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Literary Analysis

Variations on Melodramatic Forms in the Fiction of Dickens

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Abstract: This study examines the evolving use of melodramatic conventions in Charles Dickens' fiction, focusing on *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Bleak House*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. It argues that Dickens transforms melodrama from overt theatrical representation into a more complex narrative strategy that integrates symbolism, psychological depth, and moral critique. Using close textual analysis within a literary critical framework, the study demonstrates how melodramatic elements shift from visible stage-like presentation in early fiction to structurally embedded narrative and ethical devices in later novels. The paper contributes to Dickens studies by re-evaluating melodrama not as a simplistic stylistic borrowing but as a dynamic and evolving narrative mode central to Dickens' artistic development.

Keywords: Melodrama, theatrical aspect, audience, story-teller, stock characters, clichés, stereotypes

Introduction

Charles Dickens' fiction has long been associated with theatricality, emotional excess, and highly visible narrative performance. Wilson (1970) argued that Dickens possessed a strong performative impulse as a writer, shaped by his early experiences as an amateur actor. According to Wilson (1970), Dickens sought to establish an immediate emotional connection with his readers that resembled the direct engagement between performer and theatre audience. As a result, his early fiction often constructs scenes in ways that resemble stage performance, where characters, actions, and emotional effects are deliberately dramatized for audience impact.

Background

Building on this perspective, Garis (1965) in *The Dickens Theatre* further emphasizes the visibility of the author in Dickens' narrative style. He argues that Dickens' narrative voice does not recede into the background but remains perceptibly present, actively shaping the reader's emotional and imaginative response. As Garis notes, the author's "presence does not gradually disappear as we become aware of the objects his language is embodying, the feelings it is evoking" (Garis, 1965). This reinforces the idea that Dickens' narrative technique retains a theatrical dimension in which storytelling itself becomes a form of performance. In relation to this theatricality, many critics have identified strong parallels between Dickens' fiction and the conventions of Victorian melodrama. Rahill (1967) defines melodrama as a form structured around stock characters, emotionally charged incidents, moral polarization between good and evil, and resolutions grounded in poetic justice. Within this framework, Dickens' fiction frequently appears to adopt melodramatic techniques: characters are often presented in morally legible terms, plots emphasize persecution and rescue, and narrative resolution tends to moral clarity reinforced through emotional and visual exaggeration.

Research Gap and the Purpose of the Study

While existing scholarship has effectively identified Dickens' use of theatrical and melodramatic conventions, these studies often treat melodrama as a static influence or as a

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simplified stylistic borrowing. They tend to overlook the developmental complexity of how melodramatic form operates across Dickens' career and how it interacts with narrative symbolism, thematic depth, and moral structure.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to re-examine the melodramatic dimensions of Dickens' fiction beyond their conventional classification as theatrical excess. It argues that melodrama in Dickens is not merely a borrowed stage convention, but an evolving narrative strategy that becomes increasingly complex throughout his novels. By analyzing selected scenes from *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Bleak House*, and *Our Mutual Friend*, this study demonstrates how melodramatic form shifts from overt theatrical representation to a more integrated system of symbolic, psychological, and ethical meaning.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative literary analysis based on close reading of selected scenes from Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Bleak House*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. The three novels were selected to represent different stages of Dickens' fictional development and to examine changes in his use of melodramatic conventions. The analysis focuses on characterization, dialogue, setting, symbolism, moral conflict, theatricality, and narrative presentation. Relevant critical works on Dickens and Victorian melodrama are also used to support the interpretation of the selected passages. Through comparative textual analysis, the study traces how melodrama develops from overt stage-like representation in *Nicholas Nickleby* to more symbolic, psychological, and ethically complex forms in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*.

Findings and Analysis

The Evolution of Melodramatic Form in Dickens

To explore this transformation of melodramatic form in Dickens' fiction, it is necessary to examine key narrative scenes where theatrical conventions are most explicitly visible. These moments reveal how Dickens constructs character, dialogue, and action in ways that initially resemble stage performance but also serve broader thematic and symbolic functions within the novel.

