



A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON CHARLES DICKENS

UMA NOTA BIOGRÁFICA SOBRE CHARLES DICKENS

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RESUMO: As biografias de autores famosos costumam trazer supostas explicações para a sua obra literária. Foi o caso com Charles Dickens e a revelação do episódio da fábrica de graxa quando ele era menino, inspiração para *David Copperfield*. Exposta na biografia póstuma escrita pelo amigo próximo de Dickens John Forster, o episódio rapidamente tornou-se parte do imaginário Dickensiano. Porém é interessante observar mais de perto tais explicações e considerar outros pontos de vista, incluindo o do próprio autor.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Charles Dickens; David Copperfield; Fábrica de Graxa; Literatura Vitoriana; Biografia literária.

ABSTRACT: The biographies of famous authors often bring supposed explanations for their literary work, especially for complicated or obscure passages. Such was the case with Charles Dickens and the revelation of the blacking factory episode when he was a boy, which served later as inspiration for his novel *David Copperfield*. Exposed in the posthumous biography written by Dickens's close friend John Forster it quickly called fan's attention and became part of the Dickensian imaginary. Yet, it is interesting to look closer at such easy explanations and consider different views, including the author's himself.

KEYWORDS: Charles Dickens; David Copperfield; Blacking factory; Victorian literature; Literary biography.

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In 1871, a little more than one year after Charles Dickens's death, John Forster published the first volume of his biography *The Life of Charles Dickens*, written from the perspective not only of the biographer, but also the close friend and confidant of many years. Forster was a young literary editor when he met the rising author Charles Dickens in 1836 and thenceforth they developed a friendship that lasted throughout their lives (SLATER, 2011, p. 101). When this biography was released, it was the first time that the private life of one of the most important English writers of all time became known with the details and the sensibility never demonstrated before. Dickens was a public figure and achieved large fame in his lifetime, continuously present in the English Victorian literary life with his novels, short stories, the magazine he edited and was respected contributor, his speeches, his public readings, etc. But when it came to the man behind the author, in the last decade of his life, the attention of the press turned from his imagination and strong opinions to the sensational gossip raised when he separated from his wife Catherine in 1858 and supposedly had a relationship with the young actress Ellen Turner. That is why Forster decided it was important to show the Charles Dickens he knew, highlighting the human side of his friend, the trials he passed through, the hidden feelings, the happiness and the tears, all of which had made him the man he was. To do so, Forster touched on stories of Dickens's early life that were never mentioned before his death, at least not publicly, especially a very delicate episode of his childhood which became for many years after the publishing of the biography, a kind of explanation for the author's sensible writing about poor suffering children: the now famous blacking factory months. This episode nearly came out earlier when Dickens attempted to write his autobiography in the mid 40's, but the project was left aside along with other delicate affairs because he thought the time was not right. His parents were still living and other people might have been offended by certain revelations he thought necessary to be completely honest, as always, to his audience. Instead of the autobiography, the novel *David Copperfield* was written instead, strongly based on the author's life anyway, given the autobiographical mood he found himself by then. However, by that time, nobody was aware of it. One of the most shocking and sad moments of the novel was exactly the period young David is forced to work with other children at Murdstone & Grinby warehouse pasting labels on wine and spirits bottles.

David's experience was quickly connected to the blacking factory episode described by Forster, which took place in 1824 when the boy Charles was twelve years old and had to leave school to help his seriously indebted family. He started working at a shoe-polish factory, earning six shillings a week to past labels onto pots of black shoe polish. The job had been offered





