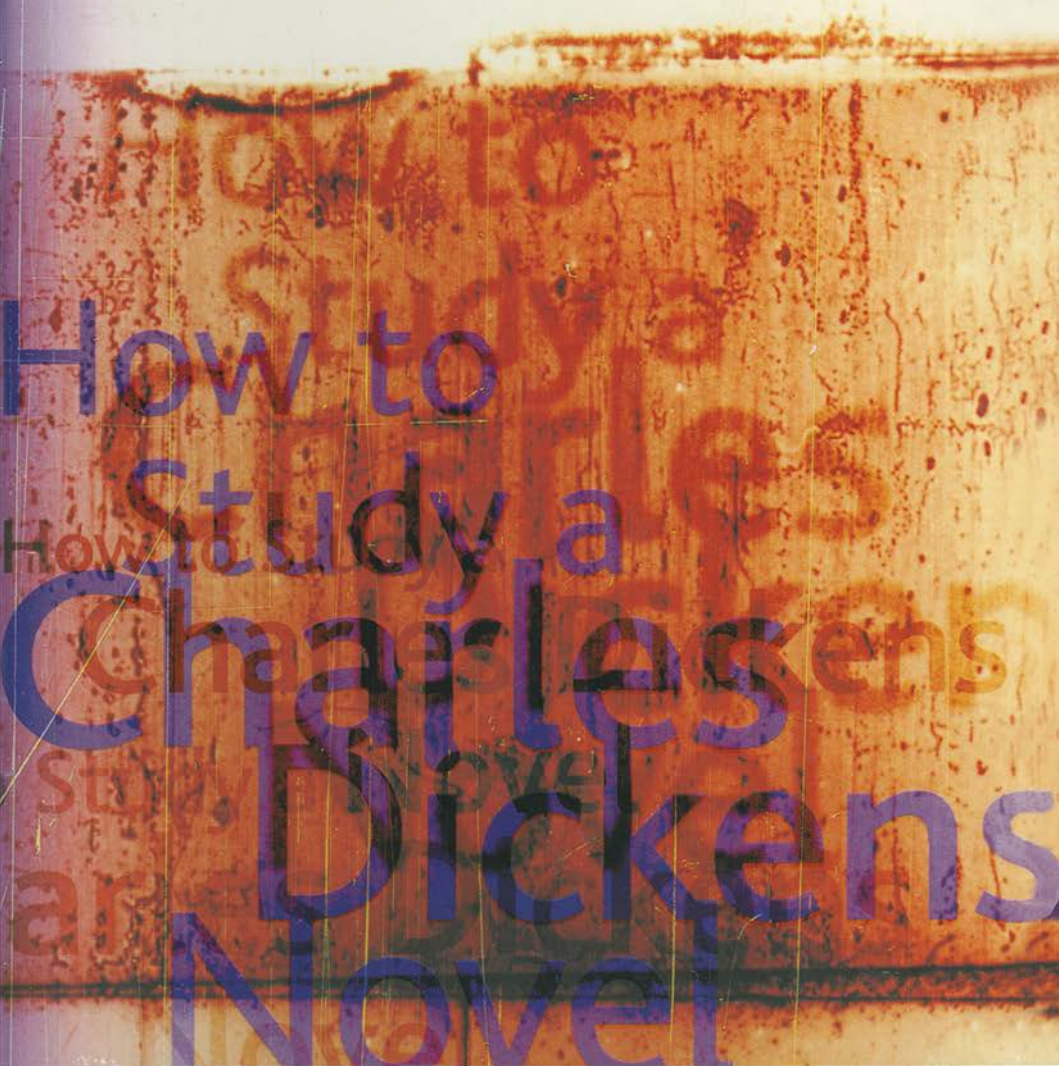


Keith Selby

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# How to Study a Charles Dickens Novel



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## HOW TO STUDY A CHARLES DICKENS NOVEL

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# **HOW TO STUDY A CHARLES DICKENS NOVEL**

Keith Selby

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## General editors' preface

EVERYBODY who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to the problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literature. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of texts you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck  
Martin Coyle

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*For my parents*

## Introduction: reading a Dickens novel

THE CHANCES are that, if you are studying English at school, college or university, you will have to read quite a few novels. While they are easy and enjoyable to read, however, novels are notoriously difficult to write about. For example, while you might enjoy reading the thousand or so pages of Dickens's *Dombey and Son*, you would probably be hard-pressed to write a good, thousand-word critical response to the novel. One of the major problems of all novels, in fact, is that they seem to resist our efforts to analyse them critically.

