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THE GAME OF IRONY IN CHARLES DICKENS'S NOVELS - MOCKING AT VICTORIANISM THROUGH MALE CHARACTERS -

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Abstract
The paper aims at identifying the three types of irony – verbal, dramatic and of situation – in some of Charles Dickens' novels in order to reveal the author's contribution to the modern understanding of Victorianism. The ironic discourse will be analyzed so as to show the true underlying meaning of Dickens' texts. It is said that Dickens revealed through irony more than historians could have ever revealed through direct telling, and to show whether this is true or not represents the purpose of the current paper. As far as Victorianism is concerned, the first major paradigms which irony is aimed at are precisely Victorian respectability, domesticity and stability. Fragments from the novels that we have chosen as textual support will provide us with evidence that, for example, respectability, domesticity and stability are ironically mocked at through such characters as Mr. Bumble (*Oliver Twist*), Mr. Dombey (*Dombey and Son*), Mr. and Mrs. Merdle (*Little Dorrit*) or Pip (*Great Expectations)*.
Key words: irony, ironic discourse, respectability, domesticity, stability.

1. Introduction

'Irony' is a 'double significance arising from the contrast in values associated with two points of view'; irony also suggests 'the secret communion between author and reader'; 'irony may be located in details of lexis and syntax.'[1] This 'secret communion' between author and reader is able to bridge ages because irony, as we shall further demonstrate, is among the most important and successful devices an author can use to appeal to readers, to remain 'in fashion'. This 'secret communion' able to connect authors and readers belonging to different epochs had already been identified by the Roman rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian who called it 'double-edgedness' and which appears to be a diachronic feature (*ironia)*; for the Greeks, irony figures as one who 'does not come out into the open', of a shadowy nature (*eiron)*.[2] Theorists of later centuries considered irony in conceptual terms that charted understandings such as 'tragic irony' (i.e.

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Oedipus); 'Philosophical Irony' 'which begins with a contemplation of the fate of the world' (Karl Solger, 1817); 'Romantic Irony' where irony is a 'mode of seeing things, a way of viewing existence' (Kierkegaard's thesis on the *Concept of Irony*, 1841) where a distance emerges between the viewer and the thing viewed, such as an artist contemplating his creation from a distanced vantage point, or better, the eminent position God takes in viewing Creation 'with a detached, ironical smile': 'Irony is often the witting or unwitting instrument of truth.'[3] There are three types of irony in rhetorical modern theories: verbal irony (disparity of expression and intention: when a speaker says something but means another or the literal meaning is contrary to its intended effect, e.g. sarcasm); dramatic irony (disparity of expression and awareness: words and actions posses a significance that the reader or audience understands, but the speaker or character does not); situational irony (disparity of intention and result: the result of an action is contrary to the desired or expected result).

Generally speaking, irony describes a situation in which appearance and reality are in conflict: 'a specific literary form of such situational irony is dramatic or tragic irony where, for example, the signification of a situation is hidden from the character but known to the audience.'[4] In a narrower verbal sense, irony 'is a figure of speech in which the intended meaning of an utterance differs from (usually directly contradicting) its apparent meaning.'[5] According to Charadeau and Maingueneau[6], irony implies an effect of disagreement concerning the expected words; irony is, therefore, a contextual phenomenon, with strong interactive and paraverbal components.

Irony often shows itself in a 'collocative clash' – a combination of words which clashes with our expectations: 'the sequencing of impressions is also important to irony', the irony hitting us as a sudden reversal of expectation; irony describes 'a distortion of accepted values: vice = virtue.'[7] Thus, we shall prove that through irony, the Victorian values incorporated into the three Victorian main paradigms of respectability, domesticity and stability are distorted, reversed.

D. Sperber and D. Wilson (1978)[8] suggested that irony should be analyzed as an act of autonomy: thus, instead of being an antiphrasis, irony would be, in fact, some sort of quotation by which the locutor mentions the words of a disqualified character who has said something clearly out of place in relation to the context (thus, our approach to Victorian stability, respectability and domesticity through Dickens' ironic discourse shows the Victorian society as a disqualified character, pretending to be respectable, domestic and stable but being, actually, out of context; the characters will serve as synecdoches, i. e., they will be used in our paper in order to refer to the entire Victorian society). Thus, we may continue the idea with the fact that irony turns into a sign of authorial autonomy and authorial intention.

