



Attitudes to Booze: Comic and Serious Drinking in *David Copperfield*

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Outline

Different attitudes: Comic and Serious

Drinking jugs

David Copperfield

Mr Wickfield

Dickens and “Dickens” in America

Dickens’s library

Comic drinking

spirit of camaraderie



sees drink as an
enabler to allow
people to socialize

Cartoon physics



Pickwick Club

First day of adventure finishes at Bull Inn (Rochester)

Pickwickians drink port with comic villain Mr Jingle

“The wine was passed, and a fresh supply ordered”

Finish with Mr Pickwick’s first experience of drunkenness

There is a gentle rhythm to the way it is written

We are lulled into believing that these consequences are not serious

Consequences of drinking

- ▶ The wine ...had stolen upon the senses of Mr Pickwick. That gentleman had gradually passed through various stages which precede the lethargy produced by dinner, and its consequences. He had undergone the ordinary transitions from the height of conviviality to the depth of misery, and from the depth of misery to the height of conviviality.
- ▶ Like a gas lamp in the street, with the wind in the pipe, he had exhibited for a moment an unnatural brilliancy: then sunk so low as to be scarcely discernible: after a short interval, he had burst out again, to enlighten for a moment, then flickered with an uncertain, staggering sort of light, and then gone out altogether. His head was sunk upon his bosom; and perpetual snoring, with a partial choke, occasionally, were the only audible indications of the great man's presence. [Pickwick Papers, 2, 22-3]

- ▶ sees drink as a barrier that can shield problems with excessive alcoholism
- ▶ leading to violence, alienation, and death

Serious

Drunkenness

- ▶ Mr Winkle is challenged to a duel
- ▶ He cannot remember what he did the previous evening
- ▶ He even searches his coat pockets for evidence
- ▶ “It must be so”, said Mr Winkle, letting the coat fall from his hands. “I took much wine after dinner, and have a very vague recollection of walking about the streets, and smoking a cigar afterwards. The fact is, I was very drunk - I must have changed coat-gone somewhere-and insulted somebody-I have no doubt of it; and this message is the terrible consequence.” [Pickwick Papers 2, 32]
- ▶ This drunkenness is taken seriously and could have had serious and fatal consequences [Pickwick Papers 2, 34]

Drink with Dickens

Euphoric drinkers

- ▶ become signature 'characters'
- ▶ Featured on dishes, cigarette cards, Toby jugs (shaped with extraordinarily large heads of Mr Pickwick, Sam Weller, or Sairey Gamp)
- ▶ We not only drink with Dickens but also with (and from) some of his appealing characters

Serious drinkers

- ▶ Who would want to drink out of mugs featuring the faces of Mr Wickfield, Mr Dolls or Mrs Blackpool?
- ▶ These are tragic, serious drinkers

David Copperfield jug

- ▶ Royal Doulton tiny character jug

4cm (1 1/2") tall
Issued 1982-1989 from the
Charles Dickens
Commemorative series

- ▶ https://www.roundaboutantiques.com.au/products/d6680-royal-doulton-character-jug-david-copperfield?_pos=2&_sid=d850b9c32&_ss=r



Remembering and forgetting: David's drinking episode

How funny it is depends on our ability to forget

We suspend our thoughts of the danger of too much alcohol

David's single and funny experience of drunkenness at his housewarming dinner is confined to only one night and two chapters

It ends with Agnes's promise not to think of it again

David tells what his drunkenness might be assumed to cause him to forget

David's "Somebody"

- ▶ *Somebody* was leaning out of my bedroom window, refreshing his forehead against the cool stone of the parapet, and feeling the air upon his face. It was myself. I was addressing myself as 'Copperfield,' and saying, 'Why did you try to smoke? You might have known you couldn't do it.'
- ▶ Now, *somebody* was unsteadily contemplating his features in the looking-glass. That was I too. I was very pale in the looking-glass; my eyes had a vacant appearance; and my hair—only my hair, nothing else—looked drunk.
(DC 24, 308)