Melodrama in *Nicholas Nickleby*

The analysis begins with *Nicholas Nickleby*, where melodramatic representation is most overt and structurally dominant. A good example of this is the scene from *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* by Dickens (1950) in which the hero and his sister arrive to save Madeline Bray from the clutches of their uncle and Arthur Gride:

> As the brother and sister stood side by side . . . they had never looked more handsome, nor he more ugly . . . all the worst characteristics of a face rendered coarse and harsh by evil thoughts were half as manifest as now. 'Away!' was the first word he could utter as he literally gnashed his teeth. . . . 'I come here,' said Nicholas in a low deep voice, 'to save your victim if I can. Liar and scoundrel you are, in every action of your life; theft is your trade; and double dastard you must be, or you were not here today. . . . Here I stand, and will, till I have done my errand' (*Nicholas Nickleby*, 203–204).

It is unnecessary to have read the preceding parts of the novel to understand what is happening here. The characters' descriptions in this passage are stereotypes of goodness and virtue opposed to evil. The added touches in the dialogue, Ralph gnashing his teeth and Nicholas speaking in a low deep voice, not only further the stereotypes but add an audible dimension to the scene. Indeed, it is hard to read this scene without picturing it on a stage; it could have been taken directly from any number of third-rate-melodramas, yet in the context of *Nicholas Nickleby*, the high-handed triumph of good over evil is completely appropriate to the tone of the novel, and much of the pleasure that the scene gives are precisely in this sense of its familiarity.

Dickens was deeply familiar with the theatre and with melodramatic performance from an early age. His interest began with family theatricals, toy theatre, and regular attendance at performances, and later developed through amateur acting and public readings. As a young journalist in London, he frequently attended the theatre and even considered acting professionally. He also wrote several

early plays, including *The Strange Gentleman* and *The Village Coquettes*, both produced in 1836. Although these works were melodramatic and largely recreational, they demonstrate Dickens' sustained interest in dramatic form. His continuing involvement with performance helps explain why theatrical techniques, especially melodramatic characterization, dialogue, and visual presentation, became important features of his fiction.

Dickens' interest in melodrama in *Nicholas Nickleby* is evident in both the presentation of scenes and the novel's subject matter. The novel was initially intended to expose the abuses of Yorkshire schools, where unwanted children were often sent by their parents. To prepare for the novel, Dickens travelled to Yorkshire to investigate these schools and the treatment of their pupils. However, Dotheboys Hall and the Squeers' cruelty mainly serve as a background to Nicholas's adventures. Apart from Smike, little attention is given to the suffering of individual children. The narrative soon shifts away from this initial focus toward other settings and events.

The next extended section of the novel follows Nicholas's experiences as a melodramatic actor. Although Dickens' descriptions of the Crummles, Mr. Lenville, Miss Snevellici, and the other theatrical characters are sharply satirical, it is also clear that he enjoys writing about this world. The tone resembles that of the two later Household Words articles entitled "Amusements of the People," in which Dickens criticizes the artistic limitations of popular melodrama while still recognizing its value as entertainment. This attitude is evident in his description of one of the plays performed by the Crummles.

> The plot was most interesting. It belonged to no particular age, people, or country, and was perhaps the more delightful on that account, as nobody's previous information could afford the remotest glimmering of what would ever come of it. An outlaw had been very successful in doing something somewhere, and came home, in triumph, to the sound of shouts and fiddles..." (*Nicholas Nickleby,* 304).

This is a satire on melodramatic plots, yet it is done in fun and reveals an appreciation of the exaggerations in that form of drama.

Dickens is not criticizing theatre itself, nor the exaggerations and distortions of life associated with melodramatic performance. Rather, his criticism is directed at two things. First, he mocks the pretentiousness of hack writers and theatre-goers who treat commonplace melodrama as serious literature rather than popular entertainment. Second, he criticizes the narrow theatrical world of actors who fail to distinguish between performance and reality. Mr. Crummles, for example, appears insincere and shallow off stage because he continues to behave as though he were performing.

> In fact, Mr. Crummles, who could never lose any opportunity for professional display, had turned out for the express purpose of taking a public farewell of Nicholas; and to render it the more imposing, he was now, to that young gentleman's most profound annoyance, inflicting upon him a rapid succession of stage embraces, which, as everybody knows, are performed by the embracer's laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection, and looking over it. Mr. Crummles did in the highest style of melodrama, pouring forth at the same time all the most dismal pieces of farewell he could think of, out of the stock pieces (*Nicholas Nickleby,* 399).

Throughout the novel Dickens sponsors the qualities of sincerity, honesty, and heart-felt kindness as evidenced by Nicholas, Kate, and the Cheerybles; in contrast with Nicholas's deep concern for his sister at this point of the novel, Mr. Crummles is anything but admirable.

