

‘Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners.’

Explore in relation to two contemporary novelists of either the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.

Woolf paradoxically presents the ideal of fiction as a carefully crafted web of lies that reveals fundamental truths of the human condition. Both 19th century novelists Charles Dickens and George Eliot sought to realistically portray Victorian society in an urban and a rural environment respectively. While the contrast between Dickens’ cartoonish realism and Eliot’s high realism appears to suggest that Dickens veiled his fiction more effectively, both approaches were ultimately equally successful examples of the Woolfian ideal.

Fiction, Woolf asserts, derives its beauty from its ethereal, almost transcendental appearance. But, ‘like a spider’s web’,¹ it collapses if not attached to reality. To me, this means that writers must incorporate knowledge attained from personal experience to convey the deeper meaning of human life, thereby anchoring their writing to reality. Here, the well-known proverb ‘write what you know’² is relevant. This seems to suggest that one should not write, say, fantasy. Given the enormous success of the fantasy genre, this is clearly inaccurate. What it actually means is that one should write what one knows not in terms of mundanities such as setting or plot, but in terms of *emotion*. What makes fiction great is the ability to appeal to universal human emotions, to spark a flash of recognition, of emotional connection, within the reader. In other words, fiction is successful not if it tells the reader something about the writer, but if it tells the reader something about themselves. Indeed, Woolf clearly states that writers should disguise autobiographical details, noting that ‘when the web is pulled askew’ ‘one remembers that these webs’ ‘are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things’.³ The pejorative adjective ‘grossly’ implies that writers should conceal the personal strife that results in such emotional knowledge. This means that, in order to maintain the detached illusion of a spider’s web, writers must cloak such truths with the concocted lies of creation. And this is the central conceit at the heart of Woolf’s ideal: that the lies of fiction are truer than the facts of life.

‘Ask no questions’, Philip Pirrip's sister and maternal figure Mrs Joe advises in Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861), ‘and you’ll be told no lies’.⁴ But this is precisely what fiction does. Fiction both challenges the implicit biases and assumptions that lie dormant in the human psyche and attempts to provide a solution. What such guidance can be taken to suggest, therefore, is that fiction is, necessarily, lies. In the context of the Woolfian ideal, such lies counterintuitively function to reveal truths about emotional universals. As a realist writer, Dickens attempted to truthfully represent the harsh nature of urban Victorian life. He was horrified in particular by societal treatment of the poor. Industrialisation resulted in the population of London surging from 1 million in 1801 to 6.2 million in 1901.⁵ Given rapid employment fluctuations, the poor were consequently

¹ Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One’s Own*. p.41.

² Common proverb.

³ Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One’s Own*. p.42.

⁴ Charles Dickens. *Great Expectations*. p.14.

⁵ <https://files.datapress.com/london/dataset/population-change-1939-2015/historical%20population%201939-2015.pdf>

Ariana Rubio

an immense social issue, with some 30,000 homeless children in London in 1848.⁶ Victorian morality impressed the importance of duty and propriety, yet paid no heed to the unjust suffering of fellow human beings. Dickens sought to both expose this moral hypocrisy and expound a morality based on compassion and generosity. In the scathingly satirical social commentary of his fiction, Dickens achieves the Woolfian ideal. He disguises fundamental social truths with the comic, cartoonish nature of his writing.

Fascinated by ghost stories as a child,⁷ much of Dickens' fiction incorporates elements of the magical realism and fantasy genres. Take, for example, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), subtitled 'In Prose. A Ghost Story of Christmas'. The novella centres around moral repentance and redemption. Ebenezer Scrooge, an incorrigible miser, is miraculously transformed into the very paradigm of generosity following a series of harrowing ghostly visits. The fantasy genre is thus invoked to relate a clear moral message of munificence, especially towards the poor. *A Christmas Carol* exemplifies Woolf's ideal; paradoxically, the mask of fantasy reveals moral truths. Dickens also employed the comedy genre to veil his social criticism. His first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), establishes the cartoonish, exaggerated style that is today recognised as distinctly Dickensian. The characters in particular, constructed by Dickens as satirical tools of humour, are remembered for their comedy. One such example is Alfred Jingle, a conniving charlatan perpetually implicating the Pickwickians in his scrapes. Jingle's distortion of syntax, omitting conjunctions and replacing them with dashes, reflects the disorder and chaos he conspires to create. The abrupt, direct style of such asyndetic language heightens the comic effect of his actions, in addition to sonically mimicking their disruptive intention. But the cartoonish element to Dickens' fiction is perhaps most evident in his eccentric nomenclature. In terms of protagonists alone, Nicholas Nickleby, Philip 'Pip' Pirrip and Ebenezer Scrooge come to mind. Often humorously alliterative and absurdly unrealistic, such names attract the reader. The alluring nature of comedy permits the reader to identify with his characters, in addition to aiding acceptance of Dickens' social criticisms.

