Charles Dickens in Love

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Abstract
This is a study of Charles Dickens's love for three women and their influence on his life and fiction.

Keywords
Charles Dickens, Maria Sarah Beadnell Winter, Ellen Lawless Ternan, Mary Scott Hogarth, 19th century novelists

Disciplines
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CHAPTER I

No discourse, except it be of love

Charles Dickens first visited America in 1842. Not yet thirty when he landed in Boston, he was already famous for half a dozen novels, including the rambling *Pickwick Papers*, the melodrama *Oliver Twist*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in which the death of the girl heroine Little Nell had been a maudlin sensation in both Britain and America. Now America was eager to welcome him, and he in turn arrived with high expectations . . .

. . . only to be disappointed. Americans were coarse, cocky, and money-loving; obtrusive, vain, and ignorant. He reported one of them boasting, “Our people don’t think of poetry, sir. Dollars, banks, and cotton are our books”—and Dickens agreed: “They certainly are in one sense; for a lower average of general information than exists in this country on all other topics it would be very hard to find.” American men chewed tobacco and spit everywhere, incessantly. In four months of touring, from Boston to St. Louis, he found little to admire, much to dislike.

Toward the end of his tour, however, he visited Niagara Falls, and, awed by “nature’s greatest altar,” he momentarily put aside the
annoying Americans. He was seldom sensitive to the presence of the divine, in or out of church, but standing at the foot of the cataract he was moved by powerful intimations of the sacred. "It would be hard for a man to stand nearer God than he does there," he wrote to his close friend John Forster in England:

There was a bright rainbow at my feet; and from that I looked up to—great Heaven! to what a fall of bright green water! The broad, deep, mighty stream seems to die in the act of falling; and, from its unfathomable grave arises that tremendous ghost of spray and mist which is never laid, and has been haunting this place with the same dread solemnity—perhaps from the creation of the world.

In this sublime mood, and with the mighty falls suggesting both Death and Resurrection, his thoughts irresistibly turned to a beloved girl, Mary Hogarth.

His wife's younger sister, Mary Hogarth had died suddenly five years earlier, only seventeen, and since that stunning loss Dickens had revered her as his tutelary angel. In moments of deepest feeling, he sensed "the presence and influence of that spirit which directs my life, and through a heavy sorrow has pointed upwards with unchanging finger for more than four years past."

Now at Niagara Falls, Mary was vividly present, hovering in that "tremendous ghost of spray and mist" which haunted the falls with such "dread solemnity." "When I felt how near to my Creator I was standing," he wrote in American Notes, the travel book he wrote about his visit, "the first effect, and the enduring one—instant and lasting—of the tremendous spectacle was Peace. Peace of Mind, tranquillity, calm recollections of the Dead. . . ." The rest of America was well forgotten, but at Niagara he stood on "Enchanted Ground," where the spirit of his beloved Mary was alive and spoke to him:
What voices spoke from out the thundering water; what faces, faded from the earth, looked out upon me from its gleaming depths; what Heavenly promise glistened in those angels' tears, the drops of many hues that showered around, and twined themselves about the gorgeous arches which the changing rainbows made!

Mary's grave was in Kensal Green Cemetery outside London, and from Niagara he wrote to his friend John Forster: "What would I give if the dear girl whose ashes lie in Kensal-green, had lived to come so far along with us—but she has been here many times, I doubt not, since her sweet face faded from my earthly sight."

Dickens survived Mary Hogarth by more than thirty years, and until he died his love for her was inseparable from his strongest religious feelings: indeed, she was his religion. Hers was the human face of perfect beatitude, and of his own ultimate longings: "peace of mind—tranquillity—great thoughts of eternal rest and happiness."

A quarter century later, he crossed the Atlantic again, this time to give a series of public readings from his works. During his reading tour, he took time out to make a second visit to Niagara Falls—the only spot he had visited in 1842 that he went out of his way to revisit in 1868. It was March; the upstate New York winter had been, as always, frigid and snowy; but as he traveled toward Niagara from Boston, giving readings in Syracuse and Rochester along the way, a rapid thaw dammed the rivers with ice and caused widespread flooding. Syracuse, he observed glumly, was "a very grim place in a heavy thaw, and a most depressing one." Niagara welcomed him with almost providentially fine weather, however. "We have had two brilliant sunny days at Niagara," he wrote to his daughter back in England, "and have seen that wonderful place under the finest circumstances."

Once again, Niagara stirred his deepest feelings; once again, he sensed the immediacy of God. From a vantage point above the falls:
All away to the horizon on our right was a wonderful confusion of bright green and white water. As we stood watching it with our faces to the top of the Falls, our backs were towards the sun. The majestic valley below the Falls, so seen through the vast cloud of spray, was made of rainbow. The high banks, the riven rocks, the forests, the bridge, the buildings, the air, the sky, were all made of rainbow. Nothing in Turner's finest water-colour drawings, done in his greatest day, is so ethereal, so imaginative, so gorgeous in colour, as what I then beheld. I seemed to be lifted from the earth and to be looking into Heaven.

