perceptive 1898 study, in regard to *Bleak House*, one of Dickens’ masterpieces—had “very wide application; it involves that whole system of pompous precedent which in Dickens’s day was responsible for so much cruelty and hypocrisy, for such waste of life in filth and gloom and wretchedness.”

The *Northern Star*, the newspaper of the Chartist movement, the revolutionary movement of British workers at the time, hailed Dickens as “the champion of the oppressed.” Edwin Pugh, in *Charles Dickens, Apostle of the People* (1908), (mistakenly) claimed Dickens for the working class as an “unconscious socialist.” George Bernard Shaw asserted that not only was Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* one of the greatest books ever written in English, which is true, it was “more seditious than *Das Kapital*,” which is untrue. Tolstoy, who admired Dickens greatly, said of him: “He loves the weak and poor and always despises the rich.”

Dickens did all this, and a great deal more, in the liveliest and often most comic manner. He created a universe of characters and personalities, again, in English, only second to Shakespeare. His characters’ remarkable names often say a good deal: Henrietta Boffin, Vincent Crummies and family, Affery Flintwinch, Tom Gradgrind, Mr. and Mrs. Gulpidge (dinner guests), Mr. M’Choakumchild (school teacher), Newman Noggs, “The Infant Phenomenon,” Herbert Pocket, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Mr. Pumblechook, Mr. Smallweed (moneylender), Wackford Squeers, Paul Sweedlepipe, Montague Tigg, Nathaniel Winkle and Mr. Wopsie, to mention only a few.

In his brilliant essay, *Dickens: The Two Scrooges* (1939), American critic Edmund Wilson noted that the novelist was “almost invariably against institutions.” In spite of the lip service Dickens paid to “Church and State,” Wilson argues, whenever he comes to deal concretely in his art with “laws, courts and the public officials, the creeds of Protestant dissenters and of the Church of England alike, he makes them either ridiculous or cruel, or both at the same time.”

Dickens, Wilson continued, was one of “the very small group of British intellectuals to whom the opportunity had been offered to be taken up by

the governing class and who have actually declined the honor.”

The claims of Dickens’s racism stem from observations he made at various times about India, Africa, China and Ireland, and about British colonial operations in those regions. Some of the comments are reactionary and intemperate. The worst were made during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, also known as the Sepoy Mutiny, after 120 British women and children were killed by rebel forces.

As Grace Moore explains, in her sensible book, *Dickens and Empire*, “Although much has been made of Dickens’s unpleasant and bloodthirsty calls for vengeance in the massacre’s immediate aftermath, these demands were in fact restricted to a six-month period. When it became apparent ... that the ghastly actions of the sepoys were matched by equally repugnant behaviour on the part of the British, Dickens’s outbursts ceased abruptly.”

Interestingly, Moore goes on to argue that in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), “Dickens revised his attitude towards the sepoy soldiers and the rebels who joined them, by sympathetically aligning them with both the French third estate of 1789, and the English working classes. Indeed, following his explosion of 1857 Dickens was certainly more cautious about speaking out on matters of race in the future.”

In any event, an entire industry, modest but no doubt lucrative, has sprung up dedicated to exposing Dickens for the racist, misogynist scoundrel that he was.

Few enduring literary or artistic figures are immune from such efforts. Shakespeare was subjected to idiotic abuse in Roland Emmerich’s *Anonymus* (2011). The playwright was depicted as a semiliterate braggart, drunk and murderer who took credit for works actually written by the Earl of Oxford.

Tolstoy underwent some degree of falsification and trivialization, although nowhere nearly so malicious, in *The Last Station* (2009), and Percy Shelley and Lord Byron suffered some of the same fate in *Mary Shelley* (2017). In *Papa: Hemingway in Cuba* (2015), both Ernest Hemingway and his art were horribly banalized. On a smaller scale, Orson Welles has been reduced and dismissed in *Me and Orson Welles* (2008) and *RKO 281* (1999). Various books have been dedicated to demolishing the reputation of German dramatist-poet Bertolt Brecht, including John Fuegi’s *Brecht & Co.* (1994).

Dickens, of course, has already come under attack in Ralph Fiennes’ *The Invisible Woman* (2013), about the writer’s 13-year extra-marital relationship with the much younger actress Ellen Ternan. The filmmakers expressed disapproval of Dickens’s treatment of his wife and mistress, ignoring the reality, the WSWS wrote, that the writer was “a product of his era and social circumstances (which made divorce unthinkable).”