I believe that Dickens thus satisfied Woolf's ideal of fiction. He revealed moral, emotional and social truths through the lies of fiction, enhanced by fantasy and comedy. Indeed, the cartoonish element to his fiction appears to suggest that he was especially successful in veiling such truths. This arguably enhanced his ability to impart knowledge. As outlined, comedy served as a buffer to criticism. This made the reader more amenable to Dickens' alternative morality. In any case, it certainly facilitated the dispersion of such views. Dickens enjoyed immense popularity from the publication of the short pieces of fiction collectively entitled *Sketches by Boz* beginning in 1833 to his death in 1870. As a result, he was able to emotionally influence an audience of unparalleled size. As the narrator remarks in *A Christmas Carol*, 'there is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humour.'⁸ That said, the cartoonish nature of Dickens' fiction at times leads to over-simplification. This is most evident in his binary conception of morality and justice. Characters are neatly categorised as morally good or bad, and as such receive either reward or retribution. A number of Dickens' novels feature the classic trope 'rags to riches'. In *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), the titular character, originally an impoverished orphan, is adopted by the kindly gentleman Mr Brownlow. The semi-autobiographical Bildungsroman *David Copperfield* (1849) charts a similar journey from disadvantaged child to successful writer. In a journal article, Dickens

⁶ <http://www.aboutbritain.com/articles/poverty-in-victorian-times.asp>

⁷ <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/A-Dickens-of-Good-Ghost-Story/>

⁸ Charles Dickens. *A Christmas Carol*. p.12.

Ariana Rubio

scholar John R. Reed argues that *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) exemplifies Dickens' belief that the 'authority [of God] to punish' 'can be imitated in fiction'.⁹ Dickens' strict belief in the Christian idiom 'a man reaps what he sows'¹⁰ is evident in that the morally licentious are punished (Mr Fledgeby is assaulted, Bradley Headstone and Mr Riderhood drown) and the righteous rewarded (John Harmon and Bella Wilfer marry, the Boffins remain in their employment and Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam marry). But this does not reflect the true nature of reality. Morality is nuanced, and justice does not always come to fruition. One limitation to Dickens' fiction, therefore, is that his comedic approach over-simplifies morality and justice.

In addition to this criticism, George Eliot regarded such cartoonish fiction as a vulgarity, a trivialisation and distortion of reality. In her essay *A Natural History of the German People* (1856), Eliot criticises Dickens for a lack of skill in the area for which she is most celebrated — psychological insight. She expresses her conviction that Dickens was unable to transition from 'the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic' 'without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness'.¹¹ That is to say, Dickens' focus on comedy limited the extent to which his fiction could relate emotional knowledge. This suggests that, through her greater focus on the emotional truths that constitute great fiction, Eliot was ultimately the more Woolfian novelist. But this difference in literary style is not an indication of Eliot's superiority, but simply the result of the contrasting focal points of their writing. Dickens was a social critic, Eliot, a psychological prophet. Despite Dickens' 'frequently false psychology',¹² Eliot was deeply appreciative of his contribution to realist literature, terming him a 'great novelist'¹³. Admitting the limitation his acute sense of social justice imposed on his fiction, Woolf would ultimately concur with this assessment. In an example of the Woolfian ideal, Dickens' comic, cartoonish realism enabled him to expose the shortcomings of English society.