As before, Niagara gave a glimpse of unearthly power and beauty, raising his soul to a higher pitch of awareness. And once again, he hinted to his friend Forster, the transcendent spectacle awakened him to Mary Hogarth's presence: "What I once said to you, as I witnessed the scene five and twenty years ago, all came back at the most affecting and sublime sight. The 'muddy vesture of our clay,'" he misquoted Shakespeare, "falls from us as we look." Though she had now been gone for more than thirty years, Dickens's most powerful emotions and most exalted, even mystical, aspirations still returned to his beloved Mary Hogarth. The spirit of the dead girl rose from the powerful torrent of water roaring down—"dying"—into the chasm, and the cascade itself suggested the rush of emotions evoked by Mary's ghostly presence. It was characteristic of Dickens to be so deeply moved by the thundering violence of the falls, and at the same time by a gentle, gently remembered girl.

His Niagara thoughts on this second visit were not entirely transcendent, however, nor was all his time spent "looking into Heaven." On the same day that he described the sublimity of the falls to Forster, he dispatched a packet to the sub-editor of his magazine *All the Year Round* in London, enclosing (as he cryptically put it) "another letter
from the same to the same.” The second “same,” the recipient of the letter, was his mistress Ellen Ternan, whom he had been eager to bring with him to America but had reluctantly left behind.

Along with the letter for Ellen, he enclosed a “receipt for a small box from Niagara that is to come to the office addressed to me. Please pay all charges on it, and put it (unopened) in my office bedroom to await my coming.” His confidant the sub-editor might have wondered about the exact contents of the mysterious package, but would scarcely have doubted that it was a gift for Ellen. Dickens liked to give her jewelry, in particular, and when not standing enraptured by the magnificent prospects at Niagara he had evidently found time to purchase a (probably not inexpensive) bijou. The spirit of Mary Hogarth, suspended in the mists, had encountered a rival in the warmly embodied Ellen Ternan. The two absent women both stirred his strongest emotions—but while Mary drew his thoughts upward, Ellen drew them down to earth, to the moment when, back in England, he could once again embrace her.

Thus the virgin icon and the mistress came together at Niagara Falls—and in this curious meeting, we glimpse some of the contradictions of Dickens in love.

Scarcely two years after this second visit to Niagara Falls, he was dead, buried in Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey: near the grave of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose bones had lain beneath the Abbey floor for almost five hundred years; of Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s friend and rival; of John Dryden, the first poet laureate; of John Gay, author of The Beggar’s Opera; of Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century monarch of letters. A distinguished company of writers and poets—but none of his silent companions had possessed the fancy and fertility of Dickens. His only peer in that respect was the playwright buried in Stratford.

Three months before his death, Dickens had been honored by a private audience with Queen Victoria: a meeting, it was said, of the most famous woman and most famous man in England. For all his
fame, however, and despite the distinction of Poets’ Corner, he was buried quietly—indeed, secretly.

Two decades earlier, a million and a half spectators had crowded the streets of London for the Duke of Wellington’s funeral procession. With six regiments of infantry, eight squadrons of cavalry, and seventeen rolling guns, the procession took two hours to file past. The duke’s body was carried in an ornate eighteen-ton bronze carriage, twenty-seven feet long, drawn by twelve black draft horses; as many as eighteen thousand people jammed into St. Paul’s for the service. Dickens had censured the gaudy spectacle: “the more truly great the man,” he asserted, “the more truly little the ceremony.”

His own body was smuggled into the Abbey surreptitiously, with only a dozen or so mourners and a handful of early-morning tourists in attendance. A plain, private service had been his own dictate, for he detested funeral ostentation; but the modesty of his funeral had a fitting symbolism as well, bringing his life full circle.

He had arrived in the world obscurely. His father had been an unimportant clerk in the Navy pay office; his father’s parents had been servants. From modest circumstances, the Dickenses sank even lower, into bankruptcy and embarrassment. When Charles was twelve, his father was imprisoned for debt, and while his mother and younger siblings moved with him into debtors’ prison in London, young Charles was sent to work in a shoe-blacking factory, “a crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats.” A bright, ambitious boy with hopes for education and gentility, he found himself a working drudge. The poignant tale of the sensitive, neglected boy toiling in the blacking factory and wandering alone and unprotected through the streets of London is well known, for it was related by a master storyteller—Dickens himself, the only source for the story.

This boyhood experience of insecurity, indignity, poverty, and menial employment helped form some of the salient qualities of his character—his determination, his drive, his perseverance, his work
ethic, his earnestness. His parents had failed him; he would not fail himself.

