

Under Sir Pickwick's Hat: Impressions And Revelations Of 19th Century England

Otávio Detoni¹

¹(Department Of Human Sciences, University Of The State Of Minas Gerais)

Abstract:

This article presents a critical analysis of "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" by Charles Dickens, with an emphasis on its significance as a historical-cultural and literary document of the 19th century. It argues that the work transcends its merely literary role, offering a multifaceted representation of English society during the Industrial Revolution era. Through an interdisciplinary approach, it examines how Dickens skillfully interweaves narrative and socio-historical elements to provide a comprehensive view of the transformations and complexities of Victorian England. By means of detailed analyses of key passages, the author's ability to explore themes such as social inequality, justice, and the effects of technology on the society of the time is highlighted. Furthermore, the role of the work as a catalyst for reflections on contemporary issues is discussed, evidencing its ongoing relevance in literary, historical, and social studies. It concludes that "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" not only offers a vivid representation of 19th-century England but also serves as a starting point for more in-depth investigations into the intersections between literature, history, and society.

Key Word: Charles Dickens; Industrial revolution; Interdisciplinary analysis; Victorian society.

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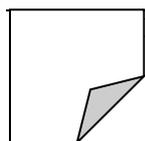
I. Introduction

Charles Dickens, a luminary of the Victorian era, gifted us with a literary work that transcends mere entertainment to establish itself as a true historical and cultural document. "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club," his pioneering foray into the novel published in serial form between 1836 and 1837, emerges not only as a milestone in his career but also as an open window into 19th-century England. Through the vicissitudes of Samuel Pickwick and the other members of the fictitious Pickwick Club, Dickens paints a vivid and detailed portrait of English society, marked by a period of transition and transformation.

This article argues that immersing in the reading of "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" is akin to taking a detailed tour of 19th-century England, an era defined by the shadows and lights of the Industrial Revolution. Dickens' meticulous descriptions entertain as much as they serve as a lecture on customs, political issues, and, primarily, the cultural and social impact of the Industrial Revolution. Thus, this novel transcends its playful nature to establish itself as a primary source of knowledge about the complex social, economic, and political dynamics of that time.

The importance of "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" extends beyond its literary contribution; it is a vehicle for understanding the clash between the old and the new, between ingrained traditions and the disruptive innovations brought by industrialization. By exploring this novel, readers are invited to witness the transformations that shaped English society, from the rural landscapes that gradually gave way to factories and chimneys to the changes in lifestyles and social structures. Therefore, this article seeks to illuminate how "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" not only marks a high point in English literature but also serves as a prism through which we can observe and analyze the repercussions of the Industrial Revolution in 19th-century England.

The article contributes interdisciplinarily, for it not only sheds light on the historical period but demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Dickens' work, encouraging a dialogue between literature, history, and social studies that can foster new research and understandings. Beyond this brief introduction, the text is divided into three further sections. The second section generally highlights what previous studies reveal about the economic and social transformations experienced by England during the Industrial Revolution. This bibliographic examination provides a theoretical and contextual background for the subsequent analysis. In the third section, we dive directly into Dickens' work to extract and discuss excerpts that illustrate the "shadows and lights of the Industrial Revolution." This segment seeks to demonstrate, through concrete examples from the narrative, how Dickens captured the essence of his era's social and economic changes. Finally, the fourth section presents a set of



concluding considerations, where the insights generated by the analysis are synthesized, reinforcing the importance of the work as a source of reflection on the Victorian era, a period of intense social and economic change.

II. The Force Of The Industrial Revolution: A Panorama Of 19th Century England

The Industrial Revolution, initiated in the 18th century, reached its zenith in 19th century England, positioning the country as the epicenter of an unprecedented global transformation. This period of intense technological innovation and economic expansion profoundly reshaped the English economy, society, and environment, laying the groundwork for the modern world. The mechanization of production, the consolidation of the factory system, and the expansion of railways not only accelerated the transition to an industrial economy but also reconfigured the urban and social fabric of the nation (Saes & Saes, 2013; Hobsbawm, 2003; Borges, 2011).