by James Lamert, a family friend who partly owned the establishment, and which was accepted by the parents John and Elizabeth Dickens on behalf of their son (KAPLAN, 1988, p. 38). It was a kind of job that children of much poorer backgrounds than the middle-class Dickens would think of accepting, though. And for the first time in his life, Charles lived among the really poor; he met people who lived in the streets, who were from the workhouses, and were not stranger to hunger and cold. He and other boys worked for many hours a day under bad sanitary conditions, exposed by a great window to everyone who passed in front of the place, what enhanced the boy's sense of humiliation. Plus, the blacking formula seemed to be highly toxic, causing dizziness and serious health problems to the children. Much of that extraordinary experience that lasted for around a year (it is not known for sure) surely echoed in Dickens's future writings. It has left a deep mark on him, as he declared to Forster, he felt socially degraded and neglected by his parents who seemed to have forgotten that by that age what he needed was an education, as well as care from them. To make it worse for the sensitive Charles, the financial difficulties of the family had partly to do with the fact that at the same time he worked at that place his elder sister Fanny was studying to be a professional musician at the Royal Music Academy in Hanover Square, a private institution, costing thirty-eight guineas a year. According to Fred Kaplan, it was inevitable that "whatever Charles's feelings were then, whatever his love for his sister, his situation soon took a grim, pervasively damaging turn that keenly attacked his sense of his own worth and stirred feelings of sibling resentment" (KAPLAN, 1988, p.39). In Dickens's novels, the name Fanny is frequently found, usually to call ambiguously likable characters like Fanny Dorrit in *Little Dorrit* or Fanny Cleaver, Jenny Wren's real name in *Our Mutual Friend*, but never the heroine. Kaplan points that it is interesting how much interest their parents had to support Fanny's studies in a time when women were still much less likely to return investment on their education than men. Fanny had her artistic talent supported by the family, at the cost of her brother's suffering and resentment, but if genuinely believed, something which were, at least, memorable.

In Forster's book, the episode of the blacking factory was presented as he quotes Dickens himself "an evil hour for [him]":

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every-day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by





day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life (FORSTER, 2008, p. 39-40).

He famously describes the place as “a crazy, tumbled-down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats” (FORSTER, 2008, p. 38). The “squeaking and scuffling” of the rats all over the place haunts the image that horrible house creates in the readers minds, which shocks and intensified the feeling of utter revolt against the circumstances and even towards the parents who allowed such situation to happen.

The financial instability of the Dickens household is notorious in every biography of Charles Dickens. His father’s lack of control of money is pictured since from Forster’s book, and recreated along the years, with more or less detail. He had a life of difficulties which urged his son, the boy full of dreams and energy, to fight for a better future willingly or not. John Dickens was a Navy Pay Office “extra clerk”, and his earnings were not bad - £350 a year – a some that could allow the growing family to live rather comfortably. They moved continuously since Charles’s birth in the city of Portsmouth, always either because of John’s work or financial necessity. By the time the family went to London, in 1822, they had also lived in Chathan and Rochester. But it was in London that the Dickenses’ tenuous claim to lower middle class eventually began to eclipse (SANDERS, 2009, p. 1-2). John’s annual salary dropped by £90 since his transfer, and with the permanent mismanagement of the money, a second income became necessary. Elizabeth Dickens decided then to set a private school for girls in their house in 1823. But despite all the circulars left by great many houses doors at the time, nobody ever enrolled to the school and the attempt was completely disastrous.

As the family seemed to be incapable of paying its debts, the young Charles was sent to the blacking factory with the avail of father and mother. Still, a few weeks later, around February of 1824, his father was arrested for debt and later sent to the Marshalsea prison. The boy’s hopelessness only increased in this period. The family moved into the prison with his father, as it was common by that time, since debtors could hardly have money to keep their families outside while being in jail. All of them except Charles, who kept working to earn the only money available for the now, and running messages for his father. At first, he was lodged with a family friend in Camden Town, but later moved to back attic near the prison where he had a small room for himself. The boy felt as lonely and neglected as ever.





Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the period of work and his father's imprisonment obliged him to discover an enforced maturity, independence and even the familiarity with the streets, alleys and short cuts of London that influenced his later life. It was much because of this sad and prolific period that when we read *Oliver Twist* we can almost see the London of the urchins from the point of view of the scared boy, or almost smell the dirty Thames and see all its hidden secrets and stories in *Our Mutual Friend*. The life of the Marshalsea debtors and their unfortunate families are also vividly present and revived in *The Pickwick Papers* and later, more poignantly, in *Little Dorrit*.