A self-made man, he was an exemplary figure of his dynamic, striving times, the age of “steamboats, viaducts and railways,” as Wordsworth put it; the age of telegraph, Crystal Palace, and Empire. Victorian writers were no less industrious than the engineers, entrepreneurs, explorers, speculators, and navvies. Dickens’s contemporary Anthony Trollope wrote forty-seven novels (three times as many as Dickens, the Trollope Society likes to point out), rising at four each morning and writing without pause from five to eight—before heading off to his full-time job, for he was also a busy bureaucrat in the Post Office. Trollope’s mother, Frances, had been a novelist, too; publishing her first book at fifty-two, she went on to publish forty more over the next twenty-five years. Dickens attributed his own success to “a patient and continuous energy.” “I have been very fortunate in worldly matters,” his autobiographical character David Copperfield remarks; “many men have worked much harder, and not succeeded half so well; but I never could have done what I have done, without the habits of punctuality, order, and diligence, without the determination to concentrate myself on one object at a time.”

If in his indefatigable activity Dickens was a man of his times, he was unique in a second and rarer quality—his extraordinary inventive powers. His energy was a steam engine, his imagination the winged horse Pegasus.

This fertile tension between force and fancy was paralleled by other inconsistencies. Like David Copperfield, for example, he was punctual, diligent, and orderly—almost excessively so. He had a rage for tidiness: “There never existed, I think, in all the world, a more thoroughly tidy or methodical creature than was my father,” his eldest daughter Mary recollected. “He was tidy in every way—in his mind, in his handsome and graceful person, in his work, in his large correspondence, in fact in his whole life.” He was strongly domestic, “full of the kind of interest in a house which is commonly confined to women,” inspecting
every room daily, “and if a chair was out of place, or a blind not quite straight, or a crumb left on the floor, woe betide the offender.” Many years later, his second daughter Katie told a friend that as girls, she and her sister were allowed to arrange and decorate their bedroom as they pleased, “so long as the room was kept tidy and neat.” This neatness also applied to their dresser drawers, which their father periodically inspected—at one time every day—in common with his visits to other rooms in the house—“and if their contents were not found to be in apple-pie order they quickly had to be rendered so.”

He was dapper in dress, with a penchant for bright, even flashy, waistcoats, admitting “that he had the fondness of a savage for finery.” He “liked a tidy head,” his daughter Katie recalled, “and if when he went out into the garden a wind blew his hair about, and he caught sight of his dishevelled locks in a mirror, he would ‘fly for his hairbrush.’” (A fellow diner at a London restaurant was once amazed when Dickens “took out a pocket-comb and combed his hair and whiskers, or rather his goatee, at the table”; two days later the same observer at the same restaurant “saw Dickens again, and a recapitulation of the comb process.”) He couldn’t begin his morning writing session until his writing implements and the bric-a-brac on his desk (including an indispensable figurine of two frogs dueling with swords) were perfectly disposed, but in thirty-five years of writing to deadline—all his novels were written as weekly or monthly serials—he missed a deadline only once, and then only because he was stunned by Mary Hogarth’s death. “His punctuality,” his daughter remembered, “was almost painful.”

In 1846, he spent the summer and autumn in Switzerland. Earlier, he had spent a year in Italy, which he found dirty and disorderly. “The condition of the common people here is abject and shocking,” he wrote of Naples:

I am afraid the conventional idea of the picturesque is associated with such misery and degradation that a new
picturesque will have to be established as the world goes onward. Except Fondi [a town outside Naples], there is nothing on earth that I have seen so dirty as Naples. I don’t know what to liken the streets to where the mass of the lazaroni live. You recollect that favorite pigstye of mine near Broadstairs? They are more like streets of such apartments heaped up story on story, and tumbled house on house, than anything else I can think of, at this moment.

Switzerland, by contrast, was an Eden of tidiness:

The country is delightful in the extreme—as leafy, green, and shady, as England; full of deep glens and branchy places . . . , and bright with all sorts of flowers in profusion. It abounds in singing birds besides—very pleasant after Italy; and the moonlight on the lake is noble. . . . The cultivation is uncommonly rich and profuse. There are all manner of walks, vineyards, green lanes, cornfields, and pastures full of hay. The general neatness is as remarkable as in England. . . . The people appear to be industrious and thriving.

The peasantry were “admirably educated . . . and always prepared to give a civil and pleasant answer.” His Swiss servants, “taken at hazard from the people of the town,” were exemplary: “I never saw more obliging servants . . . and in point of cleanliness, order, and punctuality to the moment, they are unrivalled.”

But even as he loved the trim and tidy, he was fascinated by disorder and uproar, and the placidity of the Swiss began to oppress him. Of Lausanne, he observed that “The Genius of Dullness seems to brood over the town.” He missed the noisy jostling streets of London, and found it difficult to write without them. “The absence of any accessible streets continues to worry me,” he fretted. “At night, I want them beyond description. I don’t seem able to get rid of my spectres
unless I can lose them in crowds." His restless energies and lively imagination sought an active, crowded stage. The absence of busy streets caused him "giddiness and headache," he complained, and he began to think the Swiss were made "despondent and sluggish in their spirits by the great mass of still water, Lake Leman." On the other hand, "The sight of the rushing Rhone [in Geneva] seemed to stir my blood again."