Massive urbanization was a direct consequence of industrialization, with a substantial migration of the rural population towards cities, driven by the promise of factory jobs. This transition caused a profound restructuring of society, altering family dynamics, labor relations, and community organization. The accelerated urbanization exacerbated social problems, such as unsanitary housing, precarious working conditions, and increasing environmental pollution, triggering a series of social movements and reforms aimed at mitigating these negative impacts (Hobsbawm, 2003; Teixeira, 1995; Wrigley & Wrigley, 1990).

The 19th century was marked by a surge of technological innovations, with the steam engine being one of the most emblematic. These innovations dramatically increased efficiency in production and transportation, revolutionizing not just the textile industry but also sectors like mining, metallurgy, and transportation. The development of railways transformed the English landscape, connecting distant cities, facilitating trade, and promoting an unprecedented economic integration (Dathe, 2003; Hobsbawm, 2003; Wrigley & Wrigley, 1990).

The economy experienced exponential growth, driven by increased industrial productivity. The transition from agricultural labor to mechanized industrial processes not only revolutionized production but also transformed the nature of work, creating new social classes and redefining power relations within society. The emergence of an urban working class, alongside a rising industrial bourgeoisie, highlighted the growing economic and social disparities. The rise of factories and the consequent decline in traditional agriculture displaced thousands of rural workers, forcing them to migrate to already overcrowded cities in search of work. In these industrial cities, many found only poorly paid jobs in deplorable working conditions, unsanitary housing, and a precarious existence. While industrialization promoted efficiency and economic growth, it exacerbated class division, creating an ever-widening gap between a wealthy industrial elite and an impoverished working class (Saes & Saes, 2013; Hobsbawm, 2003; Wrigley & Wrigley, 1990; Teixeira, 1995).

Rapid industrialization also brought serious challenges to public health and the environment. The concentration of factories, coupled with the intensive burning of coal, generated alarming levels of air and water pollution, directly affecting the quality of life in industrial cities (Pott & Estrela, 2017).

The Industrial Revolution significantly expanded the reach of global trade, with England emerging as a leading economic power. The development of transportation infrastructures, such as railways and steamships, allowed for a faster and more efficient exchange of goods and ideas, consolidating England's position on the world stage and laying the groundwork for globalization.

In summary, the Industrial Revolution in 19th century England was a period of profound transformations, characterized by technological advances, economic and social changes, environmental and health challenges, and a lasting impact on culture and global society. This context established the foundations upon which the modern world would be built, highlighting the complexity and challenges of this transformative era.

The image I below vividly exemplifies the process of urbanization, capturing the transformation of the natural and social landscape from an agrarian state to an industrialized society. To the left, idyllic rurality is characterized by open spaces, cultivated land, and a life centered around nature and agricultural activities. The presence of people and animals in harmony with the environment reinforces the sense of a community based on sustainable and traditional subsistence practices.

In direct contrast, on the right, the image reveals urban expansion with all its typical elements: factories that mark the landscape with their tall chimneys, a significantly greater population density, and an atmosphere choked by pollution. Residential and industrial structures are piled upon each other, reflecting the vertical growth and spatial compaction of urbanization. People here are immersed in labor activities associated with the industry, highlighting the change in the way of life and work relations resulting from the Industrial Revolution.

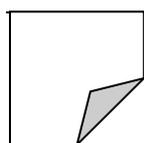


Image I: From Pastoral Green to Industrial Grey: The Dual Realities of Progress



DALL·E was the tool used by the author to generate the image (OpenAI's AI tool).

III. A Tour Through England In The Throes Of The Industrial Revolution

"The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" by Charles Dickens is a literary time capsule that transports readers to 19th-century England. Through its vivid descriptions, multifaceted characters, and exploration of social themes, Dickens not only entertains but also offers a penetrating critique of the society of his time. This section analyzes how the literary elements of the work contribute to an immersion in the Victorian era. It is worth mentioning that the excerpts from the work discussed are from a Portuguese version translated and published under the title "As Aventuras do Sr. Pickwick" by Globo in 2012. Therefore, the quotations have been retranslated into English by the author.

