

LETTER--To Charles Dickens

The letter to Charles Dickens delves into the unique literary divide between those who favor Dickens and his contemporary, Thackeray, arguing instead for appreciation of both authors' works. The narrator identifies himself as impartial, enjoying the merits of both writers without taking sides. Despite this neutrality, the chapter critiques the extreme imitations and mannerisms of Dickens's "special devotees," who, despite their adoration, might misunderstand the breadth of his humor and the depth of his works beyond the surface-level mimicries. The evolution of Dickens's reception is noted, with a recognition of his enduring popularity and the way his novels, such as "David Copperfield," provide solace and escape to readers, even as some openly reject his books like "Pickwick."

The chapter progresses to lament the decline of humor in England, attributing societal issues and lack of understanding of Dickens to a broader dearth of humor. Dickens is celebrated for inheriting and contributing to a British tradition of robust, uproarious humor and social satire. Characters like Sam Weller and Mrs. Gamp symbolize the essence of old English comedy, reared on "the beef and beer" of a bygone era. Yet, the chapter questions the longevity of Dickens's appeal, especially concerning his pathos and melodrama, which, to modern sensibilities, may seem overwrought or maudlin.

In its critique, the letter points out the paradox of Dickens's intense and sometimes gratuitous emotional manipulation, particularly in his depiction of child characters like Little Nell and Paul Dombey. There's an argument that such overt sentimentality might disengage contemporary readers rather than endear them. However, the chapter acknowledges the subjective nature of emotional response to literature, highlighting that what moves one reader to tears may leave another cold.

The chapter concludes by addressing what it perceives as Dickens's occasional excesses in both dark and fantastical elements, which can distance readers through

their implausibility or heavy-handedness. Yet, amidst these critiques, the chapter retains a deep respect and affection for Dickens's work, recognizing his unparalleled contribution to English literature and humor, while expressing hope that his legacy will continue to be cherished, notwithstanding changing tastes and sensibilities.