It has become a critical commonplace to observe that Dickens' criticisms of melodrama resemble the criticisms often directed at his own work. Nevertheless, many scenes in Nicholas Nickleby show that melodramatic conventions strongly shaped his narrative method. The plot moves through a series of theatrical episodes in which Nicholas repeatedly defeats evil to protect virtue. He opposes his uncle and Arthur Gride to save Madeline, attacks Squeers to rescue Smike, and confronts Sir Mulberry Hawk to defend his sister's reputation. Other episodes contribute little to the plot and appear mainly for comic effect or to fill the monthly instalments. Critics have often noted that Dickens turned to melodrama when he needed to extend the narrative, as seen in Nicholas and Newman Noggs's secret visit to the Bobster cellars and the comic episodes involving the "Gentleman Next Door" and Mrs. Nickleby.

It is therefore not surprising that the relationship between Dickens and melodrama worked in both directions. Many scenes in Nicholas Nickleby appear readily adaptable to the stage, and melodramatic versions of the novel became popular in London. Brown (1964) reproduces a playbill that highlights episodes such as "DO-THE-BOYS HALL. YORKSHIRE. A WINTRY PROSPECT," "WORK-ROOM at MADAME MANTALINI'S—TABLEAU," and the school-room scene culminating in "Quarrel, Blow, and Fight." These examples show how easily the novel's visual, dramatic, and action-based episodes could be transferred to theatrical performance. The adaptations relied heavily on the audience's familiarity with the story and their desire to see well-known characters and scenes brought to life on stage.

Melodrama in *Bleak House*

In his later novels, Dickens' borrowings from melodrama are not as unadulterated as they are in *Nicholas Nickleby*, but they are there nonetheless. In *Bleak House*, for example, there are two scenes that are essentially melodramatic in tone and presentation and yet are also of primary importance to the symbolic and thematic structure of the novel. The first of these is the meeting between Esther Summerson and Lady Dedlock, when Esther learns that Lady Dedlock is her mother:

> I had been looking at the Ghost's walk lying in a deep shade of masonry afar off . . . when I became aware of a figure approaching through the wood. The perspective was so long, and so darkened by leaves, and the shadows of the branches on the ground made it so much more intricate to the eye . . . By little, and little, it revealed itself to be a woman's—a lady's—Lady Dedlock's. . . . 'O my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother! O try to forgive me!' . . . I felt, through all my tumult of emotion, a burst of gratitude to the providence of God that I was so changed that I never could disgrace her by any trace of likeness; as that nobody could ever now look at me, and look at her, and remotely think of any near tie between us (*Bleak House*, 1962).

Melodramatic productions commonly used symbolic settings that were overdone to the point that their meaning would be immediately obvious to anyone watching the play. Dickens prepares for the encounter between Esther and her mother by painting a setting that would cue anyone familiar with melodramatic stage conventions that something important and traumatic is going to occur: the shadows of the branches on the ground, the semi-darkness, and the ghost-like appearance of the approaching woman are highly appropriate for a scene that will reveal a long-kept, deep, dark, and terrible secret. The repetitious cadences of the diction reinforce the theatricality of the setting and the emotionalism of the situation. In addition, Lady Dedlock looks and acts like a stock character of melodrama; she is the woman with the mysterious past who has the power to bring unhappiness into the lives of those around her. Esther's reaction, as heroine, to the knowledge of her mother's identity is appropriately sentimental and emotional. Her feelings are externalized and exaggerated in a way that makes them immediately understood in an intuitive rather than an intellectual way, as is typical of melodramatic stories.

Unlike the theatrical scenes in *Nicholas Nickleby*, which mainly advance the plot and use little symbolism, this passage from *Bleak House* has deeper meaning despite its obvious melodramatic features. The setting not only creates the mood but also reflects Lady Dedlock's troubled state of mind and uneasy relationship with society. It also reinforces the theme of Christian forgiveness, especially through Esther's acceptance of her disfigurement as an act of Providence. After Lady Dedlock's confession, the setting changes from distorted shadows to the calm of a summer landscape. Esther recalls that she embraced and forgave her mother, while the stillness around them contrasts with their emotional unrest (*Bleak House*, 565). This change symbolically supports Lady Dedlock's confession and Esther's forgiving response. However, their continued suffering suggests that society will eventually discover their relationship and may judge them far more harshly than Esther does.