John and Elizabeth Dickens are easily recognizable as well in *David Copperfield* as the models for the tragically funny Mr and Mrs Micawber. In the novel, the clumsy couple is as warm-hearted as they are untrustworthy when it comes to money, and therefore, to their commitments to their debts and creditors. The young David Copperfield lives with the Micawbers in London because his stepfather, Mr Murdstone, sends him to work at this wine warehouse he partially owns and, as he tell the boy when he sends him away, to fight the world and begin "a life on his own". But the boy quickly understands that the hard work pasting labels at wine bottles is only one of his problems in this new life. The Micawbers' instability forces him to move with them, hide and run from angry people charging for the rent, taxes, or even the grocer and the boot-maker. David witnesses Mrs Micawber's despair to see how deep they are in debt and at the same time alarmingly having one child after another in an already large household; trying to set a private school for girls in their home, naturally unsuccessfully. He develops the ability to deal with shop dealers to help Mr Micawber sell the family's silver cutlery, and struggles the way he can to prevent the total ruin of that family that is the only family he has now. Nevertheless, Mr Micawber is arrested for debt just like Dickens's father, and wife and children move into prison with him. David does not abandon the Micawbers, although there is not much the boy can do as a child, poor and friendless.

Although this is all clearly based on Dickens's real story (as people learned later in Forster's book), the passage from David's childhood does not follow only the melodramatic line. The Micawbers are funny at times, and are even pictured as irresponsible, but they are also loving and the best friends that David had since his mother died and he lost contact with his nurse, Pegotty. Charles Dickens loved his parents, especially his father, and although the blacking factory episode evokes mixed feelings, the memories are generally kind and forgiving:

I know my father to be as kind-hearted and generous a man as ever lived in the world. Everything that I can remember of his





conduct to his wife, or children, or friends, in sickness or affliction, is beyond all praise. By me, as a sick child, he has watched night and day, unweariedly and patiently, many nights and days. He never undertook any business, charge, or trust, that he did not zealously, conscientiously, punctually, honorably discharge. His industry has always been untiring. He was proud of me, in his way, and had a great admiration of the comic singing (FORSTER, 2008, p. 27).

John Dickens had left the debtors prison a few months before Charles quit the blacking factory. He got himself declared insolvent by “The Insolvent Act” law and released in May 1824. While still in prison, he retired from work, probably based on health grounds and addressed a petition to the Navy Treasury asking for a superannuation on account of his chronic affection of the urinary organs (the same that would kill him years later), which was granted. A week after his release, John was also found the sole executor in his mother’s will. All of this contributed for a period of stability and relief for the family and Charles was able to go back to school (SLATER, 2011, p. 21-23).

But if the father seemed to have been forgiven, Elizabeth Dickens left negative marks that the adult Charles still remembered when he wrote that unfinished autobiography, which Forster partly reproduces in his book. Back then when John Dickens argued with James Lamert (probably because he saw how his son was exposed as if in a window shop during the blacking factory working hours), he decided that the boy would leave that place at once, never to return, but the mother opposed to it. The memories of the incident remained clear in his memory. He wrote “I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back” (FORSTER, 2008, p.49). That specific passage seems to have left great resentment in him, as if his mother cared more about the money than his son’s feelings and self-esteem. Later, Elizabeth was the model for Mrs Nickleby’s affectations in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Like Nicholas, Dickens resents his mother’s airs of grace, pretensions of being from a higher social level than she really is, and her lack of trust in her son’s character. On the other hand Elizabeth is also the mother who taught him to read and write and therefore also inspired the loving and gentle (but foolish) Clara Copperfield, David’s mother.

Anyway, after Forster first mentioning of the blacking factory, the subject became a certain obsession to all Dickens’s biographers for many decades. That deep suffering caused by humiliation and lack of perspective seemed to be the key to understand his feelings, novels and writings in general. The episode became a handy explanation to his social activism not only towards poor children but also women and the poor in general





throughout his public life. Especially because Dickens himself treats his story in a very similar melodramatic way of which he treats the fictional stories of *Oliver Twist* and *Little Nell (Old Curiosity Shop)*. The famous autobiographical fragment is reproduced by Forster in Dickens's very words, the way he wrote it in the mid 40's, inserted with Forster's comments and explanations on certain parts.