Dickens's characters are notable for their diversity and complexity, reflecting the various facets of English society. Samuel Pickwick, with his optimism and benevolence, contrasts with characters of dubious morality or from distinct social classes, illustrating the complex social stratification of the time. The interactions between the members of the Pickwick Club and the various characters they meet on their journeys reveal the tensions and social dynamics, especially in relation to the emerging classes and the impact of industrialization on human relations. Through these interactions, Dickens explores solidarity, conflict, and the comedy inherent in social relations, offering a rich perspective on Victorian society.

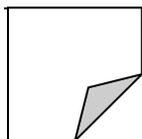
"This hereby establishes the Correspondent Society of the Pickwick Club; and Samuel Pickwick, Esq., P.G.M.C.P., Tracy Tupman, Esq., M.C.P., Augustus Snodgrass, Esq., M.C.P., and Nathaniel Winkle, Esq., M.C.P., are hereby elected and appointed members of the same; charged with presenting, from time to time, to the Pickwick Club, based in London, authentic reports of their journeys and investigations, their observations on characters and customs, and the entirety of their adventures, as well as all narratives and documents that may originate from the local scenes or societies." (Dickens, 2012, pp. 12-13).

This passage clearly establishes the narrative and social purpose of "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" by Charles Dickens. By creating the Correspondent Society of the Pickwick Club, Dickens not only provides a pretext for the physical and observational journeys of the characters but also establishes a framework through which he can explore and comment on the varied aspects of 19th-century English society.

This structure allows Dickens to address a wide range of themes, from human peculiarities to deeper criticisms of social injustices, all while maintaining the light and humorous tone that characterizes the work. The account of the journeys and adventures of the Club's members serves as a vehicle for a detailed exploration of the customs, politics, law, and economy of the time, presenting the reader with a vivid and diversified panorama of English life.

Every adventure, encounter, and observation reported by the members of the Pickwick Club provides Dickens with the opportunity to weave sharp social commentary, often disguised as humor. Through the lenses of Samuel Pickwick and his companions, the reader is introduced to a variety of characters and situations that reflect the complexities, contradictions, and beauties of their society.

"There are in London several old inns that were once headquarters for famous stagecoaches, in the days when stagecoaches traveled in a more stately and solemn manner than today; but that have now degenerated into little more than depots for country carts. The reader would search in vain for some of these old inns among the Crosses, the Bulls, and the Golden Mouths that today raise their majestic frontages in the improved streets of London. If you wish to alight at one of these old hostels, you must direct your steps to the darker quarters of the city; and there, in some secluded corner, you will find several that still stand with a kind of melancholic stubbornness amidst the modern innovations that surround them." (Dickens, 2012, p. 123).



This passage describes the transition of London from an era marked by stagecoaches and the inns that served as their headquarters to an age of modernization and urban change. The inns, once vibrant centers of activity and commerce, now relegated to depots for country carts, symbolize the rapid evolution of the city and the disappearance of older forms of life and business.

The description evokes a sense of nostalgia for old London, a city transformed by industrialization and urban progress. The "Crosses, the Bulls, and the Golden Mouths" that "raise their majestic frontages" represent not just the architecture of the time but also the rich tapestry of stories and cultures that these inns harbored. At the same time, the passage speaks of a loss, suggesting that the essence and character of these historical places are being erased by modernity.

The mention of the "darker quarters of the city" where these inns can be found emphasizes the marginalization of certain traditions and ways of life in the face of the relentless advance of modernization. These inns, standing with "a kind of melancholic stubbornness," symbolize resistance against forgetting and homogenization, offering a glimpse of the past amidst the constantly changing urban landscape.

This transition captured in the passage reflects the broader themes of change, loss, and resistance in the face of the inevitability of progress, an echo of the tensions between the old and the new that permeate the history of many cities around the world during periods of intense urban and industrial transformation.

"It may be my imagination, or it may be that I cannot entertain the place with the old memories it awakens, but the fact is that I cannot bear this stretch of London. The street is wide, the shops are spacious, the noise of the vehicles that pass, the footsteps of an endless torrent of pedestrians — all the active sounds of traffic resonate from morning to night; but the adjacent streets are narrow and dirty; misery and debauchery swarm in the teeming alleys..." (Dickens, 2012, p. 279).

