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FOLKLORE AND FAIRY-TALE ARCHETYPES AS A POETIC MECHANISM OF MORAL MEANING IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

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Abstract

This article investigates the function of folklore and fairy-tale archetypes in the poetics of Charles Dickens, arguing that they operate not as decorative borrowings but as a systematic mechanism for the expression of moral value. While the presence of fairy-tale motifs in Dickens has long been noted, scholarship has tended to register their similarity to folk material rather than to analyse their structural moral function. Taking Oliver Twist (1837–1839) and Great Expectations (1860–1861) as principal cases, and drawing on the wider corpus, the study shows how the fairy-tale opposition of good and evil, the motif of magical transformation, and the figure of the secret benefactor are reworked by Dickens into instruments of ethical analysis. The investigation employs close reading and a comparative-typological method. The findings indicate that the archetypal substratum performs three interrelated tasks: it organizes the moral architecture of the plot, it grounds the reader's confidence in the ultimate meaningfulness of moral choice, and it allows the writer to combine realistic social critique with the affirmation of enduring moral values. The study contributes to an understanding of Dickensian poetics in which folklore is a constitutive rather than an ornamental element.

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1. Introduction

Among the most persistent features of Charles Dickens's art is the presence of motifs, situations and character-types that derive, directly or indirectly, from folklore and the fairy tale. Critics from his earliest biographers onward have observed that his novels are populated by figures who recall the ogres, fairy godmothers, foundlings and transformed paupers of popular tradition, and that his plots frequently move according to a logic closer to the folk tale than to documentary realism. What has been less fully examined is the precise function these archetypes perform within the moral economy of the novels.

The question is more than a matter of source-hunting. Dickens wrote at a moment when the study of folklore was beginning to acquire intellectual prestige and to extend its influence into anthropology, classical philology, history and psychology. Popular tradition was no longer regarded merely as the residue of an unlettered past but as a repository of collective experience and value. To ask how Dickens uses the fairy tale is therefore also to ask how a major realist novelist drew on the moral inheritance of oral culture in order to address the social crises of an industrial age.

The prevailing tendency in scholarship has been to treat the folkloric dimension descriptively — to identify resemblances between Dickensian episodes and their folk analogues — rather than to ask what work the archetypes do. Even the most substantial studies of Dickens and the fairy tale have tended to concentrate on establishing the similarity of his images and situations to folk material, often attributing to his later imagination a deep mysticism that prompted him to seek

hidden meanings in the most ordinary appearances of daily life. Valuable as such work is, it stops short of a functional analysis.

This article proceeds from a different assumption: that in Dickens the fairy-tale substratum is not an ornament added to a realistic surface but a structural mechanism through which moral meaning is organized and conveyed. The archetype, in this account, is a poetic instrument of ethics. It is the means by which the novel articulates its judgements of good and evil, secures the reader's assent to those judgements, and holds together a vision in which unsparing social criticism coexists with an affirmation of enduring human worth.

The influence of oral tradition is felt across the whole of Dickens's development, though its intensity varies. In the early novels he follows largely in the line of the enlightenment moral tale, whereas in his later work the folkloric inheritance becomes more strongly marked and more critically deployed. This article concentrates on two novels that frame this development — Oliver Twist, an early work in which the fairy-tale opposition of innocence and corruption is at its clearest, and Great Expectations, a mature work in which the fairy-tale machinery of the secret benefactor is subjected to a searching moral and realistic critique. The aim is to show, through these two cases and with reference to the wider corpus, that the folkloric archetype in Dickens functions simultaneously as a principle of plot construction, as a guarantee of moral intelligibility, and as a means of reconciling social realism with the affirmation of permanent human values.

2. Materials and Methods

The primary material consists of Dickens's novels Oliver Twist (1837–1839) and Great Expectations (1860–1861), examined in relation to the broader corpus, in particular Our Mutual Friend (1864–1865), in which folkloric figuration is

especially dense. These additional texts function as comparative reference points rather than as objects of equal analysis. The selection is designed to capture both ends of Dickens's career, so that the development of his use of the archetype can be observed rather than merely its presence at a single moment.

The study is qualitative and text-analytical. Two complementary procedures are combined. The first is close reading, applied to selected passages — dream sequences, scenes of revelation, and descriptions of benefactors — at the level of imagery, narrative structure and moral framing. The second is a comparative-typological method, which identifies recurrent archetypal patterns (the opposition of good and evil, magical transformation, the secret benefactor) and traces their reworking across the novels and against their folk analogues. Where relevant, the cultural-historical context of nineteenth-century folklore study is invoked to clarify the intellectual environment in which Dickens's engagement with popular tradition took place.

