

## Urban spaces in dicken's sketches by boz

Pratibha Malhotra

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

### Abstract

In the paper, I examine Dickens' representation of spaces associated with debtors– the brokers' shop, sponging house and the debtor's prison. It is interesting to trace how these spaces are creatively conceived as they lie on the dividing line of home and the street. To what extent the domestic ideology, that informs most of the fiction of the time, determines the contours of these spaces.

**Keywords:** dickens, debt, public, private, urban, domestic, walking, *flaneur*

### Introduction

'When I talk of homes' pursued Nicholas, 'I talk of mine... If it were defined by any particular four walls and a roof, God knows I should be sufficiently puzzled to say whereabouts it lay, but that is not what I mean. When I speak of home, I speak of the place where, in default of a better, those I love are gathered together; and if that place were a gipsy's tent, or a barn, I should call it by the same good name notwithstanding'. (*Nicholas Nickleby*, 334)

This definition of home is central to Dicken's understanding and visualization of domesticity and the related bliss. It helps him also to delineate the spaces which are excluded from his definition of home. His urban sensibility allows him to speculate on diverse spaces where the home and the street, the private and the public intersect. The dynamic nature of society in Dicken's times underlies the shifting topology of urban landscape. Institutional spaces like hospitals, asylums, prisons and other commercial sites like shops, markets and inns, became domains where unprecedented interactions necessitated by the urban experience of change and heightened mobility, take place.

Dicken's keen observation, sensitivity and speculative powers allowed him to perceive the changing nature of societal interactions. The changes that swept across the urban England of early nineteenth century made possible the chance encounters between people of various socio-economic classes. Thus, the technological and commercial forces that forged new means of income and new relations based on work and profession, also ushered in the possibilities of bringing together people of diverse classes. The confluence of the rich and poor, respectable and despicable, honest/moral and degenerate was made inevitable in places as diverse as trains, markets, shops to prison and most certainly in the street. The possibility of such encounters provided stimulus for the creative artists of the time. Dickens sketches capture the variety and vitality of life in London.

In the present paper, I attempt to see how the city in transition informs Dickens's vision and representation of the urban landscape. The London scenario, for Dickens, gave rise to an acceptance of diverse minor sites as well as panoramic view. In the paper, I examine Dickens' representation of spaces

associated with debtors– the brokers' shop, sponging house and the debtor's prison. It is interesting to trace how these spaces are creatively conceived as they lie on the dividing line of home and the street. To what extent the domestic ideology, that informs most of the fiction of the time, determines the contours of these spaces. I proceed by examining the literary representations of these spaces in the early nineteenth century popular entertainment and Dickens's sketches and fiction.

Dickens in *Sketches by Boz* presents certain urban scenes along with characters and tales. The choice of scenes presented by Dickens "The Streets" "Scotland Yard", "Monmouth street", "Doctor's Common", "Astley's", "A Parliamentary Sketch", "Omnibuses", "Criminal Courts" etc. foreground his urban concerns. A variety of humble shops are presented along with more sophisticated scenes of 'Vauxhall Gardens', 'London Recreations', 'Private Theatres'. However, in most cases it is not difficult to determine his sympathies which drive him towards the streets teeming with people, as the day progresses from lazy torpor to usual bustle of the city life. These are the characteristic scenes and caricatures witnessed by Londoners 'illustrative of everyday life and everyday people', as the subtitle asserts.

This form of caricature and city sketches was not uncommon for contemporary Victorians. It was popularized by graphic sketches of Hogarth, literary sketches of Pierce Egan, Redding and sketches of London types or urban individuals. The panoramic London scenes send out what Deborah Epstein Nord calls 'ideological message', 'an ordered virtuous capital, emblematic of a majestic and great society, indicative of a nation fit to rule a great and growing enterprise'. Hogarth brings the contradictory elements of London life together.