This passage reflects a profound and emotive observation on the contrast between the visible prosperity on London's main streets and the hidden misery in its alleys and side streets. The narrator expresses a personal aversion to this part of the city, not just because of the visual and auditory pollution, but also due to the sharp contrast between wealth and poverty, between the frenetic movement of commerce and the stagnation of human suffering in the adjacent areas.

The description of the street as wide and the shops as spacious starkly contrasts with the characterization of the adjacent streets as narrow and dirty, where "misery and debauchery swarm." This contrast is not only physical but also symbolic, representing the social and economic divisions of the city. This passage is an example of Dickens's skill in using the description of urban environments not just to set the scene for his narratives, but also to comment on the social conditions of his time. In doing so, he not only captures the complexity of urban life but also challenges readers to recognize and reflect on the injustices that surround apparent prosperity.

The mention of traffic and transport in this passage is crucial to understanding the broader context of the urban environment and the social dynamics of the depicted era. Traffic is not just a physical detail; it's an element that symbolizes the acceleration of urban life, the expansion of commerce, and the technological and infrastructural transformation of cities during the 19th century.

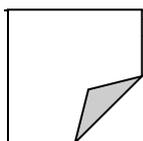
The reference to "passing vehicles" and the "steps of an endless torrent of pedestrians" vividly illustrates the pulse of life in the metropolis, marked by the constant movement of people and goods. This incessant movement reflects the economic growth and accelerated urbanization, which brought with them both advancements and social problems. The dominant presence of transport in urban life also highlights the importance of mobility in the industrial era, both in terms of economic efficiency and social divisions.

On one hand, the improvement of transport facilitated trade, communication, and urban expansion, contributing to the economic and cultural dynamism of large cities. On the other hand, the passage suggests that this progress had a significant human cost, exacerbating social inequalities and leading to confinement and misery in the less favored areas. The main streets, with their thriving traffic and commerce, contrast sharply with the "teeming alleys" of poverty and suffering, revealing the complexity of urban transformations and their divergent impacts on different segments of the population.

This passage encapsulates the vitality of London, a metropolis in full expansion thanks to industrialization. Dickens does not focus directly on technology; instead, he uses urbanization as an omnipresent backdrop for his stories. London, vibrant and always in motion, serves as a symbol of the new urban reality created by the Industrial Revolution, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges generated by this process of change.

"As they rolled through the narrow arteries that led to the heart of the city, the spectacle and noise of serious labor struck their senses more violently. The streets, filled with workers. The whisper of labor resounded from every house; lights shone in every window up to the top floors, and the rumble of machines and the noise of wheels shook the trembling walls. The fires, whose sad and livid reflections could be seen miles away, blazed furiously in the great factories of the city. The panting of steam, the clinking of hammers, the rattling of engines constituted the rough music that rose from all quarters." (Dickens, 2012, p. 667).

This passage vividly captures the atmosphere of the Industrial Revolution, portraying the radical transformation of cities and people's lives during this period. The focus on workers, on streets full of activity, on



the ceaseless labor within houses, and on the omnipresent presence of machines and factories reflects the profound impact of industrialization on society. The description of light shining in every window, the rumble of machines, and the sad and livid reflections of the fires from the factories illustrates not just the intensity of industrial labor, but also suggests the dehumanizing and alienating effects of life in the industrialized city.

The mention of the "panting of steam, the clinking of hammers, the rattling of engines" as "rough music" is particularly evocative, suggesting that the industrial environment is not just physical, but also auditory, dominating the landscape with the incessant noise of production. This "music" can be interpreted both as a symbol of progress and as a reminder of the often brutal and relentless conditions under which workers of the industrial era had to labor.

