

# Charles Dickens and Intellectual Disability

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**Abstract:** Throughout civilization, the power of the word has significantly influenced and shaped societies. The contributions of writers has been substantial and this is certainly true in the field of intellectual disability. The renowned author, Charles Dickens, spoke of the need for appropriate education and treatment for people with these disabilities. He is notable for his early and prophetic vision of their potential for growth. This paper reviews important examples that were included in his novels as well as in other writings on people with intellectual disabilities. The manuscript places his work in an historical perspective, highlights his contributions to the literature of disability advocacy, and references his relevance to the field of intellectual disability.

**Keywords:** Intellectual disability, Literature, Dickens.

The impact of writers on the perceptions of people with disabilities has been significant throughout history. Smith and Polloway noted that, "while the impact of literature may vary widely, those individuals deemed to have added important perspectives through their writing are often elevated to positions of high regard and influence" [1, p201]. Such literary influences evoke imagery of the "power of the pen" in our society. In the last century, literary voices have certainly been significant and have had both positive impact on perceptions of intellectual disability such as through the work of the novelists Pearl Buck, John Steinbeck and William Faulkner as well as a negative impact such as through the writings of Ayn Rand and Edgar Rice Burroughs [1].

These twentieth century voices were recent manifestations of the impact of earlier writers on public perceptions of persons with disabilities in general and those with intellectual and developmental disabilities in particular. For example, Smith and Polloway [2] highlighted the important work of Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, who wrote at a time when "appeals for the decent treatment of people considered to be inferior because of race, social class, gender or disability were rare" [2, p1]. Defoe, decades before Jean Jacques Itard [3], spoke strongly about the treatment and education of persons who would now be considered to have an intellectual disability (ID). He can be considered one of the first prominent advocates for these people [2].

Another early and significant voice was that of Charles Dickens, among the most esteemed authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or any century. The purposes of this paper are to explore the foundation of Dickens' understanding of persons who were with maltreated by society, to focus on his contributions to the literature as related to persons with disabilities, and to highlight his work with regard to education and treatment for persons with intellectual disabilities.

## CHARLES DICKENS: BECOMING A WRITER AND AN ADVOCATE

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 in a family of tenuous means. Two days after his 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, his father was arrested and jailed in a debtor's prison. His mother and siblings followed his father to live in the jail, a common practice at the time. Charles lived in a lodging house while his father was incarcerated, working long hours in squalid conditions at the Warren Blacking Company where he pasted labels on bottles of shoe blacking. These experiences seem to have set the course for the rest of his life. His subsequent writings would continually address the plight of people who were oppressed, abused, exploited and/or devalued [4].

After his parents and his siblings were released, Dickens returned to school but funds for his education were soon depleted. Consequently, his formal education ended when he was fifteen. His sensitivity to human differences and social inequities, however, would continue for a lifetime. He clerked in a law office for a time but after 18 months he was able to demonstrate his potential as a writer [4].

Dickens' talents for observation and for capturing the interest of readers soon became apparent. He was

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offered the opportunity to submit essays to a number of periodicals and his commentaries on the life of the lower classes, published under the pen name Boz, were very popular. Due to their popularity, even among the poor who pooled their money to purchase them, his sketches of London street life were collected in two books, *Sketches by Boz* and *Sketches by Boz II*. These works led to the publication of his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* [5]. By the time that his fifth novel, *Barnaby Rudge* [6], was published, Dickens had become a famous writer in both the United Kingdom and North America [4].

## DICKENS IN AMERICA

A common theme of the novels that followed *The Pickwick Papers* [5] was the wide gap between the privileged classes and the struggling poor, which helped give rise to the term "Dickensian", which has been used to refer to difficult social conditions. Dickens' interest in persons who were disenfranchised was also reflected in his visits to prisons, residential facilities for people with disabilities and schools. This interest is most evident in his book, *American Notes* [7], which was an account of his first visit to North America. It generated considerable controversy in the United States and his commentaries concerning slavery in particular created ire among some sectors of the American population.

### Dickens on Slavery

During his American visit, Dickens traveled to Richmond, Virginia. He [7] observed:

In the Negro (*sic*) car belonging to the train in which we made this journey were a mother and her children who had just been purchased; the husband and father being left behind with their old owner. The children cried the whole way, and the mother was misery's picture. The champion of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, who had bought them, rode in the same train; and every time we stopped, got down to see that they were safe [7, p122].