His appetite for rush and violence was even more evident in an arduous climb up Mount Vesuvius in 1845, the year before his Swiss sojourn. He had arranged to ascend the mountain at night, to enhance the fiery spectacle within the crater. Nearing the top, he admired the moonlit vista below: sea, Naples, and countryside.

The whole prospect is in this lovely state when we come upon the platform on the mountain-top—the region of Fire—an exhausted crater formed of great masses of gigantic cinders, like blocks of stone from some tremendous waterfall, burnt up; from every chink and crevice of which, hot sulphurous smoke is pouring out: while, from another conical-shaped hill, the present crater, rising abruptly from this platform at the end, great sheets of fire are streaming forth: reddening the night with flame, blackening it with smoke, and spotting it with red-hot stones and cinders, that fly up into the air like feathers, and fall down like lead. What words can paint the gloom and grandeur of this scene!

He was eager to climb to the higher, active crater: "There is something in the fire and roar, that generates an irresistible desire to get nearer to it. We cannot rest long, without starting off, two of us, on our hands and knees, accompanied by the head-guide, to climb to the brim of the flaming crater, and try to look in." Prudently remaining below, the rest of the climbing party "yell, as with one voice, that it is a dangerous proceeding, and call to us to come back": 
What with their noise, and what with the trembling of the thin crust of ground, that seems about to open underneath our feet and plunge us in the burning gulf below (which is the real danger, if there be any); and what with the flashing of the fire in our faces, and the shower of red-hot ashes that is raining down, and the choking smoke and sulphur; we may well feel giddy and irrational like drunken men. But, we contrive to climb up to the brim, and look down, for a moment, into the Hell of boiling fire below.

And yet this was the man whose dueling-frogs figurine had to be precisely in its assigned position before he could dip his pen in the inkwell.

His love of order and fascination with violence often rub against each other in his fiction. Novel after novel presents scenes of tidy, cozy homes. In *David Copperfield*, the Peggotty family lives in a beached boat, snug and shipshape, "beautifully clean inside, and as tidy as possible." Visiting this boat-house, young David Copperfield is shown to his bedroom, "the completest and most desirable bedroom ever seen—in the stern of the vessel; with a little window, where the rudder used to go through; a little looking-glass, just the right height for me, nailed against the wall, and framed with oyster-shells; a little bed, which there was just room enough to get into; and a nosegay of seaweed in a blue mug on the table. The walls were whitewashed as white as milk, and the patchwork counterpane made my eyes quite ache with its brightness." Such snugness appealed deeply to Dickens, satisfying both his need for order and his wistfulness for childhood's small world.

Yet his novels betray, too, his attraction to chaos and violence. In his novel of the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities*, he was both appalled and excited by the fury of the Paris mob:

"... The Bastille!"

With a roar that sounded as if all the breath in France had been shaped into the detested word, the living sea
rose, wave on wave, depth on depth, and overflowed the
city to that point. Alarm-bells ringing, drums beating,
the sea raging and thundering on its new beach, the attack
began.

The mob presses the attack: “Flashing weapons, blazing torches,
smoking waggon-loads of wet straw, hard work at neighbouring bar-
ricades in all directions, shrieks, volleys, execrations, bravery without
stint, boom, smash and rattle, and the furious sounding of the living
sea.” The bloodthirsty Madame Defarge is the harpy-heroine of
the assault, and when the governor of the Bastille is hauled out and
murdered by a “rain of stabs and blows,” she pounces on his corpse:
“When he dropped dead . . . she put her foot upon his neck, and
with her cruel knife—long ready—hewed off his head.” Then “the
sea rushed on”:

The sea of black and threatening waters, and of destruc-
tive upheaving of wave against wave, whose depths were
yet unfathomed and whose forces were yet unknown.
The remorseless sea of turbulently swaying shapes,
voices of vengeance, and faces hardened in the furnaces
of suffering until the touch of pity could make no mark
on them.

Dickens the bourgeois Victorian householder was horrified by his
own vivid imagining of such mayhem and butchery—and yet sym-
pathetic, too. He could imagine himself one of the mob, but also
one of its victims—one of the heads borne aloft on pikes, “whose
drooping eyelids and half-seen eyes awaited the Last Day. Impassive
faces, yet with a suspended—not an abolished—expression on them;
faces, rather, in a fearful pause, as having yet to raise the dropped
lids of the eyes, and bear witness with the bloodless lips, ‘THOU
DIDST IT!’”
Tidiness, punctuality, and domestic coziness . . . volcanoes, storms, rampaging mobs, and murder: such inconsistencies and conflicts fueled his genius.