Methodologically, the analysis treats the archetype not as a static motif to be catalogued but as a dynamic structure whose meaning is realized in its narrative deployment. Attention is therefore directed less to the existence of fairy-tale elements than to their function: to the moral consequences that follow from Dickens's decision to organize a given episode according to fairy-tale logic, and, equally significant, from his decision in the late work to withhold the fairy-tale resolution that the form appears to promise. The selection of passages was guided by their programmatic character — each is a moment in which the moral logic of the archetype is condensed and made visible.

3. Results

3.1. The fairy-tale opposition of good and evil as moral architecture. The analysis confirms that in the early fiction the archetypal opposition of good and evil organizes the moral architecture of the plot. In Oliver Twist innocence is

embodied in a foundling whose purity survives every corrupting pressure, while evil is concentrated in figures who recall the ogres and witches of folk tradition. Fagin presides over his thieves' den like a malevolent enchanter; Bill Sikes is the naked embodiment of brute violence; and Oliver passes among them as the fairy-tale child whose essential goodness no environment can extinguish. The famous scene in which Oliver, dreaming in Fagin's house, half-perceives the menacing faces at the window discloses a central premise of the novel: that goodness is a kind of inviolable memory of an original, undeformed human nature, and that evil is something which adheres to that nature from without without being able wholly to destroy it[1]. The fairy-tale structure here is not decorative; it carries the novel's fundamental moral claim. At the same time Dickens introduces an important qualification of the folk model: unlike a pure fairy tale, his social criticism is specific. It is not civilization as such that corrupts but particular institutions and structures — the workhouse, the court, the prison, the criminal underworld — that are shown to be the bearers of evil.

3.2. The motif of magical transformation as moral metaphor. A second result concerns the motif of magical transformation. In Great Expectations the sudden elevation of the blacksmith's boy Pip to the status of a gentleman is constructed on the model of the fairy tale, in which a poor child is mysteriously raised to fortune by an unseen power. Yet Dickens reworks the motif critically. The transformation proves to be financed not by a benevolent fairy figure but by the convict Magwitch, and the "magic" is revealed as a moral metaphor rather than a supernatural event: the true power to change a destiny lies in human gratitude and self-sacrifice, not in wealth. Here magic is not merely a fantastic element but a

[1]Dickens, Ch. (1838). Oliver Twist. London: Richard Bentley, Ch. 34.

moral metaphor — the capacity of a human being to transform himself and to turn the fate of another towards good is itself a kind of magic, and this magic is embodied in the figure of Magwitch. Where a pure fairy tale would allow the transformation to bring happiness, Dickens, depicting the real texture of life, denies Pip the untroubled good fortune the form seems to promise. The gift of the false gentility severs Pip from the genuine human bonds — with Joe Gargery, with Biddy — that constituted his true moral wealth.

3.3. The secret benefactor and the inversion of patronage. The figure of the hidden benefactor, a staple of folk narrative, is the third archetype examined. In Great Expectations Magwitch acts as Pip's secret patron, providing the means for his rise; but in the novel's resolution the relation is inverted. The once-powerful benefactor becomes helpless, ill and imprisoned, and it is now Pip who extends human care to him[2]. Through this inversion Dickens gives the archetype a philosophical content: true goodness, he suggests, lives not in the one who receives help but in the heart of the one who gives it. The folk pattern is retained, but it is bent towards an ethical conclusion the folk tale itself does not draw. The novel thereby approaches a profound moral idea about debt and conscience: genuine virtue is realized not in the act of receiving but in the act of giving. The completion of Pip's moral development is marked precisely by the moment at which he ceases to regard Magwitch with the gentility-bred revulsion of his earlier self and recognizes in the dying convict a fellow human being deserving of love. Dickens extends this insight into a broader humanist proposition: even those who inhabit the world of crime, even the prisoners of the convict ship, are not "wholly evil." This observation affirms the universal value that a seed of goodness may

[2]Dickens, Ch. (1861). Great Expectations. London: Chapman and Hall, Ch. 39.

exist in a human being under any circumstances whatever. Through the figure of Magwitch the writer places the philosophy of humanity at the very centre of his artistic and ethical conception, and the fairy-tale archetype of the benefactor becomes the vehicle of that philosophy.