The other dominant perceptual and literary mode for evoking early nineteenth century city was the sudden, instructive encounter with a solitary figure. Though it brought the complacent bourgeois, idly rambling over the city landscape face to face with poor beggars, sweeps, urchins, they served for the moral edification and entertainment of the readers and spectators. This form was inherited from Romanticism, for instance, in the epiphanic encounter with the blind beggar in Book VII of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850), and appeared in literary and graphic portraits of the city and urban entertainments. In W.T. Moncreiff's play *Tom and Jerry*, adapted from Pierce Egan's novel *Life in London*, Tom

Corinthian, an urban dandy conducts his rustic cousin Jerry Hawthorn through London with view of instructing and amusing him. In the process, various picturesque sites of London are visited and instruction-- orchestrated by beloveds Kate and Sue-- gained. As Tom states at the conclusion

Well, we have been amused by life in London, now let us endeavor to profit by it; - let our experience teach us to avoid its quicksands, and make the most of its sunshine. (26)

Thus, after the uneasy encounters alternating between dazzling high-life and criminal low life, virtuous simplicity and dissipated idleness, an easy solution is soon reached. This resolution is possible because Tom and Jerry remain, for the most part, spectators; they, not unlike the readers and audience, are insulated from the dangers of urban experience. The urban observers preferred to maintain their own invisibility, while absorbing learning from the 'shows' of the city. The urban middle-class reader gets what the narrator in Egan's *Life in London* states as "*camera obscura*" view of the city, 'not only [for] the safety, but because it is so smug, and also possessing the invaluable advantage of SEEING and not being seen'. (51-52)

The contrasts are set in motion by juxtaposition of scenes of low dive in East End 'All Max' and 'Almacks', a grand assembly room in West End; of a modern hell in Fielder Street to Burlington Arcade; of "Black Slums in the Holy Land" and Tom Cribb's parlour. The juxtaposition offers entertainment, delight and shock. As Epstein Nord says, 'contrast works here only inadvertently as a tool of social criticism' (171). A moral and psychological distance is produced by presenting the low-life groups as hypocrites and importers, deprived. Gull'em and Cope dupe flat Mr. Green of city into buying a lame horse, watchman O'Boozle picks Buck's pocket, the cadgers in black slums revel in the success of mendacity society. These scenes reassure the reader further by proving their exculpability in the face of beggar's disguises. Tom introduces Black slums to Jerry as

This, my dear Jerry, is a rich page in the book of life, which will save you many a pound, by exposing the impositions of street mendacity—It almost staggers belief that hypocrisy is so successful, and that the fine feelings of the heart should become so blunted, as to laugh at the humanity of those who step to relieve them. (18)

This complacency of self-congratulating bourgeois is a little ruffled by an increasing anxiety over inequities palpable even in the popular entertainments. Certain encounters like that of Bob Logic with Poor T, in Newgate disrupt the comfortable fiction of deceptive beggars.

By contrast, Dickens' concern for the 'deserving poor' and 'shabby- genteel' is palpable early in his sketches and throughout his fiction. However, even there are instances in sketches where Dickens is ironical about the attempts by some to rise above their class. His attempts to sympathize with the deserving poor and laugh at others need to be closely examined as he presents varied scenes and characters in the earliest journalistic pieces.

The street life and suburban scenes in various degrees of destitution described by Dickens are, like the pawnbrokers'

shop's door, 'half inviting, half repelling to the hesitating visitor' ("The Pawnbroker's Shop"). The speculative pedestrian, Boz is attracted by both the inside and outside of the shop. The narrator, Boz, can be seen as a rambler, observing and not observed. Through his telescopic eye he investigates the scenes, characters and presents them as interesting anecdotes for education and entertainment of his bourgeois readers. He often becomes involved with what he sees on Manmoth Street or with the hospital patient with a sympathetic engagement.

However some sketches had to be structured so as not to offend the reader's sophisticated bourgeois sensibility. The narrator is here, at the same time, critical of the self-satisfied readers who 'in the pleasant consciousness of their own rectitude' forget the 'poverty' of the men and 'temptation' for the women that drive them to gin-shops. He wants the sympathies evoked by the sketches to be in the right place.

Gin drinking is a great vice in England, but wretchedness and dirt are a greater; and until you improve the homes of the poor... gin shops with increase in number and splendor. (*Sketches*, 171)

The affective structure of sympathy, manipulated by the characteristic charity movements, reform societies and governmental institutions in the early nineteenth century, is set against a more individual sympathy. The individual sympathy would, however, require identification with the object. This identification is stalled by the narrator by systematically differentiating himself from the objects of his description. The distanciation is achieved in various ways. Primarily, the self-referential narrator-character Boz, "establishes his narrative position by seeing what character fails to see". (*Vanishing Points*, 17). His omniscience privileges him to have a panoramic and scopic view of the scenes. By implication, what the narrator knows, through his omniscience, is accepted as more reliable.