The case is, and we can never forget, that Charles Dickens was always very proud to be seen as a man who made himself, despite all the drawbacks. He was proud of settling as a professional writer and to be one of the men who fought for the recognition of the profession (SALMON, 2015, p. 11-12). He was proud of being respected and admired, without coming from a rich background or receiving expensive education. All of it as the result of hard work, perseverance, discipline and much talent. He knew the value of money and responsibility. He understood his merits of reaching his position because he knew how hard it was to get there and how easily he could have turned the other way and ended as poor as the people he knew in the streets. His traumatic experience provided a view of what might have been. This is one of the reasons for his becoming a very demanding father, as frequently mentioned by family members. Some of his children (he had ten with Catherine Dickens) complained that their father never seemed to be satisfied with their professional achievements, no matter how good they were; that it seemed they never exerted their true potential; that they could do more. One of Dickens's most famous quotes comes from *David Copperfield*, when David reflects about the way he perseveres in life guided by honesty, discipline and devotions to his dreams:

My meaning simply is, that whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do well; that whatever I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely; that in great aims and in small, I have always been thoroughly in earnest. I have never believed it possible that any natural or improved ability can claim immunity from the companionship of the steady, plain, hardworking qualities, and hope to gain its end. There is no such thing as such fulfilment on this earth. Some happy talent, and some fortunate opportunity, may form the two sides of the ladder on which some men mount, but the rounds of that ladder must be made of stuff to stand wear and tear; and there is no substitute for through-going, ardent, and sincere earnestness. Never to put one hand to anything, on which I could throw my whole self; and never to affect depreciation of my work, whatever it is; I find, now, to have been my golden rules (DICKENS, 2012, p. 557).





In more modern biographies, like Michael Slater's, the childhood of Charles Dickens is dealt with less sentimentally and more critically. Of course, it is understandable how the episode of the blacking factory left a deep mark in Dickens's memory and how hurt he must have felt being a child used to have the protection of a home and parents and suddenly having to look for his own. On the other hand, when this story became known, both parents were dead, as well as many of the others involved, and nobody could ever explain or defend themselves. Dickens was the beloved English writer who was now deceased and everything that came from him was balm for his melancholy fans. At the same time, the last years were a trial for the writer who saw himself amid scandals involving his private life (TOMALIN, 1990, p. 113). Forster used this episode to show the humane side of his friend; he wanted people to love Dickens even more than they already did, and used a certain dose of sensation himself to achieve this goal. By the time the biography was published, the reactions were mostly positive, but some negative reviews also took place. Some critics pointed that 'the great tree of Dickens's achievement was rooted as limiting that achievement', which is, the explanation based on true stories might discredit his imagination (SLATER, 2011, p. 621). The melodramatic point of view instead of validating his work apologised for his weaknesses and flaws.

Fortunately, as the time passes, more impartial studies appear and the amount dilutes in the pool of information and research. A great mind like Charles Dickens, creator of characters who live until today in people's imagination, some of the greatest books of the English language and more, cannot be reduced to a product of one unfortunate childhood memory. He lived much more than that, and he knew it. He learned and taught much more than that. It was not actually his fault that after his death the autobiographic fragment, written so much time earlier, took such proportions, although he seemed to have told Forster that he would like to have it posthumously published. Maybe Dickens, considering the intimacy he always felt with his public, wanted to share this last secret with those to whom he was so close. Maybe deep inside, he wished for their compassion and comfort. However, it is hard to believe that he desired that one moment of the blacking factory to eclipse everything else he did. He surely wanted to be admired for his genius; for being a man who overcame such difficulties of life in order to become the man he was so proud to be; a man whose spirit was stronger than he was ever given credit for as a child. He wanted to be a model of strength and perseverance. Charles Dickens understood that whatever happens to us in life are challenges than can overpower and destroy us, or they can be absorbed and fortify us. To show the importance of a careful reading, in the fragment he also said in behalf of his parents: "I do not write resentfully or angrily; for





I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am”
(FORSTER, 2008, p. 49).

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