Other contradictions abound. He admired “the great progress of the country . . . of Railway construction, of Electric Telegraph discovery, of improvements in Machinery.” He demanded that his sons “be trained in the spirit of the Time,” and thought it would be “horrible” if his eldest son “were to get hold of any conservative or High church notions.” He regarded every era before his own as benighted if not barbaric, with the middle ages a particular horror. “Dickens was a pure modernist,” John Ruskin scoffed, “a leader of the steam-whistle party par excellence—and he had no understanding of any power of antiquity except a sort of jackdaw sentiment for cathedral towers.” And yet despite his progressive zeal, he was deeply nostalgic, strongly in the grip of his own past.

He was gregarious and sociable, and an exuberant performer who loved to organize theatricals and act the leading roles, and to read aloud from his own works. Behind his gusto and bonhomie, he maintained a deep reserve, however. He kept his childhood employment in the blacking factory a close secret for a quarter of a century, even from his wife. He admitted to being “chary of shewing my affections, even to my children, except when they are very young.” One of his sons, Henry, testified to his father’s “intense dislike of ‘letting himself go’ in private life or of using language which might be deemed strained or over-effusive,” and recalled an example. After his first year at Cambridge, Henry won a scholarship from his college. Driving a carriage to the train station near their home in Kent, Gad’s Hill, to meet his father, arriving on the train from London, Henry announced the triumph. Dickens’s congratulations were perfunctory:

He said, “Capital! capital!”—nothing more. Disappointed to find that he received the news apparently so lightly, I
took my seat beside him in the pony carriage he was driving. Nothing more happened until we had got halfway to Gad’s Hill, when he broke down completely. Turning towards me with tears in his eyes and giving me a warm grip of the hand, he said, “God bless you, my boy; God bless you!”

Though reluctant to betray emotion to his son, Dickens wept openly at the theater and delighted in extracting tears from his own audiences when he read or acted.

He could in fact be highly sentimental, and none of his novels is wholly free of lachrymose indulgences. One of his most notable triumphs in this way was the death of the heroine Little Nell in his fourth novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Thousands of readers wept as Nell languished—as did Dickens himself. “I am breaking my heart over this story, and cannot bear to finish it,” he wrote as Nell lay dying, and two weeks later (it took her many chapters to die), he lamented that “I am slowly murdering that poor child, and grow wretched over it. It wrings my heart.” As Nell’s end grew yet closer, he felt himself “the most wretched of the wretched”:

It casts the most horrible shadow upon me, and it is as much as I can do to keep moving at all. I tremble to approach the place. . . . I shan’t recover it for a long time. Nobody will miss her like I shall. It is such a painful thing to me, that I really cannot express my sorrow.

And finally having dispatched Little Nell, he sighed: “I am, for the time being, nearly dead with work—and grief for the loss of my child.”

One reader deeply touched by Nell’s death was William Bradbury, a partner in the firm of Bradbury and Evans, Dickens’s publishers. A few years earlier, Bradbury had lost a young daughter, and as he narrated Nell’s slow dying, Dickens kept people like Bradbury in mind:
“I resolved to try and do something which might be read by people about whom Death had been,—with a softened feeling, and with consolation.” He was gratified when Bradbury wrote an appreciative note: “I was moved to have poor Bradbury’s note yesterday, and was glad to think he felt as I would have had him.”

But he “who wrote so tenderly, so sentimentally, so gushingly,” an acquaintance observed, “had a strain of hardness in his nature which was like a rod of iron in his soul.” In 1854, Dickens described with comic zest a boy’s death in a London street accident:

You know my man Cooper? Steady stupid sort of highly respectable creature? . . . Eldest boy 13 years old, “working” (I can’t conceive how) at a Mathematical Instrument Maker’s . . . On Tuesday night, the boy did not come home. Mother half distracted, and getting up at 5 in the morning to go and look for him. Father went out after breakfast, to do likewise. . . . Father conferring with Policeman on disappearance, up comes strange boy saying that how he as eerd tell, as a boy is a lyin in the “Bonus” [bone-house, or mortuary], as was run over. Wretched father goes to the Bonus . . . and finds his child with his head smashed to pieces! . . . He fell under a coal waggon as it was advancing, and was picked up as Dead as Adam.

Just the year before this joking account of a boy’s death, Dickens had invited his readers to weep at the pathetic death of another boy, Jo the crossing sweeper, a character in *Bleak House*.

Some years later William Bradbury, who had been consoled for the death of his young daughter by Little Nell’s death in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, lost another child—an adult son who took his life by drinking prussic acid. Having in the meantime quarreled with Bradbury, for reasons reflecting badly on himself, Dickens regarded his former friend’s new grief with cold vindictiveness, greeting young Bradbury’s
suicide with gloating satisfaction. "Mr. Henry Bradbury has poisoned himself," he gossiped. "A gloomy professional purchaser of Nos., with a dirty face, . . . . offered to make oath 'wot he dun it in Cremorne in a bottle o' Soda Water. It was last Sunday, wot he knowed Mr. Bradbury well, and he dun it there." Another version had Bradbury's death occurring at his father's house, and Dickens continued:

I cannot say which account is correct—probably neither—but the wretched creature is doubtless dead. . . . Nothing having appeared in the papers, I suppose strong influence to have been used in that wise, to keep the dismal story quiet. Holsworth . . . said that he, the deceased, "had been laying it at Miss Evans's door for her getting married." God knows whether any blurred vision of that most undesirable female with the brass-headed eyes, ever crossed his drunken mind.