The death of Jo, another strongly melodramatic scene in *Bleak House*, functions in a similar way within the novel. Jo lies in a stupor as Allan Woodcourt watches over him. "The cart had very nearly given up, but labours on a little more." As darkness closes in, Jo asks, "Is there any light a-coming?" Woodcourt reassures him and helps him repeat the Lord's Prayer: "OUR FATHER... WHICH ART IN HEAVEN." Jo again asks whether the light is coming, and the narrative answers:

"The light is come upon the dark, benighted way. Dead!" Dickens then turns directly to society: "Dead, your majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen... And dying thus around us every day" (*Bleak House*, 703, 705).

Children's deathbed scenes were very common in melodrama, as they were in all Victorian fiction. That this particular scene excited the interest of theater audiences is evident from the names of the stage adaptations of the novel in which it appears: "Jo," "Bleak House; or, 'Poor Jo,'" "Poor little Jo," "Poor Jo," "Move on; or, Jo the outcast," "Move on; or, the Crossing Sweeper," "Jo, the Waif; or the Mystery of Chesney Wood," and "Bleak House; or Events in the life of Jo." Apparently, the death of Jo would have been the climactic scene in most of these productions, a scene made as moving as possible and played to leave the audience in tears.

Dickens presents the scene almost like a melodramatic stage script. The arrangement of Woodcourt, George, and Phil around Jo's bedside creates a tableau-like effect, while the dialogue between Jo and Woodcourt is designed to make emotion immediately visible. Jo's words seem less like the natural speech of a dying child than a deliberate appeal to the reader's sympathy. Van Amerongen (1969) argues that the repeated references to the cart and the light function like background music in melodrama, shaping the mood and increasing the emotional effect. Although this interpretation may understate their symbolic meaning, these recurring images also trace Jo's gradual decline and keep his approaching death constantly before the reader.

Jo's death also contains clear melodramatic elements. Allan Woodcourt appears as the kind and virtuous hero comforting the suffering child, while the Lord's Prayer introduces the conventional hope of happiness in heaven. Victorian melodrama often assured audiences that sympathetic characters who died would enter a better world. However, the scene in *Bleak House* goes beyond conventional sentiment. The prayer also reflects Dickens' criticism of a society in which some people can find hope only through faith in God and heaven. Although the author's direct intervention at the end of the scene is highly dramatic, it supports the novel's moral theme. Just as Lady Dedlock is shown as deserving Christian forgiveness, Jo is presented as deserving Christian charity. The emotional intensity of the scene therefore strengthens Dickens' criticism of those who ignore human suffering. Jo's death becomes not merely melodramatic sentiment, but a powerful condemnation of an uncaring society.

These two scenes from *Bleak House* are the most overtly melodramatic ones in the novel and are also the ones underlining the most explicit Christian message. The reason for this can be traced to Dickens' attitudes toward melodrama. In "The Amusements of the People," discussed earlier, Dickens criticizes melodramatic productions that fail to use their influence on audiences to promote proper moral values. "The people, who now resort here, will be amused somewhere. It is of no use to blink that fact, or to make pretenses to the contrary. We had far better apply ourselves to improving the character of their amusement. It would not be exacting much, or exacting anything very difficult to require that the pieces represented in these Theatres should have, at least, a good, plain, healthy purpose in them" (Dickens, 1973). Dickens seems to see a difference between melodrama and melodrama with a Christian message. As a result, when his handling of a situation leans heavily toward melodrama, he balances it with more explicit Christian morality than usually appears in his work.

Melodrama in *Our Mutual Friend*

In *Nicholas Nickleby* the morality involves the physical defeat of evil characters by good characters and little more. In *Bleak House*, as the handling of situations has become more mature and more complex, so has the presentation of the morality. By the time of *Our Mutual Friend*, written twenty-six years after *Nicholas Nickleby* and twelve years after *Bleak House*, Dickens' style has become less melodramatic with less theatrical posturing; the language is more lyrical and poetic, more image-oriented, and it does more than chronicle the action; the morality has become a component of personality rather than an adjunct to the action. These differences can be seen by comparing two pieces of dialogue, the first from *Nicholas Nickleby* and the second from *Our Mutual*

Friend, both of which involve a common melodramatic situation, that of a brother confronting the man who has been taking advantage of his sister and demanding an explanation from him:

> "There was a dead silence. 'I am the brother of the young lady who has been the subject of conversation here,' said Nicholas. 'I denounce this person as a liar, and impeach him as a coward.' . . . Sir Mulberry looked at him contemptuously . . . 'Let the fellow talk. I have nothing to say to boys of his station; and his pretty sister shall save him a broken head, if he talks till midnight.' . . . 'You are a base and spiritless scoundrel!' said Nicholas" (*Nicholas Nickleby*, 414–415).