Many critics [<sup>1</sup> regard Boz as a *flâneur*, a rambler of the streets, observing the crowds, delighting in the vibrancy of the street life. The detached viewer musing over the street scene does not engage or participate in it. As Walter Benjamin in his study on Charles Baudelaire states that the *flâneur* is inherently out of place in the street. Boz's perambulations give him the "authority" attached to omniscience. He takes upon himself to "author" the lives and scenes of street life. Yet Boz is markedly different from *flâneur* because of his engagement and speculation with the street scenes. Boz's popularity with contemporary bourgeois readership indicates endorsements of his viewpoint by the reading public.

The popular taste determines and is determined by the projected images of squalor, filth, poverty, destitution and depravity manufactured by such sketches. These are made available and circulated through the newspaper, which is the popular medium of crystallization of some of the widely circulated comfortable discourses. They reaffirm bourgeois's faith in its own moral and cultural superiority. The flâneur functioned to reassure the urban middle-class that the urban crowd was not as illegible, chaotic or threatening as it

<sup>1</sup> Lyn Pykett in *Charles Dickens* writes, 'By the 1830's the *flâneur's* street walking style of urban spectatorship had become so pervasive that it seemed quite natural for Dickens to adopt it for *Sketches by Boz*.' (30)

appeared to be. Since both the observer and producer consumer of these images have similar class orientations, it is important to keep in mind that they are likely to reproduce certain caricatures and stereotypical scenes.

In Dickens' *Sketches*, Boz is an idle non-participant observer viewing the city. It is a luxury that only a person who is uninvolved in the observed life can afford. The "Pawnbroker's Shop" stages the disintegration and downfall of formerly prosperous families. Boz perceives the danger that pawning holds for the welfare of the family. It might ordain doom for respectability which is cherished by all the people. The people who've come to pawn their valued articles are not amused by the scene. They evade observation by remaining behind screens, in separate boxes or dark corners. Both the respectable women, who are on the brink of penury and the prostitute, are highly uncomfortable in this public space. They try to remain in the most 'the darkest and the most obscure corner of the shop. They despair over the lost prosperity of the bygone days.'

The shopkeeper deals in rather respectful manner with the elderly lady and her daughter. It is, however, not their first visit to the shop as indicated by their unhesitating answers to the shop man. The 'recollection of misery' endured have hardened the features of both. It is significant that they exchange a small gold chain and 'forget me not ring' which were most likely gift given to the young girl. It is the observation of these small tokens of lost prosperity in a bleak and cold milieu that evokes pathos for the readers.

On the other hand, the prostitute, whose attire bespeaks her destitution and degradation, is also anxious to avoid observation. She is dressed in 'miserably poor but extremely gaudy, wretchedly, cold but extravagantly fine clothes'. Her body and appearance is described in detail: 'sunken face, where a daub of rouge only serves as index to the ravages of squandered health never to be regained, and lost happiness never to be restored' (177). It is the poverty coupled with depravity that attracts Boz's attention. The cause and which effect cannot be determined and there is not attempt to do so. While she is subjected to the gaze of the narrator, she in turn scans 'minutely the appearance of her-half-concealed companions', the respectable women referred earlier.

She is in turn looked by these respectable companions, who 'involuntarily' shrink from her. It is interesting to see how the prostitute is under a matrix of gazes, of her companions, the narrator and the reader of the *Sketches*. The first response of her immediate neighbors repulsed 'involuntarily' by her demeanor is enough to make her 'retreat to the back of the box, cover her face with her hands, and burst into tears'. The intuitive response of the prostitute is to 'cover her face', to avoid the gaze of her observes. However, in a place, like a shop, this is not possible. It is a space where objects, people and affects, alike are on display. They can be interpreted by the observer according to his/her own value base.