"After careful study of Mr. Pickwick's notes on the four towns, Stroud, Rochester, Chatham, and Brompton, we find no significant divergence between his impressions and those of other travelers who have trodden the same ground. His general description can be easily summarized. 'The main productions of these towns,' says Mr. Pickwick, 'appear to be soldiers, sailors, Jews, chalk, shrimps, officials, and dockworkers. The goods mainly exposed for sale in the public streets are nautical provisions, toffees, apples, soles, and oysters. The streets present a lively and animated aspect, mainly caused by the sociability of the military. It is truly delightful for a philanthropic spirit to see these brave men staggering under the influence of an excess of spirits as lively as they are fiery; especially considering that following them and mocking them provides cheap and indecent amusement for all the boys in town. Nothing,' adds Mr. Pickwick, 'can exceed their good humor. On the eve of my arrival, one of them had been grossly insulted in a tavern. The maid had flatly refused to give him more drink; in return for which (just for fun) he had drawn his bayonet and wounded the girl in the shoulder. And yet, that brave fellow was the first to return to the tavern the next morning to declare that he bore no grudge and was ready to forget the incident. 'The consumption of tobacco in these towns,' continues Mr. Pickwick, 'must be very great; and the smell that pervades the streets must be exceedingly pleasant to those who enjoy smoking. A superficial traveler might criticize the mud, which is the main characteristic of these towns; but, to those who regard it as an indication of traffic and commercial prosperity, it is truly gratifying.'" (Dickens, 2012, p. 25).

The passage captures the essence of these towns in a way that blends sharp observation with a touch of comedy, revealing the social and urban conditions of the time. The list of "main productions" of these towns, including soldiers, sailors, Jews, chalk, shrimps, among others, along with the description of the goods sold in the streets, provides a vibrant and diverse portrait of urban life and local economies. The reference to the behavior of the military, describing them staggering under the influence of alcohol and engaging in unseemly behaviors, reflects Dickens's characteristic humor in addressing aspects of the human condition and social interactions.

The incident mentioned, where a military man jokingly wounded a maid with his bayonet and then returns to the tavern to declare he bore no grudge, is an example of Dickens's ironic approach to violence and reckless behavior, suggesting a subtle critique of social norms and indulgence towards certain behaviors due to social or occupational status.

Mr. Pickwick's final observation about the consumption of tobacco and the condition of the muddy streets, seen as indicators of traffic and commercial prosperity, reflects Dickens's ability to find meaning and even certain charm in aspects of urban life that others might consider unpleasant or undesirable. This passage not only highlights Dickens's talent for social satire but also illustrates his skill in portraying the complexity and richness of the social fabric of his time, even in its strangest or seemingly trivial peculiarities.

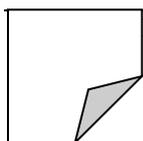
"Indeed, it is not, Sam,' replied Mr. Pickwick, observing the dirty and crowded street they were passing through" (Dickens, 2012, p. 294).

By noting the "dirty and crowded street," Mr. Pickwick reflects on the tangible consequences of pollution and congestion that characterized many cities during the 19th century.

This passage, though brief, serves to emphasize the emerging awareness of urban environmental issues, such as pollution, overcrowding, and poor management of public space, which began to be recognized as side effects of industrial progress. The mention of the dirty street not only illustrates the unsanitary conditions in which many people lived and worked but also suggests a critique of the lack of urban planning and the priorities of the society of the time, which often neglected environmental and social well-being in favor of economic development.

"While the aristocracy of the place — the Bulders, the Clubbers, and the Snipes — preserved their dignity in the upper corner of the room, the other classes of society imitated their example in the other corners. The less aristocratic officers of the 97th dedicated themselves to the families of the less important officials of the arsenal. The lawyers' wives and the wine merchant's wife headed another circle (the brewer's wife visited the Bulders); and Mrs. Tomlinson, the post office agent, seemed to have been, by mutual consent, chosen as the head of the merchants' group." (Dickens, 2012, p. 30).

The passage illustrates Dickens's keen eye for social stratification and the dynamics of interaction among different social groups. The excerpt presents a rich description of a stratified society, where each social group occupies a specific space and interacts within its own sphere. The aristocracy, symbolized by the Bulders,



Clubbers, and Snipes families, maintains their dignity and position in the upper corner of the room, standing out from the rest. This reflects the importance of hierarchy and social status in organizing community life.