This difficulty seems to be much greater in the case of Dickens's novels. Because most of his novels are fairly long, it seems hard to recall them and decide which bits you should be commenting on. One way round this problem, of course, is to turn to critical books for help, but these may merely add to your problems. Some critics will tell you that Dickens's greatness is to be found in his comic writing and in his genius as a creator of caricatures; others will suggest that Dickens should be regarded as a social reformer, his stories acting as a sugar coating on the moral pill he wants his readers to swallow; others still will tell you that he is concerned with the effects of Victorian economic principles on the life of the individual. What might trouble you most of all about such ideas is the way they differ from your perceptions of the novel you are studying, or the difficulty of seeing their relevance when the only thing you remember about *Hard Times*, for example, is that some of the characters are funny. At this stage it is all too easy to begin to believe that the critic must be right, and to forget the enjoyment that your reading of the novel gave you.

This is also the point at which many students give up trying to shape their own response to the novel they have read, because they can see little connection between their own experience of the book and the kind of things that appear to be central in criticism.

Yet most students know that studying English is only going to be really worthwhile if they can formulate their own view of a text. The major aim of this book is to show you how to move from your reading of one of Dickens's novels to shaping your own response to that novel. A central point, which will be stressed all the time, is that the best way to build a critical response is to start with a few clear, simple ideas about the novel as a whole and to use these ideas to direct and shape all your subsequent thinking. To do this, however, you must first learn how to read a novel in an analytical way, and to identify what the novel is about.

### **Seeing what a novel is about**

On a first reading of a novel you are likely to be so absorbed in the details of the story that you might fail to perceive a larger pattern at work in the text. Yet it is precisely this sense of a larger pattern that you need to establish when you begin to think about the novel critically. This book is about how to move beyond that initial bewildered response.

The first point to grasp about novels in general is that novelists tend to return to the same issues and situations time and again. Clearly, a strong sense of the story being told, and an ability to reduce that to a few basic points, is a fundamental first step in beginning to get a sense of the larger pattern at work in a novel.

The second point is to remind yourself that all literature is concerned with some kind of opposition or conflict. You have probably noticed that poems tend to employ a basic opposition to draw attention to the problems that the poet is concerned with. This can be any kind of conflict or opposition at all: day is opposed by night, light by dark, youth by old age, good by bad, right by wrong, and so on. These oppositions are all around us, and many people argue that it is through these opposites that we begin to make sense of the world. Certainly, in a novel, the novelist tends to pattern events, characters and settings in such a way that they are opposed with one another, thereby dramatising and illustrating the conflicts at the centre of the novel.

The broadest pattern that can be observed in a novel is of some kind of conflict between society and one or more individuals within that society. In Dickens's novels, as we shall see, the conflict tends to be shifted a little, to the conflict or opposition between the

world of money, greed, lust and desire, on the one hand, and a sense of natural goodness and love, on the other. But we shall be looking at this in much more detail later. For the moment, the second thing to grasp about novels in general is that some kind of conflict resides at their centre. If we can be sure about the general nature of this conflict, then we can begin to see how all the details of the novel form part of an overall pattern, and so begin to produce a coherent critical response to the novel as a whole.

The final point to remember about novels for the moment is that they begin on the first page and end on the last. What happens between the first and last pages is the story. This may seem self-evidently true and hardly worth stating, but the first and last pages can tell us a great deal about the way in which the story will work, and how it has worked. The opening pages of the novel are going to establish most of the details and conflicts of the rest of the novel. The ending of the novel is the culmination of all the events and details of the story. The more important of these two moments for our purpose is going to be the beginning, since it is there that the major conflicts and tensions of the novel will be most apparent.

To summarise briefly: first, *it is important to have a good, strong sense of the story being told and to be able to reduce that to a few major points*; secondly, *it is important to recognise the basic conflict or tension between opposites which forms the core of the novel*; and, finally, *the best place to locate those oppositions is likely to be in the first few paragraphs of the novel*, since it is here that the conflict at the heart of the novel is going to be most apparent.

It is these three steps which mark out the process I am going to describe in this book, and which provide a useful critical framework for analysing a novel. What you will notice about this process is that it starts from simple ideas of what a novel is about, moves down to the details on the page, and then allows us to move back again to the larger, broader concerns and aspects of the novel as a whole. The logic of this approach is that it makes you work from the text and draw all your evidence from a close analysis of the details contained in the words on the page. How exactly this can be applied to specific novels will be demonstrated in the chapters given over to each novel I discuss. For the moment, it will help if you can remember the three points discussed above. The major one is the notion of a conflict or tension of some kind. What I want to do now is to consider further the nature of the conflict or tension commonly found in Dickens's novels.

### **The conflict in Dickens's novels**

As I mentioned above, the broadest pattern that can be observed in a novel is of some kind of conflict between society and one or more individuals within that society. In Dickens's novels, this conflict tends to be expressed as a tension between two opposed ideas: on the one hand, we find a broad panorama of lust, greed, desire, show and affectation, and on the other, a sense of natural simplicity of spirit, of goodness and love for our fellow humans. This opposition can be simplified even further to the basic conflict between money on the one side, and love on the other.