The reaction of the women is characteristic of the treatment that the prostitute is likely to be meted out by most observers. The prostitute was regarded increasingly, in the early nineteenth century, as the morally degenerate carrier of disease. Boz's use of word 'involuntarily' to qualify the response from the respectable women signal his own ambiguity in structuring his response to such problematic figures in a space which allows the coming together of people of in different levels of destitution and deprivation. To assign

repulsion as response to women whom he regards as respectable, which have only recently been prosperous, is unacceptable to Dickens. The bourgeois heroines, much admired by the public, in his novels like Little Dorrit, Esther Summerson etc. are genteel women, amiable, generous and kind and incapable of any mean response to anybody. It is, however, an accepted and conditioned response which helps these women to establish their difference from the prostitute. They articulate their difference from this prostitute by bodily shrinking from her in a place where class differences are flimsy.

Boz alludes to the innate goodness and integrity of the human nature, 'strange chords in the human heart, which will be dormant through years of depravity and wickedness'. Her destiny is embodied in the form of another woman in the shop. She is also a spectator but her curiosity and attention is short-lived. She is the 'lowest of the low', 'dirty, un-bonneted, flaunting and slovenly'. She is a step further than the prostitute in the 'usual' course that life of these women takes. This anonymous woman awaits the last two stages-- the hospital and the grave.

Through the juxtaposition of these three types of women in different degrees of penury and related moral deprivation in this curious space, Dickens hints at the economic factors leading the women to degradation. Women who are the ideal 'housekeepers' providing the male with the cozy and warm hearth at home, are doomed when they are forced out of house for the want of money. Suggesting that the first described woman may soon follow the other's example 'terminated the same wretched course, in the same wretched manner', Dickens ironically observes the possibilities of moral depravity of respectable woman. Since, the system of brokering is inhumane, mechanical, based on monetary principles, it is unlikely to be considerate to the misery of the women.

Combined with the misery and projected fates of the women in the shop, the articles, 'pledged and never redeemed' represent the disintegration of the domestic sphere which is the cherished domain of the bourgeois reader. The more humble shops deal with 'every description of property'. An array of household articles-- graded prayer books, silver watches, table and teaspoons, cheap silver penholders and snuff, silk and cotton handkerchiefs-- bespeak of households disbanded, shorn of their adornments, and portending complete destitution. The reader is, however, invited by the narrator Boz to view this receptacle for 'misery and distress with which the streets of London abound' as a matter of curiosity, to observe the 'striking scene' it presents. Its contents and sights are orchestrated so as not to offend 'the most fastidious reader'.

Georg Simmel notes the importance of eccentricity as a necessary means of expressing individuality.

There is the difficulty of giving one's own personality a certain status within the framework of metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice, of fastidiousness, the meaning of which is no longer to be found in the content of such activity itself but rather in its being a form of "being different" – of making oneself noticeable. (*On Individuality and Social Forms*, 336)

The bourgeois reader and the narrator, in an attempt to establish their difference from those on lower social scale then

themselves present their life and spaces as eccentric. However, a repetition and rearticulation of this eccentricity leads to what Audrey Jaffe calls 'uniformity of eccentricity'. Such universalization of curious behaviour alienates him from the 'observed' and flatten their differences in favor of stereotypes. It further makes sympathy with the 'shabby-genteel' difficult. The Debtor's prison is a consistent presence in Dickens's oeuvre. The childhood feelings combined with insight of mature observation kept this space alive in his imagination. In an early sketch on the issue of debt, "The Broker's Man", Dickens presents amusing Mr. Bung, the eponymous broker's man. He himself is a marginal character, a cog in the wheel that drives people up to the debtor's prison. His fortune fluctuates 'between nothing to eat and just half enough'. He is not, he himself remarks, 'one of those fortunate men who, if they were to dive under one side of a barge stark-naked, would come up on the other, with a new suit of clothes on, and a ticket for soup in the waistcoat pocket'. On the other hand, 'he is just one of the careless, good-for-nothing, happy fellows, who float, cork-like, on the surface, for the world to play hockey with'. (27)

This happy, jovial, poor broker's man is appointed by Boz to give an insider's view of households where he is sent to serve notice for payment of debt. Boz is like Dickens a detached non-participating observer complicit 'voluntarily or involuntarily' with the system that serves the merchants, traders etc. to retrieve their money from the debtors. However, Boz is exculpated on account of his poverty, his job, it has been explained, is for sustenance. Thus, Dickens supplants Bung in the midst of the household on the verge of collapse. The distanciation it allows Boz also grants him to ironically view the wretched state these families are in.