Eliot shared Dickens' desire to realistically portray Victorian life and, in doing so, also satisfied the Woolfian ideal of fiction. Following the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1867), Dickens wrote to Eliot to declare his conviction that the writer was a woman. Rather audaciously, he related how he 'observed what seemed to me such womanly touches in those moving fictions'.¹⁴ Does this imply that Eliot's fiction did not fulfill Woolf's ideal? That her web of lies was too obviously attached to autobiographical truths, instead of illusorily suspended by emotional universals? Dickens' intention was certainly not criticism. He subsequently lauded the 'exquisite truth and delicacy' of her fiction, which he declared he had 'never seen the like of'.¹⁵ Woolf herself described *Middlemarch* as 'one of the few English novels for grown-up people'.¹⁶ What led Dickens to

⁹ John R. Reed. *Authorised punishment in Dickens' fiction*.

¹⁰ Galatians 6:7-9 (NIVUK).

¹¹ George Eliot. *The Natural History of German Life*.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/21/charles-dickens-george-eliot-a-tale-of-two-cities>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/gems-from-george-eliot>

Ariana Rubio

ascertain her true sex was not a failing of her craft, a web of illusion too obviously transparent, but her acute awareness of the inner workings of human psychology.

Frustrated by the trivial nature of female fiction, Eliot sought to realistically and seriously portray life. While Mary Anne Evans' male pseudonym is commonly regarded as a defence against discrimination, it was more to dissociate herself from the trivial tradition of fiction in which female writers were ensconced. Her essay 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (1856) objects to the extreme 'silliness' and profoundly unrealistic, cliché-ridden nature of most fiction written by and for women.¹⁷ Such fiction, Eliot argues, is highly dangerous because it presents the reader with a perverted world view, violating the writer's integrity. In addition to this is the practical matter that such triviality belittles the importance of women's education. To summarise, the fact that the majority of female novelists treated universal human truths with levity and trivial matters with gravity contravened Woolf's ideal. Eliot's realism is an explicit riposte to such triviality, and as such abides by the ideal.

Eliot elaborates this conception of fiction in 'The Natural History of German Life'. In the essay, Eliot lauds German writer W. H. Riel for his realistic representation of the German working class and peasantry. In an essay on art critic John Ruskin, Eliot defines realism as 'the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature'.¹⁸ This is high realism, which attempts to represent reality as truthfully as possible through minute attention to detail, especially the psychological. For Eliot, realism is more than a literary genre, it is a philosophy; realist literature is more than a matter of aesthetics, it is a matter of morality. Writers have a duty to represent the world without romanticisation or glorification — that is to say, the trivialisation to which Eliot objected so strenuously. 'Art', Eliot proclaims, 'is the nearest thing to life, a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'.¹⁹ The suggestion that art is closer to life than life itself is a formulation of the fact-fiction paradox Woolf delineates. Furthermore, Eliot places a similar emphasis on the importance of the communicative powers of fiction. Emotional knowledge derived from personal experience is used to connect with the reader. What must be considered of course, is whether Eliot's own fiction satisfies this.

Eliot interrupts the narrative in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* (1859), her début novel, to relate a realist manifesto of sorts. In addition to the aesthetics of literature, Eliot urges writers to 'give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things'.²⁰ The writer has a moral obligation to truthfully relate the facts of life — concealed, of course, by a web of lies. In preparation for the novel, Eliot herself conducted fastidious research on the the 18th century.²¹ To continue, knowledge of human universals conveyed by fiction results in a feeling of kinship with

¹⁷ George Eliot. *The Natural History of German Life*.

¹⁸George Eliot. *Art and Belles Lettres: Review of Modern Painters III*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ George Eliot. *Adam Bede*. p.318. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/realism-and-research-in-adam-bede>

²¹ Joseph Weisenfarth. *George Eliot's Notes for Adam Bede*. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/realism-and-research-in-adam-bede>

Ariana Rubio

our 'fellow-men'.²² This aligns with Woolf's focus on the importance of emotional connection. Entitled 'In which the story pauses a little', Eliot's narrative intrusion anticipates the fragmented narration characteristic of postmodern fiction. Indeed, her highly philosophical view of fiction and incorporation of metaphysical discourse is not dissimilar to the epistemological focus of the postmodern genre, which often centres around the notion that there are no such things as objective truth or absolute knowledge. To summarise, Eliot's acute focus on the psychological facet of realism, as evident in her novels *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), in which the heroine and her brother tragically drown, and *Middlemarch* (1872), which questions a number of societal institutions such as education, religion and marriage, identify her as a keenly Woolfian novelist.