Dickens [7] noted the pervasive influence of slavery everywhere he looked. He included in *American Notes* the fact that a law in Virginia provided severe penalties for teaching reading and writing to slaves:

All men who know that there are laws against instructing slaves, of which the

pains and penalties greatly exceed in their amount the fines imposed on those who maim and torture them, must be prepared to find their faces very low in the scale of intellectual expression. But the darkness—not of skin, but mind—which meets the stranger's eye at every turn, the brutalizing and blotting out of all fairer characters traced by Nature's hand, immeasurably outdo his worst belief [7, p1].

In his preface to the 1850 edition of *American Notes*, Dickens made an obvious reference to the issue of American slavery in noting: "I hope and believe it [the United States] will successfully work out a problem of the highest importance to the whole human race" [8, p. ix]. His sensitivity and concern regarding slavery are in line with his concurrent observations concerning persons with disabilities.

### Dickens on Disability and Institutions

During his visit to North America, Dickens [7] had particular interest in public institutions. He toured prisons and asylums for people with intellectual and emotional disabilities. In fact, he spent more time in such institutions than in observing any other facet of life in the United States. In Boston, he was very impressed with the Perkins Institute and later with the Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind. His notes seemed to be prophetic of the normalization movement of the twentieth century when he observed that at Perkins and elsewhere in early American institutions an emphasis on individual identity was evident that was not characteristic of British institutions.

Here, as in many institutions, no uniform is worn; and I was very glad of it, for two reasons. Firstly, because I am sure that nothing but senseless custom and want of thought would reconcile us to the liveries and badges we are so fond of at home. Secondly, because the absence of these things presents each child to the visitor in his or her own proper character, with its individuality unimpaired, not lost in a dull, ugly, monotonous repetition of the same unmeaning garb, which is really an important consideration [7, p27].

Dickens [7] was also pleased with the atmosphere and care provided to residents of the State Hospital for the Insane in Boston as well as several correctional

facilities for juveniles. Overall he considered what he saw as far superior to what existed in England at the time. When he toured institutions in New York, however, he had mixed impressions. Among the institutions that he made favorable references to was Sing Sing prison, which he found to be a model jail. On the other hand he reported that the institution he referred to simply as a 'lunatic asylum' was depressing and discouraging.

I saw nothing of that salutary system which had impressed me so favorably elsewhere and everything had a lounging, listless, madhouse air, which was very painful. The moping idiot, cowering down with long disheveled hair; gibbering maniac, with his hideous laugh and pointed finger; the vacant eye, the fierce wild face, the gloomy picking of the hands and lips, and munching of the nails; they were all, without disguise, in naked ugliness and horror [7, p84].

### Dickens, Howe, and Laura Bridgman

Dickens [7] was particularly impressed with the work of Samuel Gridley Howe, the American pioneer in disabilities advocacy and special education. In addition to his work with students with blindness and deaf-blindness, Howe was an early advocate for the education of children and adults with intellectual disabilities. He convinced the legislature of Massachusetts in 1848 to provide initial funding for a school for the "teaching and training of idiotic children" [9, p122].

Dickens [7] had read accounts of Howe's instruction of Laura Bridgman and therefore he made a point of seeing her during his trip to the United States. At two years of age Laura was rendered deaf and blind by scarlet fever and her senses of smell and taste were also damaged. Howe had devised a method for teaching her based on her ability to feel the differences in shapes. Through drill and practice, he taught her the names of objects using raised print and subsequently with movable letters and then fingerspelling. This approach was the method that Anne Sullivan later acquired through communicating with Laura at Perkins, and then used in teaching Helen Keller. While the miracle of Anne and Helen began with Dr. Howe and Laura, Laura's fame and Howe's success with her were later eclipsed by the extraordinary accomplishments of Helen and Anne [10].

Dickens' admiration for Laura increased once he spent time with her in Boston. He wrote that she was "both charming and inspirational: a merry, graceful, and intelligent young girl, she seemed to symbolize the possibility of spiritual awakening and redemption" [7, p22]. Dickens also made reference, however, to Howe's ironic observations of Laura's disdain for children that she believed to be intellectually inferior, an exception to Laura's expressions of natural altruism.

It has been remarked in former reports that she can distinguish different degrees of intellect in others, and that she soon regarded almost with contempt, a newcomer, when, after a few days, she discovered her weakness of mind. This unamiable part of her character has been more strongly developed during the past year. She chooses for her friends and companions those children who are intelligent, and can talk best with her; and she evidently dislikes to be with those who are deficient in intellect, unless, indeed, she can make them serve her purposes, which she is evidently inclined to do [7, p39].