He could be not only cold but ruthless. When news of the 1857 Indian Mutiny reached England, he blustered that were he Commander in Chief in India, he would give notice of his intention "to exterminate the Race from the face of the earth, which disfigured the earth with the late abominable atrocities." Three years later, following the Second Opium War, he "spoke with great vehemence against the Chinese" and "believed that if we struck off the heads of 500 mandarins we should achieve more than by the greatest of victories." When a few years later the English governor of Jamaica suppressed a native insurrection with much bloodshed, flogging six hundred and summarily executing more than three hundred, Dickens heartily approved.

He was both pragmatic and idealistic. He was a highly successful entrepreneur and businessman. It was more or less an accident that his first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, was published in monthly numbers, but it proved a happy accident, and he seized on the advantages of
serial publication and exploited them for the rest of his career. He holds a leading place in a nineteenth-century revolution in publishing, a revolution "brought about by attendant revolutions in literacy, real wages, urbanization, industrialization, technology, commerce, finance, transportation, and law, to be sure," as the leading scholar of Dickens's dealings with his publishers, Robert L. Patten, describes it, "but at critical points fuelled and sparked by one writer, Charles Dickens."

His friend and fellow novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton admitted that Dickens was "one of the greatest geniuses in fiction the world has produced," but noted, with less admiration, that Dickens "understands the practical part of Authorship beyond any writer—[Walter] Scott not excepted." In an interview a few weeks before his death, an aspiring young writer was impressed by his charm but also "found Mr. Dickens very practical. He spoke a great deal of the pecuniary advantages to be derived from his profession." He was aggressive and astute in extracting profit from his writings. Knowing that he was more valuable to his publishers than they to him, Dickens discarded them whenever it suited him. By twenty-five, he had already disposed of two and moved on to a third. His dealings were sometimes barely scrupulous, and certainly not high-minded. In disputes with his publishers, Patten admits, "Dickens behaved outrageously at times."

He wrote for money, enjoyed money, and spent liberally. It is a common misconception that he wrote long novels because he was paid by the word, but he was bent on squeezing shillings and pounds from his writing and reputation. His secund imagination was a gift, but writing novels was hard work. "I do not regard successful fiction writing as a thing to be achieved in 'leisure moments,'" he once acidly observed to a genteel amateur. Because fiction-writing was a heavy drain on his energies and provided little income between novels, he established a weekly magazine, *Household Words*, with himself as proprietor, editor, and frequent contributor, to provide him with a steadier income. Falling out with *Household Words*’ publisher, he promptly discontinued it and began another weekly, *All the Year Round*. 
Eventually he realized that he could reap more profit from his fame and histrionic flair by giving public readings from his novels and stories, and for his last dozen years reading tours consumed more of his time, and earned more money, than writing. His letters are full of gleeful financial accountings from these readings, as: “I made last week, clear profit, £340; and have made, in the month of August, a profit of One Thousand Guineas! ... Pretty well, I think?” He gave generously of time and energy to worthy causes, but his almsgiving was modest. In his will, he bequeathed one thousand pounds to his mistress; nothing to charity.

But focusing on Dickens’s hard-edged dealings and business push misses his complexity. He was deeply and ardently idealistic. He entertained romantic notions of the poor and dispossessed—the penniless but cheerful and loving Cratchit family in *A Christmas Carol*, for example. He idealized childhood, and his novels often feature noble-hearted children, preferably orphans, struggling in a world of selfish, rapacious adults; Oliver Twist is only one of many such virtuous orphans.

After his death, eulogies and reminiscences were almost uniformly laudatory, sometimes fulsome. His energetic benevolence was particularly remarked. His best American friend, the Boston publisher J. T. Fields, recalled that in Dickens’s presence “there was perpetual sunshine, and gloom was banished. ... No man suffered more keenly or sympathized more fully than he did with want and misery; but his motto was, ‘Don’t stand and cry; press forward and help remove the difficulty.’”

But a woman friendly with his mistreated wife was less dazzled by Dickens’s radiant virtues: “That man,” she declared, “is a brute.”