- ▶ But the agony of mind, the remorse, and shame I felt, when I became conscious next day! My horror of having committed a thousand offenses I had forgotten, and which nothing could ever expiate—my recollection of that indelible look which Agnes had given me. (DC 24, 310)
- ▶ The morning after that (2 days later):
- ▶ I was going out at [sic] my door on the morning after that deplorable day of headache, sickness, and repentance, with an odd confusion in mind relative to the date of my dinner-party as if a body of Titans had taken an enormous lever and pushed the day before yesterday some months back. (DC 25, 311)

Subsequent mornings

Mr Wickfield

- ▶ Caught between remembering and forgetting
- ▶ Has a history of alcohol consumption
- ▶ David notices the facial marks of drunkenness as he narrates upon meeting Mr Wickfield:
- ▶ He had a very agreeable face, and, I thought, was handsome. There was a certain richness in his complexion, which I had been long accustomed, under Peggotty's tuition, to connect with port wine; and I fancied it was in his voice too, and referred his growing corpulency to the same cause. (DC 15, 188)

Mr Wickfield's breakdown

- ▶ Uriah Heep preys on his employer's weakness for alcohol
- ▶ He gradually plots his takeover
- ▶ 'Oh, Trotwood, Trotwood!' exclaimed Mr. Wickfield, wringing his hands. 'What I have come down to be, since I first saw you in this house! I was on my downward way then, but the dreary, dreary, road I have traversed since! Weak indulgence has ruined me. Indulgence in remembrance, and indulgence in forgetfulness. My natural grief for my child's mother turned to disease; my natural love for my child turned to disease. I have infected everything I touched.' (DC 39, 493)

Dickens in America - 1868 lecture tour

- ▶ American biographer Fred Kaplan notes:
- ▶ As the April [1868] departure date came closer, Dickens felt tired and acutely homesick. He felt "depressed all the time (except when reading)" and had lost his appetite
- ▶ On reading days, at seven in the morning he had fresh cream and two tablespoons of rum, at noon a sherry cobbler and a biscuit, and at three a pint of champagne
- ▶ Five minutes before his [evening] performance he had an egg beaten into a glass of sherry, during the intermission strong beef tea, and afterward soup, altogether not "more than half a pound of solid food in the whole four-and-twenty hours."
- ▶ Philip V. Allingham, 'Alcoholic Drink in Charles Dickens' Writings', The Victorian Web, last modified 24 April 2006, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/pva/drink.html> [pp. 525-526]

“Dickens” performs in America

- ▶ *The Snake-oil Dickens Man* by Ross Gilfillan. London: Fourth Estate, 1998
- ▶ *Dickens* (imitated by Mr Hope Scattergood) performing live readings in 1868
- ▶ After seeing Dickens perform in Boston Hope decided to listen hard, watch his every move, make notes, and perfect his ruse in order to make lots of money
- ▶ As Hope read “He ...made gestures eloquent of the various characters and their actions. His voice rose and dipped and amazingly, one moment he was terrifying women and children as he sprang upon them the desperate convict Magwitch and the next his timbre had changed and here was the bluff and genial Joe Gargery” [Ch 7]

- ▶ Things became a little unstuck as his voice faltered and he started to invent storylines for the characters
- ▶ Some of the audience realized he was drunk and those that had read the books complained of the changes
- ▶ Even though he held his audience's attention it was obvious that he was suffering
- ▶ He paused often for water, sometimes for sips, other times huge draughts, and observed to the audience that this was thirsty work

“Dickens”
performs in
America
(cont.)

Dickens's Library at Gad's Hill

Books related to drinking:

- *Anatomy of drunkenness* by Dr Robert Macnish, 1827
- *Philosophy of drunkenness* by Dr Robert Macnish, 1840
- A pamphlet: *Temperance and total abstinence* by Stephen Thomson (no date)

Source: Joanne Eysell. *A Medical companion to Dickens's fiction*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005.

- Medical related books in personal library at Gad's Hill (Dickens lived there 1856-1870)



Cheers! Salute! Yamas! Skal! Sante!

- ▶ Comic - cartoon physics
- ▶ Serious - dangerous
- ▶ Drinking jugs - artefacts
- ▶ David's drinking episode
- ▶ Mr Wickfield
- ▶ Dickens and "Dickens" in America
- ▶ The Snake-oil Dickens Man
- ▶ Dickens's library