We added: “Frankly, the novelist’s dedication to presenting life in his novels is a thousand times more important and enduring than his imputed peccadilloes. Who set up these middle class critics as the arbiters of morality extending back into history? What have *they* got to boast about? It should be noted that the movie was scripted by Abi Morgan, who wrote the shameful tribute to Margaret Thatcher, *The Iron Lady*.”

In part, this entire process is simply one more indication of a very bad artistic and social climate. In a period in which artistic genius of the type exemplified by Shakespeare, Dickens, Tolstoy, Balzac and others—or anything even resembling it—has been sadly, conspicuously lacking, mediocrities feel it vital to repudiate the idea that genius has *ever* existed. The artist of the past must be cut down to size to make the present-day nonentity feel better about him or herself. “Well, they weren’t so different from us, after all, petty, selfish, back-biting ...” Several generations of intellectuals, who have swung largely to the right, cannot conceive of artistic greatness, with all the self-sacrifice and exhaustive mental labor involved, on the level of a Dickens (a labor that helped bring about his death at the age of 58).

They search out and discover pettiness and sordid motives everywhere

because their own lives and activity are dominated by pettiness and sordid motives. Scandal-mongering, gossip and the rest define their existence and they impose all that on the subjects of their research.

Moreover, one of Dickens’ tremendous failings from the point of view of the contemporary academic is his continuing popularity. His works have never fallen out of print. *A Tale of Two Cities* is estimated to be one of the most widely read novels of all time. With the aid of “cheap monthly installments he [Dickens] wins a completely new class for literature, a class of people who had never read novels before,” asserted cultural historian Arnold Hauser.

All of this is reason enough for the contemporary academic cynic, resigned to his or her own insignificance and impotence, to despise Dickens. What the mass of the population is drawn toward must be rubbish, because the masses are backward rubbish. It is appropriate that the attack on Dickens House in Broadstairs was carried out by a member of the Green Party, a petty bourgeois, neo-Malthusian movement profoundly hostile to the working class.

In regard to a healthy portion of the current academic view of Dickens, what amounts to a deep, abiding antagonism toward wide layers of the population is framed in “left” language, as befits our present situation. Dickens is faulted, in the end, for not holding socialist and internationalist views. The fact that he lived 38 of his 58 years and wrote eight major novels (*The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son* and *David Copperfield*) before socialist internationalism even existed as an organized force (the first English-language edition of the *Communist Manifesto* was only published in the latter half of 1850) is not an issue that concerns the critics.

Dickens appeared to the public as a serious fiction writer and as a chronicler of urban life, including plebeian urban life, in the mid-1830s. He had behind him many illustrious figures in Britain, including Daniel Defoe, Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne, Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Fanny Burney and Walter Scott, but he was writing a new kind of social novel. How many guides did he have before him to show him the “proper” path? Our contemporary critics never ask themselves that.

Nor do they concern themselves with the enormous pressures exerted on a popular writer of the time. Leon Trotsky notes somewhere the astonishing fact that Tolstoy rewrote and reworked *War and Peace* (a 1,200 page novel) seven times! Equally astonishing, however, is the fact that Tolstoy had the leisure time in which he could carry out such titanic efforts. Dickens wrote his large, complex novels in *monthly installments*, in “real time,” as it were. Once an installment was out there in the public, there was no going back. This method, George Gissing pointed out, “with author but a little in advance of printer, was ... as bad a one as novelist has ever contrived.”

Dickens the man had many failings, some of them nearly inevitable, some of them his own responsibility. It is nearly impossible to find an important artist without personal failings. Class society damages, twists or obstructs very gifted people as it does everyone else. Artistic genius, on the one hand, and personal idiosyncrasy, selfishness or even destructiveness, on the other, may coexist within a single human being.

The projection back in time of prevailing middle class values, the view that “all one has to do is to attribute the thoughts, feelings and motives of present-day men to the past,” in Georg Lukacs’ phrase, is one of the most intellectually debilitating and counter-productive efforts imaginable. The contemporary petty bourgeois, offended by Dickens’ occasional backwardness and prejudice, much of it expressed privately, remains immune to the novelist’s deep, deep feelings for the crushed and oppressed present in his novels, because he or she has no such feelings. He or she has sensitivities, and identity issues, and enormous quantities of self-regard and self-pity. The problems of the great mass of the population

are of no great interest—more than that, such problems, of a vast, life-and-death character, and the human beings whom they press forward, threaten to push the self-important middle class out of the spotlight and off the social and intellectual stage completely.