These and other contradictions and conflicts flowed into Dickens’s novels: energizing, animating, complicating, enriching them. What did *not* find its way into them was love—or so it would seem. George Orwell, for example, claimed that “sexual love is almost entirely outside his scope.”
In 1847, Dickens was in the midst of *Dombey and Son*, his sixth novel, published serially over the course of a year and a half. *Dombey and Son*’s heroine, Florence, is a girl of impeccable purity and virtue who dedicates herself to her sickly young brother and cruel, autocratic father, and who over the course of the novel weeps eighty-eight times, one reader calculated. The novel lacks a hero and features only the most pallid of romances. Meanwhile, during *Dombey*’s month-by-month progress, *Wuthering Heights* was published. For heroine, *Wuthering Heights* features the recklessly eager Catherine Earnshaw; for hero, the savagely passionate Heathcliff. It seems an anomaly that the immaculate young heroine Florence Dombey should have been created by a thirty-five-year-old man, experienced and worldly, father of half a dozen children, while *Wuthering Heights*’s author “Ellis Bell” was a spinster living in a remote Yorkshire parsonage.

*Wuthering Heights* was Emily Brontë’s first and, as it turned out, only novel. Dickens’s own first novel, *Pickwick Papers*, published a decade earlier, the year Victoria ascended the throne, could scarcely have been more different. Wholly lacking romance, let alone erotic fury, *Pickwick Papers* chronicled the misadventures of a genial old man and his bumbling chums. It had been a great popular success, making Dickens’s reputation, and remained for most of his contemporaries as well as many later readers their favorite among his novels, even as he went on to write fourteen more.

His second novel demonstrated that he was much more than just a comic genius, however. Begun as he was still in the midst of *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist* was strikingly different: a lurid melodrama set among the criminal underworld of London, with orphan pathos and anti-establishment satire. But the hero of *Oliver Twist* is a young boy, who falls not into love but into drawing-room gentility. One of the novel’s two young female characters is, to be sure, a prostitute, compulsively bound to a brutal thug; but *Oliver Twist*’s heroine is an angel, eventually married in the most perfunctory of romances. Oliver Twist the character initiated Dickens’s fictional romance with the lonely
child and orphan, the outcast and powerless. His novels consistently favored such characters, intermittently expanding the sentiment into a reformist agenda. The sparkling humorist of *Pickwick Papers* proved to be, as well, an earnest Victorian moralist.

A few years later, *A Christmas Carol* added to Dickens’s celebrity, casting him in yet another role, as national patron of Christmas cheer and good feeling. But all the various aspects of Dickens, all the busy manifestations of his genius—comic sparkler, reformer and satirist, sentimentalist, champion of the lonely child, purveyor of punchbowl and Christmas turkey—seemed to leave him little time for romance. His energies were expended in so many other directions, perhaps, that he scarcely had time for amorous diversions; or perhaps, one might guess, like many ambitious men he had no capacity for strong personal affections. His early novels, in any event, evince little interest in that powerful engine of human affairs—and of literature—love. The novels’ nods to romance, in getting their young heroes and heroines suitably married, are invariably conventional and tepid. Dickens was thirty-one when he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, and from the evidence of his novels and stories to that point, one might have supposed that he had never been in love, had never known any feelings of desire, passion, or urgency.

In fact, he had loved ardently as a young man—and unsuccessfully. After the failure of that early romance, he was reluctant to revisit the painful feelings in his fiction. But there was another reason he found it difficult to deal with the complex emotions of sexual love. His strongest religious feelings held the feminine spirit in high reverence. For Dickens, the essence of femininity was love, but a love that was self-denying and otherworldly, too ethereal to descend into lower regions of impulse and desire. A pure maiden’s love was daughterly or sisterly, never erotic, and only reluctantly did he concede romance and marriage to his young heroines. His contemporary John Ruskin accused Dickens of killing *Old Curiosity Shop*’s heroine Little Nell for the market, as a butcher kills a lamb; but it would be more accurate
to say that his concession to the market was rather to marry off his heroines. Marriage condemned them to the sorry exigencies of husbands and children; it might gratify the expectations of his readers, but it violated his own idealistic cult of the maiden.

A glance at Shakespeare suggests Dickens's dilemma. With no notion of his heroines as rarefied spirits, Shakespeare made them prompt to fall in love, ready to marry, and quick to seize opportunities. Having known Duke Orsino for only a few days, *Twelfth Night*'s Viola decides that "myself would be his wife" (1.4). Having just met Orlando, *As You Like It*'s Rosalind foresees him as "my child's father" (1.3). Though Rosalind and Viola are irreproachably chaste maidens, Shakespeare did not imagine them possessing any high sanctity or ethereal detachment, nor did he see their sexual warmth opposed to their virtue. By contrast, Dickens savored the celibate sisterly and daughterly vocations of his heroines and shrank from any suggestion of amorous motives. Marriage might be an honorable vocation, as well as a novelist's obligation, but it was nothing he relished, philosophically, and he surrendered his heroines to their earnest suitors with jealous reservations. He would have preferred that they remain vestal.