Many of the reasons why Dickens concentrated on the opposition or conflict between money and love can be found in the nature of Victorian society itself. The Victorian period was a time of rapid social, technological, cultural and economic change. Dickens, who was born in 1812 and died in 1870, lived through this period of change, and he was, like other Victorian writers, acutely aware that he was living through a period of transition which would change the whole fabric and structure of society. What was at the root of all this change was the development of machinery, which meant that more could be produced, more cheaply and more efficiently. This in turn meant that more could be sold and more profit could be made.

But what the Victorians were forced to recognise was that all these changes brought about by the development of machinery were not minor or cosmetic improvements or conveniences. Some of these mechanical conveniences might have appeared trivial enough. According to one nineteenth-century writer and commentator, Thomas Carlyle, the Victorians had steam-driven machines for mincing cabbages and hatching chicks. But they also had the railway, which replaced the stagecoach; factories, which replaced the artisan and cottage industries; steamships, which replaced the old sailing ships; the steam press, which replaced the hand press; the telegraph, which replaced the messenger. What all these changes meant was that things were moving faster and faster, more and more was being produced, society was becoming more and more complex. One of the things which fascinated Dickens and other Victorian writers was what effect all this change would have on the inner life of the individual, and on the relations between individuals.

The reason for this interest is simple enough. Victorian society

was a complex world of change, of production and economic power, apparently with no place in it for love. The society it had replaced had been (in theory at least) a stable society in which there had been a natural relationship between individuals based upon love. But, in a society based upon the economic principles of production, some people will become rich by exploiting the talents, the labour and the weaknesses of others. Some, the particularly vulnerable – such as the old, the infirm, and children – will fall by the wayside. These characters are capable of offering love and a simplicity of spirit, but how can the rich respond to them, poisoned as they are by the loveless world of change, economic production and money?

It is this conflict between money and love which forms the core of Dickens's novels. What this conflict usually reveals is that the people who have the greatest love for their fellow humans are also the ones who are most hurt by the world of money, simply because money is power. In Dickens's novels, the people who possess most money and most power seem incapable of love, whereas the people who *are* capable of love are very often both poor and powerless.

This is a potentially gloomy vision of the world, because it suggests that the good and the poor will always suffer at the hands of the bad and the rich. And yet, as we know, Dickens is a *comic* novelist. He is in fact probably the finest comic novelist in English literature. How, though, can Dickens's novels be described as comic when his view of the world is potentially such a gloomy one? To answer this question we need to think a little more about comedy.

Comedy in Dickens's novels consists of laughing at characters trapped in difficult situations. People are commonly seen as types, illustrating particular human traits – traits such as greed or lust. As a result, these human weaknesses are exaggerated to comic proportions and emerge as funny. Society itself is seen as a paper-thin veneer, barely covering man's basic desires of greed, lust and self-interest. This kind of comedy is concerned to draw our attention to the absurdity of human affectation and social pretensions, because it suggests that people tend to be motivated more by self-interest than love; it draws attention also to the darker, irrational desires lurking just behind the social façade. Such a view of the world is not only a potentially gloomy one, but also an extremely disturbing one, since there seems nothing of any

permanence to hold on to when society is presented as little more than an elaborate charade. One of the odd things about comic novels, then, and one of the most difficult things to grasp, is that they are very serious novels, presenting a disturbing view of how society conducts itself.

In Dickens's novels, all this probing of society and its institutions, along with the probing of the dark impulses that motivate humans, arises from the basic conflict between money and love. What we can expect to find at the centre of Dickens's novels is a presentation of the experiences of one or more characters caught between these two worlds of money and of love, and of the kinds of demands that the world of money puts on the individual in his or her relationships with other people. We can expect to find these situations presented comically, but this does not detract from the novel's seriousness. The basic frame, then, on which to build an analysis of Dickens's novels, is that of the conflict between the world of money and self-interest and the sense of a natural goodness and love in human beings.

### **Putting a novel back together again**

An awareness of this money-*versus*-love conflict in Dickens's novels should give you a firm foundation on which you can build your reading of a particular novel. It should help you make sense of the incidents which make up the story and help you in your interpretation of particular scenes and details. If you always look for a money-*versus*-love conflict, this should help you begin interpreting any scene or detail in any of Dickens's novels. What might concern you is that using this idea might seem to limit your interpretation, but this should not be the case. What I am talking about is a very basic pattern in Dickens's fiction; it is how you fill out this pattern that will make your reading of a Dickens novel distinctive, and all kinds of readings can be built on this solid foundation.

Sometimes, however, rather than being left to pursue your own line through a novel, you might be called upon to consider a particular topic. In preparing for an examination, for example, you might be asked to discuss such issues as Dickens's presentation of class differences, or the way in which some people seem to be doomed victims in his stories, or his presentation of childhood. All