The first family that Bung enters, on his appointment, is fortunate as it is able to pay their debt and simultaneously to preserve their respectability. The humour generated in the attempt to do so offsets the serious implications; Bung soon observes that this was 'the bright side of the picture' which one sees very seldom. The next house on the list is a two-room house down George's Yard is in extremely wretched and miserable state. Misery had changed the mother into a "devil". The family was taken to the workhouse. The mother, who 'had been a quiet, hard-working woman', until 'misery drove her wild', soon dies. The other family described has a woman at the centre of household, who is angelic with all the virtues of Dickensian heroine. She is able to preserve her household but sacrifices herself.

The misery that families and women have to endure in the changing economic scenario is treated variously by Dickens. It is important to note that the repetition of an act trivializes it and it robs the contingency of acting on it. The subject who repeats, like Mr. Watkins Tottle, his folly is subjected to irony and humor. For Boz it becomes a means of evading responsibility. Mr. Tottle aspires to rise above his station without hardwork by marrying into a fortune. His indolence lands him up in sponging house, which is the intermediate step towards debtor's prison. Sponging houses were in place to fleece out or sale of whatever little property they own. The cheerful Mr. Gabriel Parsons is placed as the observer in the sponging house where Watkins Tottle is detained. Mr. Parsons again is a glum, jovial middle-class observer who is undoubtedly an outsider.

It is one of the spaces that, like debtor's prison, bring together people of different socio-economic backgrounds. There is a genteel-looking young couple, a horse dealer, and a middle-aged couple in and out of debt, who share the same glass 'in truly conjugal harmony'. It is the young married couple belonging to the genteel class, disowned by parents, who inspire interest of most of the inmates as the others are habituals. The respectable couple is unused to the filth and squalor of the place and bears 'an air of superiority'. They may have inspired admiration and sympathy in others, but they themselves seek privacy in the public space open to observation. The house offers the privacy of a drawing room to respectable detainees on payment. The coal dealer's wife comments: 'Ah! When they've seen as much trouble as I and my old man here have, they'll be as comfortable under it as we are'. (434) The semblance of home that the old couple is able to achieve in this border space merits attention. It is difficult to say whether Dickens is sympathetic to such attempts or simply ironical. However, it emerges from this brief narrative that the institutional disciplinary mechanisms exploit the bourgeois' concern to maintain respectability even in the face of acute financial crises. As a published report on the debates on the desirability of amendment in Debtor's Law, displays how the law was often used by the moneylender for personal reasons as it threatens the reputation of the debtor. The guardians of the young couple use the Law to make the couple complaint with their wishes. The debtor is also compelled to pursue their friends. Mr. Tottle depends on Mr. Parsons to pay his debts. Dickens was familiar with the darker the implications of the law and dwells, in his fiction, on the dangers it has for the domestic sphere.

The psychological effect of the debtor's prison on the psyche of an individual is best worked out in case of Mr. Dorrit, the father of the Marshalsea, 'A very amiable and very helpless middle-gentleman' who lands up in debtors' prison due to a convoluted partnership where nobody on the face of the earth could be more incapable of explaining any single item in the heap of confusion than the debtor himself. (59)

What emerges from these hybrid spaces generated by the changing socio-economic relationships in the society is Dickens acute awareness of the threat it poses for the domestic sphere. It is domestic space nurtured by women's care, devotion and sacrifice that is necessary for sanity in the urban chaos. Dickens, through Boz evades an intimate engagement with the concerns of the poor, who inhabit these hybrid spaces with the respectable bourgeois. However, the spatial proximity also threatens a probable degeneration of the moral and cultural ethos of the bourgeoisie. However, the attempt to preserve the domestic bliss in urban spaces like sponging houses and debtor's prison reaffirm the sanctity of the home.

## References

1. Breslow, Julia "The Narrator in Sketches by Boz" *ELH* 1977; 44(1):127-149
2. Dickens, Charles *Sketches by Boz* London: Penguin, 1996.
3. *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* London: Wordsworth Classics, 1998.
4. Jaffe, Audrey *Vanishing Points* Ny: Univ of California Press, 1991.
5. Maxwell, Richard "Dickens Omniscience" *ELH* No. 1979; 46:290-313.

6. Nord, Deborah E. *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation and the City* Cornell Univ. Press, 1996.
7. Simmel, Georg *on Individuality and Social Forms* Univ of Chicago Press, 1972.