His religion of feminine self-abnegation had its roots both in his own nature and in the culture of his time, but it was given its specific shape by the death of his beloved young sister-in-law Mary Hogarth when he himself was a young man, a loss affecting him so strongly that for the rest of his life she remained his principal icon of holiness. Dickens critics often disparage his fixation on Mary Hogarth as encouraging his propensity for insipid angelic heroines. Certainly her influence was deep and long-lasting. But even if the saints of his religion were excessively spiritualized maidens—Orwell scoffed at them as "legless angels"—at least they gave Dickens a religion, and one with a generous code of compassion, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. As a theology, it was slight; as an ethic of humility and self-giving, it had much to recommend it. He might have done worse. From time to time he fell into other agitations and enthusiasms, but only in passing;
he never worshiped the gods of politics, prosperity, technology, or science.

Dickens's three loves are three different stories: each revolving about a young woman who had nothing to do with the other two; each occupying a different era of his life; each with a different plot and outcome. And yet taken together, his three loves form a single story, extending across forty years, from his youth to his death.

His first love ended, his second began, in loss. "Does the imagination dwell the most/Upon a woman won or woman lost?" William Butler Yeats would wonder in "The Tower." "If on the lost, admit you turned aside/From a great labyrinth . . ."—the labyrinth, that is, of fully embodied love, with its ambiguous fusion—often confusion—of soul and body. For much of his life, Dickens's imagination brooded tenderly over the two women he had lost, richly poignant memories, sanctified by loss, regret, and time. One became the image of his own vanished youth, the other a ministering angel. Under their charm, his early novels seldom ventured into the labyrinth of Eros. For many years, he loved not a woman, but two vanished spirits.

But twenty years after the death of his young sister-in-law, Dickens fell in love a third time, with revolutionary impact. His affair with a young actress altered his life: fracturing his marriage; rupturing long friendships and business partnerships; drawing him into a double life of public celebrity and esteem on one hand, of guilt, sin, and secrecy on the other. With Ellen Ternan, he entered the labyrinth. This love was no fond memory, no wistful dwelling on a lost ideal, but a passion that possessed him for a dozen years and ended only with his death. Under its influence, his fiction ventured into new regions of feeling. The earlier women he loved gave him models of the Coquette and the Virgin; his later novels probed the mysteries of Venus.

His liaison with Ellen Ternan unsettled basic and longstanding assumptions. His feminine ideal, with the face of Mary Hogarth, had for years inspired him with reverence for maiden devotion and
self-surrender. Pure love was a feminine spirit, so chaste and celestial that it could have no sweaty business with male lovers. Soul and body were uneasy partners; the upward-tending spirit did not embrace, but only tolerated, its bondage to the flesh. It was all very well for light coquettes—of the world, worldly—to flirt and allure. But Dickens’s fictional heroines enact a divine love, sacrificing themselves, Christ-like, to unworthy and ungrateful males—fathers, grandfathers, brothers. If Orwell’s “legless angel” jest oversimplifies these heroines, it is true enough that they seldom seem troubled by desire or temptation; and that they selflessly dedicate themselves to their weak or wretched male kin, rather than wasting their time on lovers.

Dickens never relinquished his cult of the sanctified feminine spirit, but his passion for Ellen Ternan gave flesh to this spirit. She inspired him to devotion, but also enmeshed him in desire; she exalted him, but also entangled him.

Several centuries earlier, John Donne had reflected on love’s intermixture of soul and flesh:

Love’s not so pure, and abstract, as they use
To say, which have no mistress but their Muse,
But as all else, being elemented too,
Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.

(“Love’s Growth”)

For Dickens, Love had never been so fully “elemented”—embodied—as in his desire for Ellen Ternan. The Virgin and Venus, the Muse and the Mistress, love in contemplation and love in action—as these contraries jostled one another in his imagination, his novels grew richer.

Dickens died on a beautiful June afternoon in 1870, at his country house, Gad’s Hill, in rural Kent. He had collapsed at dinner the day before, after writing much of the day in the upper story of his
summer retreat, a miniature Swiss chalet on the grounds of Gad’s Hill.

The next day, he lay unresponsive on a sofa that had been carried into the dining room. Ellen Ternan was summoned. Those of his children within a few hours’ reach of Gad’s Hill kept vigil; the attending doctors shook their heads gravely. "The sweet scent of the flowers he had so much admired floated in through the open doors of the new conservatory," his daughter Katie recalled. "Just before 6 o’clock the breathing became less, and at ten minutes past that hour he gave a deep sigh, a tear rose to his right eye and trickled down his cheek—and he was gone from this world."

A deep sigh and a tear—for what? For leaving the world on a sunny June day, the air sweet with early summer? For the novel left unfinished? For the inevitable regrets of a busy, crowded life?

There was much to regret, certainly, but much accomplishment too. Westminster Abbey awaited him.

Yet the prospect of a grave in Poets’ Corner might have seemed cold consolation, forty years earlier, to a young shorthand reporter who cared for nothing in the world but the pretty, capricious daughter of a London banker. Perhaps his final tear had something to do with that sorrow too.