The less aristocratic officers and their interactions with the families of less important officials of the arsenal indicate a replication of the hierarchical structure within different levels of society. This segregation is not only spatial but also social and relational, suggesting that personal and professional relationships are closely linked to social status.

The text also mentions the formation of other social circles based on profession and economic status, such as the lawyers' wives and the wine merchant's wife forming a group, while the brewer's wife is accepted among the aristocracy, possibly indicating fluidity in social boundaries based on wealth or personal relationships.

The mention of Mrs. Tomlinson as the head of the merchants' group suggests a form of leadership and recognition within that stratum, where even among merchants, there exists a hierarchy and a person who is, by consensus, recognized as a leader.

This excerpt illustrates, therefore, the complexity of social structures and the way they manifest in everyday interactions, reflecting both the division and connection among different classes and social groups. It is a clear example of how literature can capture and reflect the nuances of social structure and human relations.

In "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club," the reference to characters like "the dirty-faced man" generally serves to evoke a vivid image of ordinary individuals, often engaged in manual labor or in less privileged conditions, contrasting them with characters from higher social classes or physically cleaner due to the nature of their jobs. Dickens used these detailed and specific descriptions to highlight social and economic differences among characters while exploring their interactions and common humanity.

The specific mention of a "dirty-faced man" may not refer to a recurring or significant character in itself but serves as a literary technique to paint a picture of the diversity of London society at the time. By introducing characters marked by visible signs of physical labor or poverty, Dickens not only enriches the social fabric of his narratives but also subtly critiques the social and economic structures that lead to such divisions.

"On the eve of the last elections here, the opposing party bribed the maid of the City Arms Inn to tamper with the drink of fourteen voters who had not yet voted and were staying there." (Dickens, 2012, p. 169).

This passage highlights the corrupt and unethical practices often associated with elections and politics of the time. The bribery of the maid of the City Arms Inn to adulterate the drink of undecided voters reflects a desperate attempt to influence the outcome of the elections, illustrating the lengths to which parties were willing to go to ensure victory.

One of the central themes of the book, justice (or often, injustice), is explored through the episode of Bardell versus Pickwick. This episode not only satirizes the English legal system but also critiques the ease with which justice can be manipulated and distorted.

There are numerous other passages not mentioned here that do justice to the central hypothesis of this study - a careful reading of Dickens's work offers a journey through an England experiencing profound economic and social transformations during the Industrial Revolution. However, the passages mentioned logically tie together the argument and provide spoilers of this immersion into nineteenth-century England that Mr. Pickwick's adventures afford.

IV. Conclusion

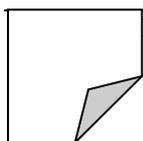
The narrative of "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" provides a detailed and critical portrait of 19th-century England. Its immersive descriptions, characters representative of different facets of society, and exploration of social themes not only entertain but also provoke deep reflection on the Victorian era, making the reading of the work a true journey through the England of that period.

Dickens skillfully intertwines narrative and social critique, capturing the nuances of 19th-century England during the Industrial Revolution. Thus, the work not only reflects the transformations of the era but also provokes reflection on the social and human constants that span centuries.

The transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy and the consequent changes in the urban landscape and people's lives serve as a backdrop for many of Mr. Pickwick's adventures. Dickens's descriptions of the cities, with their factories, smoke, and pollution, reflect the environmental and social impact of industrialization.

Mr. Pickwick and his companions can be seen as representatives of the emerging middle class, who enjoyed new economic and social opportunities thanks to modernization. Their journeys and interactions with different social classes illustrate both mobility and the tensions arising from these changes. The use of stagecoaches and the mention of railways in their early stages reflect the transport revolution that was underway, vital for economic modernization.

Many of Mr. Pickwick's adventures revolve around legal misunderstandings and disputes, satirizing the English legal system and reflecting on the social injustices exacerbated by modernization and nascent capitalism.



Dickens often contrasts wealth and poverty, innocence and corruption, using the characters and their experiences to question the values and consequences of economic modernization.

Dickens not only entertains but also provokes his readers to reflect on the complexities of economic modernization. He does this by highlighting the inherent contradictions of progress: while modernization brings advancements and improvements, it also generates inequalities, injustices, and new social challenges.

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