

Samuel Pickwick (in Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*) Agreeable

Overview An episodic novel—the first novel by Charles Dickens—published in serial form in 1836-7, and in book form in 1837. Dickens had become popular through his *Sketches by Boz* (1816), which were a series of sketches of London life, with strong emphasis on character portrayal. The kind of sociological-ironic tone of the present novel, part journalism and part work in the great tradition of the novel, shows the overwhelming passion of Dickens for **social character analysis**. The powerful portraits to come—in *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, or *Oliver Twist*—are heralded in *The Pickwick Papers*.

Character Mr. Samuel Pickwick is the organizing principle of this episodic novel. He is not a dominating figure, but rather a spirited enthusiast for the English countryside and country ways, a sentimentalist, and a compassionate appreciator of the eccentricities and local colorings of the English people. Not only is Pickwick wealthy, but he is 'administrative,' for it is he who enlists three of his friends to join him on coach jaunts throughout the English countryside. In appearance and manner Pickwick is, like all Dickens' characters, a broad caricature: the man 'who had agitated the scientific world with his Theory of Tittlebats.'

Parallels British literature abounds in quirky, bemused characters, whose essence is distilled in Mr. Samuel Pickwick. A classic example, perhaps more robustly hilarious than bemused, is Falstaff, who appears in four Shakespeare plays, notably in *Henry IV, Parts I and II* (1597). For truly bemused, one might turn to Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes' right hand man in penetrating mysteries; Watson is only slightly behind Holmes himself, in intuiting solutions, yet forever emits a kind of professorial 'egad' at the brilliance of his master; for an ironic perfect servant, brilliant, tic-ridden and jovial, look no further than P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves, in the series of novels begun in 1915.

Illustrative moments

1 Grandiloquent Pickwick's initial speech to the members of the Pickwick club, is presented with classical grandeur. 'The eloquent Pickwick, with one hand gracefully concealed behind his coat-tails, and the other waving in air to assist his glowing declamation...' In the fashion of Royal Academicians, and the new societies of learning in Britain at the time, Pickwick celebrates his own scientific ardor, and the desire of members of his new society—four of them—to extend learning and to help mankind. Pickwick refuses to deny that he too, like all humans, has earthly passions, but insists that his better instinct is always to serve.

2 Open We issue directly into the spirit of Mr. Pickwick as a new workday begins. 'Pickwick burst like another sun from his slumbers, threw open his chamber windows, and looked out upon the world beneath.' He is a man ready for and pleased with the world around him. His mind dwells for a moment on the scene right outside his lodgings, then skips rapidly to the wider world he wants to investigate. 'With his telescope in his great-coat pocket, and his note book in his waistcoat,' he headed into the city for a cab, and started on a day of science and antiquities.

3 Romantic Mr. Pickwick lives in simple but well managed boarding quarters, with his landlady and her son, and one large man who occupied a 'dwarfish French bedstead in the back parlor.' Pickwick begins to make his proposal to the (not really startled) Mrs. Bardwell, who thereupon faints in his arms. Pickwick's confusion is doubled by a sudden intervention; the three other members of the Pickwick Club, coming up the back stairs to visit him. The romantic world thus vanishes, doubly forgotten at the arrival of Sam Weller, the character whose full-figured comic joking opens this text into a developed modern novel.

4 Romantic Mr. Pickwick is at his happiest when he is exploring nature—which to him and his group means the peopled and picturesque landscape of rural Britain. On a typical occasion, Pickwick 'leant over the balustrades of Rochester Bridge, contemplating nature and waiting for breakfast.' He meditates on the ruined walls before him, covered with ancient vegetation, and with the richness of battles fought and lives lived. Then his eyes and imagination extend further, out onto the farm lands on either sides of the Medway—here and there an old church or a windmill. His soul is deeply nourished.

Discussion questions

What is Dickens' own attitude toward Mr. Pickwick? Does Dickens find Pickwick a 'loveable eccentric,' or an 'old fool'? Does Dickens appear to identify with this character?

What is the meaning of local history for Mr. Pickwick? Are the history and nature Pickwick values soft or hard? Are they by products of social values?

Is there a strong social critique embedded in *The Pickwick Papers*? How does Mr. Pickwick react to spending three months in jail?