

HUMOUR AND PATHOS IN CHARLES DICKENS "DAVID COPPERFIELD."



Assi. Prof. Sandip B. Agrawal
(Head Dept. of English)

Humour :-

Dickens is perhaps the greatest humorist that England has ever produced. In this respect he may be considered only next to Shakespeare who is the creator of great humour characters. Without humour he would have failed as a novelist. His range as a humorist is extremely wide. His novels abound in farcical situations designed with the sole purpose of amusing. When he deals with the human follies and foibles, inconsistencies and incongruities his humour becomes more mature. It gets a mildly ironical tinge. Dickens loves his characters, he appears to be amused by them rather than contemptuous of them. Therefore his humour is tolerant and sympathetic. But when he deals with officials, lawyers, other bigwigs and is confronted with their vanity, hypocrisy, greed and insolence, his humour becomes satirical. Then it is very sharp and pointed ready to hit and expose.

The best humour that we find in the whole of Dickens and in 'David Copperfield' in particular is the humour of characters. Two of the greatest comic characters, Aunt Betsey Trotwood and Mr. Micawber meet us in David Copperfield. Aunt Betsey who appears in the opening chapter sets the whole tone of the novel. The way she keeps her nose pressing against the window pane till it turns white makes her look very funny. She comes to Clara Copperfield in the hope that Clara would give birth to a baby girl whom she would be able to adopt and bring up. But when she learns about the birth of a boy she gets instantly annoyed and shaking her fists at the doctor, leaves the house, never to return. The Doctor meek and subdued, terribly afraid of her. The two of them together make the situation look extremely funny.

Mr. Micawber is humour personified. He looks funny, acts funny, speaks funny. To some he might appear as a rare and therefore improbable character. He is a middle aged person, with no more hair on his head. The abruptness with which he casts off his gloom, polishes his shoes and goes out humming a tune makes him look very

comic. In addition he has a grandiloquent way of speech. He makes eloquent speeches in a high flown style and often talking for a few minutes in a bombastic style, he paraphrases what he has said in a simple language beginning the paraphrase with the words, in short according to G.K. Chesterton

"If Falstaff is the greatest comic character in Literature Mr. Micawber is the greatest but one."¹

Dickens humour is illuminating because it sheds light on human nature. His humour allows thought. It is suggestive and psychological. We are immensely delighted in the company of his large number of humorous creations whom we never forget. We remember unforgettable character like Mr. Peter Magnus, Mr Guppy, Mr. Jack Hopking, Mr Toots, Mr. Micawber, Mrs. Gamp and Mrs. Sipper among many others.

Dickens humour of characters is both sympathetic and satiric. Furthermore his satiric and sympathetic humour is fantastic. His characters of humour maybe exaggerated but they are based on reality. He stresses on the weak points, with the result his characters become effective. Dickens being a novelist of genius makes his characters objects of humour instead of objects of disgust. He sublimates his characters. To quote Gissing

"In both the cases, the sublimation of character and circumstances is affected by a humour which is unsurpassable."²

Dickens is excellent in bringing out the humor of oddity and stupidity e.g. Mr. Dick in David Copperfield is a source of amusement and entertainment for the readers.

'David Copperfield' reveals Dickens exuberant spirit of comic art. It is because of the riot of absurdity in David Copperfield that it has become immortal. Dickens has a profound love of exaggeration which enables him to create absurd characters and situations in it. Mr. Micawber, Mrs. Micawber, Barkis, Pegotty and Miss.

Betsey are absurd figures in the novel. Moreover there are absurd situations in the novel which are sources of immense amusement and entertainment e.g. Miss Betsey's scene with Mr. Chillip and the donkey boy, Davids absurd situation with the greedy waiter and the horrible old man on mover road.

Mr. Barkis's love for Peggotty and the way he sends his proposal to her "Barkis is will, is in." is quite hilarious. These words spoken by Barkis and conveyed to Peggotty through David were on the life of almost every reader in Dickens times. These very words become very touching when Barkis utters them at the time of his death. Tears in our eyes and smile on our face appear simultaneously.

There is Mr. Dick busy in writing a memoir, worrying about King Charles head and cheerfully flying kites. There is Clara Peggotty, so plump in the body that any slight exertion makes some of the bottoms on the back of her gown fly off. Finally there is Tammy Traddles, whose unruly hair can never be smoothed down and who persists in his habit of drawing skeletons even when he grows up.