> "'Mr. Eugene Wrayburn,' said the boy, 'I want a word with you.' . . . 'You have given yourself much trouble, Schoolmaster,' observed Eugene, blowing the feathery ash from his cigar. . . . 'Since then you have seen my sister often. You have seen my sister oftener and oftener. And I want to know why?'" (*Our Mutual Friend*, 361–362).

The situation is similar, but Dickens' treatment has become far more complex. In the earlier passage, the main emotion is Nicholas's anger toward Mulberry Hawk. In the later scene, several relationships develop at once: Bradley Headstone's influence over Charley; Charley's distrust of Eugene and concern for Lizzie; the growing hostility between Eugene and Bradley; and Mortimer's sincere concern that Eugene should not exploit Lizzie's feelings. These relationships are revealed through the characters' words and gestures with greater subtlety than in the earlier novel. The exchange between Nicholas and Mulberry is largely one-dimensional, as its meaning is directly expressed through speech and behaviour.

By contrast, the interaction among Eugene, Charley, and Bradley is multidimensional, revealing their attitudes and feelings toward one another. The conflict is therefore mainly psychological rather than physical.

The social implications also become more complex. Mulberry Hawk is presented as a conventional villain, while Eugene is a more developed character whose social position and established attitudes conflict with his romantic feelings. Nicholas, though forced to work, remains a gentleman with clear moral judgement. Charley and Bradley, as teachers, occupy a less certain social position and are less reliable in judging right and wrong. In the conflict between Nicholas and Mulberry, the moral division is clear: Nicholas is the hero and Mulberry the villain, leaving little possibility of change or reconciliation.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, however, the situation is less straightforward. Eugene's possible marriage to Lizzie adds further complexity, and the reader is encouraged to consider the motives behind each character's actions rather than simply choose sides. The characters thus appear as complex individuals rather than simple depictions of good and evil.

Lightwood plays an important role throughout the encounter by acting as Eugene's conscience and guiding him toward the proper treatment of Lizzie. Although morality is no longer presented in simple terms, the scene suggests that the characters would act better if they followed moral principles rather than temporary impulses. Lightwood warns Eugene that Bradley's uncontrolled passions may lead to violence, while Charley is manipulated by Bradley because he lacks Lizzie's moral judgement and independence.

As the relationships, social issues, and moral questions become more complex in *Our Mutual Friend*, the language also becomes subtler and more effective. The description "Sir Mulberry looked at him contemptuously" functions almost like a stage direction, whereas Eugene "blowing the feathery ash from his cigar" suggests that he is consciously performing the role of a rake. His behaviour is therefore criticized as insincere without making him a complete villain like Sir Mulberry. Even so, the scene remains highly visual and could easily be adapted for the stage, with words and gestures conveying emotion in a more refined way.

Melodramatic presentation occurs throughout Dickens' fiction, suggesting that melodramatic conventions form a recurring and significant part of his narrative method. Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which Dickens used these conventions consciously, their persistent presence across his fiction indicates that they were deeply embedded in his artistic practice. Disher (1954) similarly argues that melodrama had become so deeply rooted in Dickens' imagination that he may not always have recognized how strongly it shaped his plots and moral outlook.

Conclusion

The analysis of Dickens' fiction shows that melodrama functions as an important structural and aesthetic principle rather than a simple borrowing from theatre. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, melodramatic conventions appear openly through theatrical characterization, plot, and moral conflict. In *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, however, these conventions become more closely linked with symbolism, psychological depth, and narrative complexity. This development suggests that Dickens' use of melodrama goes beyond imitation of Victorian stage conventions. Although popular theatre clearly influenced his narrative style, melodrama became a flexible mode through which he explored morality, emotion, and social criticism.

Further research, including Dickens' correspondence and comments on theatre, may clarify the extent of this influence. However, the novels themselves show that melodrama is central rather than incidental to his art. Across his fiction, Dickens gradually transforms overt theatrical techniques into a more complex narrative, symbolic, and ethical form. Melodrama therefore emerges as an important element of his narrative power and moral vision.

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