In his 1898 essay, Gissing, writing at a time when Dickens was already coming under attack by aesthetes, refined modernists and others, responded sharply to the ahistorical, anachronistic approach to art. He observed that the great novelist “was opening in truth a new era of English fiction, and the critic of our day who loses sight of this, who compares Dickens to his disadvantage with novelists of a later school, perpetrates the worst kind of injustice! Dickens is one of the great masters of fiction, who, by going straight to life, revitalized their art. That he did not see life with the eyes of a later generation can scarcely be brought as a charge against him; that his individuality [i.e., individual and specific conditions] affected his vision is no more than must be said of any artists that ever lived.” Precisely.

Edmund Wilson suggested that of all the great Victorian writers, Dickens “was probably the most antagonistic to the Victorian age itself.” In an apparent contradiction, Gissing asserted that the novelist was, “in all but his genius, a representative Englishman of the middle-class.”

There may not be a contradiction here if the matter is understood correctly. If one is speaking of Dickens’ art, especially as he practices it in his later, darker novels (*Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*), in its unbounded fecundity, its restless, relentless moral radicalism, its instinctive hatred for everything official, then Wilson is undoubtedly correct. Dickens the artist is at war with his age and culture.

At the same time, as a highly respected, well-compensated member of British society, the wealthiest and most powerful in the world, Dickens was also very much a “representative Englishman of the middle class” in his social views and conduct. At a time when nations and nationality carried far greater weight and exerted far greater pressure, Dickens attached “paramount importance,” as Grace Moore points out, “to British needs.”

Dickens makes a great point of mocking and deriding missionaries and other do-gooders (e.g., Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*) who concern themselves with the fate of Africans and others when there is so much misery at home in Britain. However, in that regard, as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Barnaby Rudge* (a historical novel, in Scott’s style, set during the Gordon Riots of 1780) demonstrate, the novelist—as Wilson observed—both “sympathizes with and fears” the mass of the population, at home and abroad.

All of the contradictions unfold systematically and logically, including his ambiguous or worse sentiments about the colonial populations.

Dickens felt a “genuine abhorrence” for slavery (Moore) and the violence inflicted on male and female slaves, as his *American Notes*—based on his dispiriting trip to the US in 1842—made clear. Moore writes further that “Dickens was strongly committed to the emancipation of all slaves and believed that they could eventually be integrated into society on an equal basis with white men.”

Yet when the Civil War broke out, like the majority of the English middle class, which he so often lampooned in his novels, Dickens sympathized with the South in the name of “free trade,” justifying himself in a letter on the grounds that “the North hates the Negro, and that until it was convenient to make a pretence that sympathy with him was the cause of the War, it hated abolitionists and derided them up hill and down dale. For the rest, there is not a pin to choose between the two parties. They will both rant and lie and fight until they come to a compromise; and the slave may be thrown into that compromise or thrown out of it, just as it happens.”

Dickens’ great contribution was as an artist, not a social thinker or political philosopher. His books contain great heaps of petty bourgeois

pathos, melodrama and sentimentality—and many social blind spots—but they include far greater heaps of life as it is, including, of course, as Gissing writes, “murky, swarming, rotting London.”

The important artist adds to the body of human understanding and feelings, particularly to those of its progressive or ascending social classes. Aspects of social and psychic reality that were outside the bounds of human awareness are brought within it. The word “Dickensian” entered the English language for a reason. The novelist, out of his intense and sometimes devastating experiences, his compassion and his great artistic intuition, held up a mirror to the misery and wretchedness the ruling elite was imposing on the population, and the latter’s complex, sometimes explosive response. The artist for the most part does not advance a political program, his or her radicalism involves the depth of his or her honest engagement with life.

Aleksandr Voronsky, the Soviet literary critic, insisted in his essay “On Art” (1925) that while a “genuine scientist discovers the laws of nature, otherwise he is a narrow pedant, or in the best case a gatherer of facts ... the artist, too, makes such discoveries.” Darwin, Voronsky asserted, brought to light and explained the origin of species, but Tolstoy brought to light the *objectively existing* human types with which he peopled *War and Peace*. So too Dickens “discovered” Scrooge, Oliver Twist, Uriah Heep, Seth Pecksniff, Estella Havisham and Sam Weller ... and Jarndyce and Jarndyce (in *Bleak House*), the wretched, soul-destroying, financially draining court case that has dragged on for many generations and “become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means. The parties to it understand it least.”

“The true artist, like the true scientist, always adds to what existed before him, otherwise he either repeats what has been established, or he simply describes things,” Voronsky adds.

We read Dickens today, not because he was a respectable Victorian gentleman, with a host of prejudices, but largely in spite of that fact. He did what every great artist does, he gave such broad and vivid expression to his opinions and moods that he lifted them above the limitations of his time, class and milieu. In Trotsky’s phrase, he raised “the experience of his epoch to a tremendous artistic height.” Everything else is secondary.

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