The themes that Dickens [7] explored in *American Notes* are consistent with the philosophy reflected in his major novels. The discussion below focuses on his major works that directly addressed issues related to persons with disabilities.

### INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN DICKENS' NOVELS

Charles Dickens is credited with writing 12 novels along with numerous short stories and serialized papers. Three of the novels provide the reader with a window on his perspectives on persons with an intellectual disability.

#### Nicholas Nickleby

Given Dickens' commitment to social justice and to the amelioration of class inequalities, it is not surprising he was an advocate for people with intellectual disabilities in his fictional literature. In his early novels, he portrays many of his characters as victims of social injustice rather than pawns of heredity. From his perspective, they served as an indictment of the society. In *Nicholas Nickleby* [11], the title character befriends a boy named Smike discovered in a school for abandoned boys. Dickens roots Smike's disability in

the toxic environment of the school, and its uncaring and abusive atmosphere. When Nicholas first enters the classroom of the headmaster, Mr. Squeers, he is stunned by what he sees.

Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meager legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot and, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring [11, p97].

Nicholas, moved by Smike's plight, helps him escape the school and becomes his friend and protector. Dickens portrays Smike as having been intellectually stunted and "made stupid" by needless "cruelty in childhood...years of misery and suffering lightened by no ray of hope", resulting in the current "night of the intellect" [11, p476].

Despite the friendship and support that Nicholas gives Smike, he continues to carry the scars of his childhood. Smike is haunted by the scourge that Squeers wreaked on him, "the vilest and most degrading cruelty, dressing the nineteen-year-old in a child's clothes barely wide enough for his attenuated frame, habitually working his student to the point of exhaustion, and withholding sleep" [11, p90].

Dickens [11] ultimately reveals that Smike is actually a cousin of Nicholas. At his untimely death, Smike is honored more for having served as a catalyst for compassionate acts than as a member of the Nickleby family.

### **Barnaby Rudge**

Barnaby Rudge is the title character in Dickens' fifth novel [6]. He is presented as a "local idiot" who wanders in and out of a complex story. He adores and is protected by his mother. He is manipulated, however, by unscrupulous men who involve him in London riots between Catholics and Protestants. His gullibility leads to his arrest and a sentence of death. His vulnerability to being duped by others is very consistent with the concept of gullibility as a central component of intellectual disability [12, 13].

Barnaby was flattered by those who took advantage of his gullibility and he believed that when they placed

him in dangerous situations he was "among the most virtuous and disinterested heroes in the world" [6, p418]. A poignant moment occurs when he is pardoned from his death sentence and described as a well-known "idiot" rather than the hero he imagined himself to be.

While Barnaby clearly illustrates gullibility as a characteristic of people with an intellectual disability, Dickens [6] also demonstrated that he understood their strengths. Barnaby had difficulty discerning malice and deception in others but he also learned to protect the things and people he loved. Dickens also showed that he understood that stereotypes of intellectual disability were pervasive during his time. On a trip to London, Barnaby and his mother encounter a country gentleman who makes repeated offers for Barnaby's pet raven, Grip. Although he tries to entice him with increased compensation for his valued possession, Barnaby refuses these offers. As a result, the man repeatedly questions the authenticity of the claims of Barnaby's intellectual disability. He asserts that the claim is only an excuse for his laziness and that all that is needed to "cure" Barnaby's idiocy is a good flogging. Frustrated at his inability to buy the raven, he reiterates his doubts about Barnaby's condition and he cries out in anger that all "real idiots" should be locked up in institutions.

### **David Copperfield**

In *David Copperfield*, Dickens [8] relates the story of an orphaned boy who lives in London and works for a wine merchant. He has been maltreated at work and in the rooming house where he lives. After his landlord is sent to a debtor's prison, David flees to the home of his aunt, Betsy Trotwood. Living with Miss Trotwood is Mr. Dick, who she rescued from abuse and demeaning treatment in an asylum where he had been abandoned by his brother and designated caretaker. Betsy Trotwood describes Mr. Dick as a "proud fool", seemingly expressing her recognition of Mr. Dick's disability as well as her respect for his value as a person.