Being comic Dickens Characters are capable of turning any situation in to a comic situations. The grandiloquence of Mr. Micawber on the miserliness of Mr. Barkis are such inherently comic traits that has great potential for comic situations.

Thus we come to the conclusion that humor is the soul of Dickens novels. It is also its savior. It sustains his creative impulses.

George Gissing very appropriately said

"Without his humour he might have been a vigorous advocate of social reform but as a novelist assuredly he would have failed."³

Pathos :-

Dickens had a natural gift for homely pathos. He could create pathetic situations as spontaneously and effortlessly as humorous situations. When Foster read one of Dickens's stories to a friend he wept so much and so painfully that Foster didn't know whether to go on or to stop. Dickens letters to his wife itself are full of reference to friends crying or being thrown into a dread full state by reading from his books. In his his autobiographical novel 'David Copperfield' there are several characters who are really pathetic and Dickens manages to extract the last drop of tears from the eyes of his readers.

The early scene in which Mr & Mrs. Murdstone tyrannise over Clara Copperfield and David affects the readers in such a way that he is all sympathy for the poor souls. Who would not feel sad and dejected at Davids Fate? His mother dies. He is kicked out of home and made to work for his living for an amount which is hardly enough to keep his body and soul together. Davids love for Dora and her prolonged illness and ultimately her death is depicted in such an effective way that we are sure to be moved to tears.

In David Copperfield Dickens extracts our tears by presenting sights of loss of son to mother and loss of parents to children. Mrs. Steerforth's laments establishes the sense of sorrow through the pity of the another son relationship. Dickens describes in details the sufferings of the motherless Dora after the sudden death of her father. The grief stricken Dora is a truly pathetic character. The picture of Mr. Mell of Salem House is indeed pathetic. His mother lives on charity from an alms house. The ill treatment she gets there is itself a suffering to Mr. Mell. To add insult to injury Mr. Mell is dismissed from the school on the ground that his mother lives on charity.

Davids sufferings at the hands of the Murdstones, the pitiable condition of his mother, the placard he has to wear in the Salem House, the cruel treatment meted out to him by Mr. Creakle, the death of his mother particularly on his birthday, the sense of humiliation and desolation suffered by him working in the women's blacking factory, and a number of other scenes where David the child is involved are genuinely pathetic. There is a great deal of pathos even in the experiences of the Peggotty's family.

In certain other scenes Dickens spoil the pathetic effect by overdoing the pathos or making the scenes theatrical and melodramatic. He has made Mrs. Gummidge a melodramatic character in order to create an aura of goodness around Mr. Peggotty. The courage with which Dora bears her suffering wipes out some of the earlier impression of being childish and makes the reader sympathise with her. Her death is quite pathetic. But the death of her dog Jip at the same moment spoils the pathetic effect. The sufferings of Mr. Peggotty and the sacrifice of Ham need no comment. There was hardly any need of washing Steerforth's body to the shore to lie at Davids feet. It serves no useful purpose but the element of coincidence involved in it reduces its impressiveness.

His humour is essentially a humour of character and his are mostly poor people who find themselves in pathetic condition. There is a whole galaxy of such characters who are both comic and pathetic at the same time. Dickens natural gift for homely pathos enables him to give heart rending pictures of the suffering of children in his novel.

Dickens humor is of two kinds Satirical and Sympathetic. People like Mr. and Mrs. Murdstone stiff cold and efficous are often the victim of Dickens satirical humour. His depiction of people like the Murdstones is such that we laugh at their appearance, their peculiar manner of speech and their habits but it is a kind of decisive laughter. His best characters are creations of his sympathetic humour. He has created such characters like Peggoty, Barkis, Betsey Trotwood, Dick and Mr. and Mrs. Micawber with sympathy and care. All of them are queer

and hilariously funny. But there is a streak of the pathetic in most of these characters.

Thus we see that the true humour and pathos run hand in hand in the novel. Dickens without humour is a very lop-sided creature indeed. And without pathos Dickens is rare or rather unthinkable. We get an over abundance of pictures delightful to every heart which can enjoy fun, respect innocence and sympathized with kindles. Hence, his appeal is national.

References -

1. Chesterton G.K. - Charles Dickens Methuen and Company London, 1966 P. 183
2. Gissing George - Charles Dickens, Washington N.Y. 1966, Originally published in 1924, P. 121
3. Ibid, P. 122