3.4. The persistence of moral good under social degradation. A fourth finding concerns the way folkloric figuration allows Dickens to assert the survival of moral good in the most degraded social settings. In Our Mutual Friend the child seamstress Jenny Wren, associated with one of the most notorious districts of London — a place the writer elsewhere called a source of "moral plague" spreading its influence across the kingdom — embodies the idea of sanctity amid squalor. Crippled and prematurely aged by suffering, Jenny is nonetheless endowed with a sense of justice and an almost preternatural ability to perceive the true worth of others; she is described as a child in years but a woman in the trials she has endured and in her self-reliance. The semantic opposition of purity and degradation, drawn from the symbolic logic of folk narrative, becomes a distinctive philosophical feature of Dickensian poetics: the more hostile the environment, the more sharply the incorruptible moral nature of the figure who survives it is thrown into relief. The dwelling-place is read almost as a piece of social reportage, yet through it Dickens fuses realistic depiction with a symbolic, fairy-tale logic in which the heroine retains the moral integrity her surroundings would seem to deny her.

3.5. The archetype as a bridge between realism and moral affirmation. Taken together, these results indicate that the folkloric archetype enables Dickens to combine two impulses that might otherwise pull apart: an unsparing realism in the depiction of social evil, and an affirmation of enduring moral value. The fairy-

tale substratum supplies the second without softening the first, so that the social critique is conducted within a framework that nonetheless preserves confidence in the meaningfulness of moral choice.

4. Discussion

The findings support the view that folklore in Dickens is constitutive rather than ornamental. The fairy-tale opposition of good and evil, the motif of transformation, and the figure of the secret benefactor are not surface decorations but structural devices through which the novels conduct their moral analysis. This has a significant consequence for the interpretation of Dickensian realism: the realism and the fairy-tale logic are not in competition but in collaboration, the latter providing the moral grammar within which the former operates.

It is notable, however, that the function of the archetype changes across Dickens's career. In the early Oliver Twist the fairy-tale structure is affirmative: innocence is vindicated and virtue rewarded. In the mature Great Expectations the same structures are retained but their resolutions are withheld or complicated; the magical transformation does not secure happiness, and the benefactor's gift becomes a moral burden as much as a blessing. The archetype thus becomes, in the later work, an instrument of irony as well as of affirmation.

This development aligns with the broader movement of Dickens's moral thought, in which the early confidence in the triumph of good gives way to a more complex and qualified vision. The folkloric material is not abandoned in the later novels; rather, it is subjected to critical pressure, so that the distance between the consoling pattern of the folk tale and the harsher logic of social reality itself becomes a source of meaning.

A further implication concerns the relation between ethics and aesthetics. The analysis suggests that, in Dickens, the moral content of an episode is inseparable

from its archetypal form: to recognize the fairy-tale structure of a scene is already to grasp its moral claim. The archetype is, in this sense, a point at which aesthetic organization and ethical judgement coincide.

It is worth emphasizing, finally, that Dickens's reworking of folk material is never naive. He was acutely aware of the gap between the consolations of the fairy tale and the conditions of industrial society, and he exploited that gap deliberately. When, in the late fiction, he sets the expectation of a magical rescue against the refusal of the social world to provide one, the disappointment is itself a moral statement: it directs the reader's attention away from the hope of miraculous deliverance and towards the concrete human acts — care, gratitude, self-sacrifice — in which, for Dickens, the only real magic resides.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that folklore and fairy-tale archetypes function in the novels of Charles Dickens as a systematic mechanism for the expression of moral meaning. Through the fairy-tale opposition of good and evil, the motif of magical transformation, and the figure of the secret benefactor, the archetypal substratum organizes the moral architecture of the plot, grounds the reader's confidence in the meaningfulness of moral choice, and enables the combination of realistic social critique with the affirmation of permanent values.

The comparison of Oliver Twist and Great Expectations has shown that the function of the archetype is not constant: it is affirmative in the early fiction and increasingly ironic in the mature work, where the fairy-tale resolution is withheld and the distance between consoling pattern and social reality itself becomes meaningful. In this respect the folkloric dimension of Dickens's art participates fully in the development of his moral vision rather than standing apart from it.

The principal contribution of the study is to reframe folklore in Dickens as a constitutive element of his poetics. Further research might extend the analysis to the late novels in order to specify more precisely how the critical reworking of fairy-tale structures contributes to the darker moral world of Dickens's final period.

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