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## Further reading

Before you start reading a lot of critical books about Dickens – indeed, before you read any critical book – ask yourself why you are bothering to do so. Critical books are useful, but only if you use them in the right way. They should complement your own thinking about a text rather than serve as a substitute for thinking. The most important thing to remember is that your criticism will only stand up if it is based on your own impressions and experience of the text. It might be that you just cannot see what a novel is about, that it leaves you totally baffled. At this point, a clear introduction to the novel which draws attention to its central themes can be very helpful. More often than not, the introductory essay in the edition of the novel you are using should prove illuminating in this kind of way. The introductions to the Penguin editions of Dickens are particularly good.

Another useful purpose these introductions serve is if you want to verify your own response; it can be very encouraging to turn to a critical essay which shows that your thinking about a novel is on the right lines. At the outset, if you are going to bother with criticism at all, don't search for unusual or eccentric criticism. What you need to establish before anything else is a clear and sensible understanding of the text. The chances are that, if you leap straight into unusual or eccentric criticism, you will become confused, and you will certainly not get a clear understanding of the novel's central themes. Good critics arrive at unusual interpretations only after spending a considerable amount of time thinking about and analysing a text, so to begin with stick to the kind of solid introductions mentioned above.

This is precisely why I have discussed the novels in the order I have in this book. At the outset, I wanted to establish the major themes at the centre of *all* Dickens's novels, and these themes are particularly explicit in *Hard Times* (1854). I then went on, looking

in increasing detail at longer and more complicated novels, finishing with *Dombey and Son* (1848). Of course, this has meant that in this book I have not discussed Dickens's novels in the order in which they were published. The order in which I have considered them is that which enabled me best to illustrate, and develop, a method of looking at the novels. Nor have I looked at all the novels, although it should be apparent that the approach I have presented will work with any of Dickens's novels.

I have used the Penguin editions of Dickens's novels throughout this book, as these are often the most readily available paperbacks, but obviously any good edition (that is to say, an edition with an introduction and notes) will serve if you are studying Dickens. The Oxford University Press editions of Dickens (published in the World's Classics series) are also good. If you are reading only for pleasure, of course, even the tattiest old beaten-up edition from the local jumble sale will still convey all of Dickens's genius and magic. And that is what I hope this book has done: although I have looked at only a few of Dickens's novels, you should be able to take the *approach* I have been recommending to any of his novels. But, as I have looked at only six of the novels, and in what might at first have appeared a rather haphazard order, it seems sensible to include a chronological list of his major fiction here:

*The Pickwick Papers* (1837)

*Oliver Twist* (1838)

*Nicholas Nickleby* (1839)

*Master Humphrey's Clock: The Old Curiosity Shop, Barnaby Rudge* (1840–1)

*Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844)

*Dombey and Son* (1848)

*David Copperfield* (1850)

*Bleak House* (1853)

*Hard Times* (1854)

*Little Dorrit* (1857)

*A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)

*Great Expectations* (1861)

*Our Mutual Friend* (1865)

*The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870; unfinished at Dickens's death)

As you will see from this list, Dickens was a very prolific writer. In fact, the above list is only a part of his output, for he wrote dozens of short stories, about half a dozen plays, and many essays and articles. What this prodigious output demonstrates is what I have been trying to draw your attention to as this book has progressed: that Dickens's novels deal with all aspects of the society in which he lived. He always wrote for a mass audience, and he was interested in the same things as interested his audience: social injustice and reform, the position of women and children in society, education, work, crime, a good murder story. As I have tried to show in this book, all these interests are deeply embedded in his fiction; it is the way in which he explores them which creates the distinctive quality of a Dickens novel: a sense of the grotesque and of fantasy, of the darker impulses which motivate people, his exuberant delight in language. If you can see these interests and qualities at work in his novels, then you really are beginning to establish a solid grasp of the text.

And really, if you can see these interests and qualities in Dickens's novels, you don't need to read any more criticism. Time spent looking at and thinking about passages from a novel is time much more usefully employed than time spent reading other people's views. But it might be that, even after doing a lot of work on the novel yourself, you still want to find out more. Indeed, working closely on a text might stimulate your interest to the point where you want to see how other people respond to the novel. This is the point at which it can prove useful to turn to criticism in order to add to or unsettle your ideas. The two times at which it is most useful to look at criticism, therefore, are just after reading the novel, when you might need some help in sorting out your general ideas and in establishing the novel's central themes, and after you have done a lot of your own work on a text, when you feel that your own thinking might benefit from some additional stimulus.

There are several books and articles I can recommend which will help you get hold of the central themes and interests of Dickens's novels. One book you will find helpful in this way is J. Hillis Miller's *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Harvard University Press, 1958). Similarly, Barbara Hardy's *The Moral Art of Dickens* (Athlone Press, 1970) presents very clearly what is central in Dickens's fiction. Once you have got hold of the central themes you might want something to stimulate your thinking. John

Carey's *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (Faber, 1973) is exceptionally good in this respect and will probably stop you in your tracks as you suddenly start reconsidering your view of Dickens's novels. But the important thing is: *read criticism critically*. Don't be fooled into thinking that the views of published critics are necessarily right.

A good way to balance your approach to any novelist is to read some critical books which include essays by a number of different critics. This helps you to see the variety of approaches which can be taken to a text and illustrates that all of these approaches may be in their own way quite valid. One such collection you might like to start with is *The Changing World of Charles Dickens*, edited by Robert Giddings (Vision Press, 1983). The books in the Macmillan Casebook series are also helpful here. The central one is *Dickens*, edited by A. E. Dyson (Macmillan, 1968) and this is supported by Casebooks collecting criticism on individual novels.

But, as you will soon find out when you start looking along the shelves of your library, Dickens has attracted a huge amount of critical attention. The first thing to remember is that you can't read all of it. And, even if for some perverse reason you did read all the criticism you could find on Dickens, this wouldn't necessarily guarantee that you would understand his novels any better. So, as I have already said, read critical books critically. That's all very well, you might be thinking, but how do I know if a critical book is any good? Well, first of all, have a look at the books I have recommended above. These should help you get to grips with a novel by sending you back to it to test out some new ideas. And that really is as good a way as any of judging the quality of any critical book you read: see if it sends you back to the text to explore it further for yourself.