To conclude, both Charles Dickens and George Eliot successfully mastered Woolf's ideal of fiction. I believe that they conveyed fundamental truths of the human condition through the web of fiction. In its popular appeal, Dickens' cartoonish realism was especially effective because it reached a vast audience in addition to promoting acceptance of reformed moral values. Equally, Eliot's greater psychological insight aligned with Woolf's focus on human emotion and connection. Indeed, in the context of the female struggle to overcome societal prejudice, the fact that Eliot evidently found a 'room of her own'²³ in which to write perhaps makes her, of the two, more deserving of commendation.

Word count: 2,499 words.

²² George Eliot. *Adam Bede*. p.318. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/realism-and-research-in-adam-bede>

²³ Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*. p.4

Ariana Rubio

Bibliography

Works cited

Dickens, C. (2012). *A Christmas Carol*. London: Penguin Classics.

Dickens, C. (2003). *Great Expectations*. London: Penguin Classics.

Eliot, G. (2005). *Adam Bede*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Eliot, G. (1856). Art and Belles Lettres: Review of Modern Painters III. *The Westminster Review*. [online] Available at: <https://georgeeliotarchive.org/items/show/128>. [Accessed 28/02/19].

Eliot, G. (1856). Silly Novels by Lady Novelists. *The Westminster Review*. [online] Available at: <https://georgeeliotarchive.org/items/show/101> [28/02/19].

Eliot, G. (2019). The Natural History of German Life. *The Westminster Review*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28289/28289-h/28289-h.htm> [01/03/19].

Flood, A. (2014). Charles Dickens novel inscribed to George Eliot up for sale. [online] *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/21/charles-dickens-george-eliot-a-tale-of-two-cities> [Accessed 01/03/19].

Kozlowski, B. (n.d.). Charles Dickens, the paranormal and ghost stories. [online] Historic UK. Available at: <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/A-Dickens-of-Good-Ghost-Story/> [Accessed 6 Mar. 2019].

Maitzen, R. (2014). Realism and research in Adam Bede. [online] The British Library. Available at: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/realism-and-research-in-adam-bede> [Accessed 4 Mar. 2019].

Mead, R. (2011). Gems from George Eliot. [online] *The New Yorker*. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/gems-from-george-eliot> [Accessed 26/02/19].

Files.datapress.com. (2015). Population Growth in London, 1939-2015. [online] Available at: <https://files.datapress.com/london/dataset/population-change-1939-2015/historical%20population%201939-2015.pdf> [Accessed 24/02/19].

Aboutbritain.com. (n.d.). Poverty in Victorian Times on AboutBritain.com. [online] Available at: <http://www.aboutbritain.com/articles/poverty-in-victorian-times.asp> [Accessed 1 Mar. 2019].

Reed, John R. (1992). Authorised punishment in Dickens' fiction. *Studies in the Novel*, [online]. Vol. 24. No. 2. p.112-130. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29532853>. [Accessed 01/03/19].

Wiesenfath, J. (1977). George Eliot's Notes for Adam Bede. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, [online]. Vol. 32. No. 2. p.127-165. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2933186>. [Accessed 27/02/19].

Woolf, V. (1989). *A Room Of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt.

Ariana Rubio

Works consulted

Dickens, C. (2004). *David Copperfield*. London: Penguin Classics.

Dickens, C. (2009). *Oliver Twist*. London: Penguin Classics.

Dickens, C. (1997). *Our Mutual Friend*. London: Penguin Classics.

Dickens, C. (1836). *Sketches by Boz*. [ebook] Project Gutenberg. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/882/882-h/882-h.htm> [Accessed 07/03/19].

Dickens, C. (1836). *The Pickwick Papers*. [ebook] Project Gutenberg. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/580/580-h/580-h.htm> [Accessed 06/03/19].

Eliot, G. (2015). *Middlemarch*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Eliot, G. *The Mill on the Floss*. (2003). London: Penguin Classics.

Websites consulted

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/05/100-best-nonfiction-books-no-45-a-room-of-ones-own-by-virginia-woolf-shakespeares-sister-seton-beton>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/mar/27/eliot-mill-floss-biography-tulliver>

<https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-a-room-of-ones-own>

<https://www.bl.uk/people/george-eliot>

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-natural-history-of-german-life-essay-by-george-eliot-from-the-westminster-review>

<http://dickenssociety.org/?p=1759>

<https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Charles-Dickens/>