*David Copperfield* provides insights in to the evolution of Dickens' [8] understanding of intellectual disability. In this novel he presents Mr. Dick as a person who not only builds on his strengths for his own growth, but who also enhances the lives of others. He proves to be a builder of relationships, becoming a surrogate guardian, along with Miss Trotwood, for David [14]. When young Copperfield resumes his

education at a boarding school, Mr. Dick visits him often. Through his visits, he helps to bring the students there together as a group of friends. He also becomes a confidant to the headmaster, Dr. Strong and, through this friendship, helps Strong overcome his depression and alienation from his wife. Mr. Dick also takes a job copying legal documents that enables him to help with Miss Trotwood's support after she is swindled and reduced to poverty.

Through Dickens' portrayal of him, Mr. Dick serves as a moral counselor in a diversity of roles. He provides humane words and actions to Miss Trotwood, Dr. Strong and David Copperfield. His character also provides an insight into Dickens' understanding of the full spectrum of intellectual disability.

### ESSAY ON INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

While Dickens regularly included characters with disabilities in his novels, the most compelling evidence of his thinking concerning intellectual and other developmental disabilities is to be found in an essay on ID that he wrote with his collaborator W. H. Wills. Titled simply *Idiot*, it was published in the periodical *Household Words* in 1853 [15].

Early in the essay, Dickens and Wills [15] made assertions concerning the potentials of people with intellectual disabilities that resonate throughout their observations. Speaking of the prevailing concept of those who were labeled as 'idiots', they said:

the main idea of an idiot would be of a hopeless, irreclaimable, un-improvable being. And if he be further recalled as under restraint in a workhouse or lunatic asylum, he will still come upon the imagination as wallowing in the lowest depths of degradation and neglect; a miserable monster, whom nobody may put to death, but whom everyone must wish dead, and be distressed to see alive [15, p313].

Dickens and Wills [15] refuted this cynicism with their findings after visiting a number of programs where people with intellectual disabilities were provided the opportunities and support that facilitated their cognitive and social development. They further noted:

Until within a few years, it was generally assumed, even by those who were not given to hasty assumptions, that because

an idiot was, either wholly or in part, deficient in certain senses...therefore nothing could be done for him, and he must always remain an object of pitiable isolation. But a closer study of the subject has now demonstrated that the cultivation of such senses and instincts as the idiot is seen to possess, will besides frequently developing others that are latent within him but obscured, so brighten those glimmering lights, as immensely to improve his condition, both with reference to himself and to society. Consequently there is no greater justification for abandoning him, in his degree, than for abandoning any other human creature [15, p314].

After citing the works of pioneer educators and physicians including Johann Jacob Guggenbuhl at the Abendberg in Switzerland who had been successful in teaching people who had been (at that time) classified as *cretins* [16], Dickens and Wills [15] described the techniques used at Park House and Essex Hall, private facilities in England. They observed that their programs were "devoted <to> the maintenance and education of idiots, for whom the parents pay a certain annual sum.... But we hope, through the instrumentality of these establishments, to see the day, before long, when the pauper idiot will be similarly provided for, at the public expense" [15, p316].

Dickens and Wills' [15] essay presaged the work of Faulkner [17] in his fourth novel, *The Sound and the Fury*. Central to the novel is the character of Benjy who had an intellectual disability and yet had an intuitive "sixth sense" about people. Nevertheless, Benjy is portrayed as a source of shame and grief to his family, especially his mother, while only his sister showed genuine love for him [16]. The title of the book is taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and is part of the famous soliloquy in Act V, Scene V.

It is a tale...Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.

Dickens and Wills [15, p459] gave this same Shakespeare quote a change in wording and a change in concept. In a comment remarkable for their time, they expressed hope that one day someone might find "in some future annotated copy of Shakespeare, the following happy emendation" about the educability of people with intellectual disabilities:

<it is> A tale...Told by an idiot, full of sound instruction, signifying something.

## CONCLUSION

Although it is impossible to document what might be the impact of Dickens' writings vis-à-vis persons with intellectual disabilities, nevertheless he is clearly considered among the greatest Western writers of all time [18]. The fact that his works have been adapted into over 200 films and television productions certainly argue for the significance of his impact.

In a 1940 essay on Dickens, George Orwell observed that “in every attack Dickens makes upon society he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure...<it is> useless to change institutions without a ‘change of heart’—that, essentially, is what he is always saying” [9, p6]. We have come much closer to making the lives of people with intellectual disabilities truly significant in our society since Dickens’ pen gave us this charge. Positive changes that reflect the philosophy inherent in his work have been made in the social structures that impact the daily lives of people with disabilities. Charles Dickens helped initiate a most promising, and important, trend that is certainly *signifying something*.

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