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2. 'Playing' the game of irony with Charles Dickens

As far as the work of Charles Dickens is concerned, George Orwell thinks that Dickens's fertility of invention consists 'not so much of characters and situations, as of turns of phrase and concrete details', an opinion shared by most critics[9]; Shaw also learned from Dickens that 'it is possible to combine a mirror-like exactness of character drawing with the wildest extravagances of humorous expression.'[10] Therefore, we shall use characters and the way in which they are described, Dickens's 'humorous extravagances', to show the way in which irony works. The characters that we have chosen are male characters because we consider that by mocking men, Dickens mocks even more visibly at the patriarchal Victorian society.

Dickens uses all types of irony: verbal, dramatic and situational, and their effects are part of what makes his writing not only colorful, but also very suggestive.

2. 1. *Oliver Twist* and the 'philosophers' of hunger

A first novel that we have chosen to refer to concerning out current topic is *Oliver Twist*. The plot of the novel opposes innocence and corruption, good and bad characters, middle-class and underclass cultures, country and city settings. The text is marked by strikingly different modes of writing, as Dickens shifts rapidly between sentiment and sensation, storytelling and satire, murderous melodrama and dream.

A wonderfully constructed ironic episode can be found in Chapter 23, the scene where Mr. Bumble woos Mrs. Corney. The serious matters of the workhouse quickly give way to the hilarious sight of Mr. Bumble courting his lady by moving surreptitiously closer around the tea-table. This theatrical interlude is closed with a secret dance of satisfaction by Mr. Bumble, who is unconcerned by the proximity of the Grim Reaper, exposing to us, the audience and the readers, the naked self-interest behind his marriage proposal:

> 'Whatever were Mr. Bumble's intentions, however – and no doubt they were of the best – it unfortunately happened, […] Mr. Bumble, brought his chair in time close to that in which the matron was seated. […] Mr. Bumble's conduct, on being left to himself, was rather inexplicable. He opened the closet, counted the teaspoons, weighed the sugar-tongs, closely inspected a silver milk-pot to ascertain that it was of the genuine metal […] and put on his cocked-hat corner-wise, and danced with much gravity four distinct times round the table.'[11]

But in the ensuing episodes, we discover a henpecked and emasculated Mr. Bumble, deprived of the beadle's cocked hat which had constituted a part of his former identity. The irony in the novel is also the

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fact that ultimately, it is not the Bumbles but the characters from the underworld who dominate the narrative. We, as readers, are struck by their vitality and the relative impossibility of saving Oliver from their hands; although, in terms of the plot Oliver is finally rescued from Fagin and Sikes, on a deeper imaginative level his deliverance seems incredible, and who knows how many similar "Olivers" were there still on the streets of London. An ironic attack is also aimed at the utilitarian philosophy underpinning such institutionalized abuses as one could find in a workhouse, and its supporters represented by the wicked Bumbledom: 'What a noble illustration of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep! […] The members of this board were very sage, deep, philosophical men.'[12] The system of the workhouse is sharply and ironically described too:

> '[…] they found out at once what ordinary people would never have discovered – the poor people like it! […] It was a regular place for public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar elysium where it was all play and no work.'[13]

Irony is obvious even from the spelling of the word 'elysium' with a small letter. The reality was that the workhouse was an institution provided by the parish to house and feed the destitute; in an attempt to minimize the cost to local ratepayers, besides the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 (which was intended to abolish outdoor relief – money and goods given to those in need - , and to leave the poor with no other alternative than to enter the workhouse), the workhouses were to be made "less eligible" – less attractive than the conditions of the poorest local labourer. Thus, the relief was to be inseparable from the workhouse and the gruel, men, women, children and the elderly were to be accommodated separately and a subsistence diet imposed on all inmates. Irony turns into bitter criticism within this fragment from chapter IV:

> 'I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him, whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron, could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected. I wish he could have witnessed the horrible avidity with which Oliver tore the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine. There is only one thing I should like better – and that would be to see the philosopher making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish.'[14]

The 'twisted' name becomes a twisted being writhing with starvation, but also a symbol of the twisted minds of those so-called good philosophers, clearly criticized throughout the novel. All the three main Victorian

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paradigms of respectability, domesticity and stability become, obviously, 'twisted'.

2. 2. *Dombey and Son* – 'anno Dombei and Son'

Such a novel as *Dombey and Son* is particularly structured on situational irony, since irony runs subteraneously throughout the plot and, after a series of disappointments, particularly for Dombey, the novel ends with him being described as different from what we, readers, and the other characters in the novel, used to know:

> 'If the House of Dombey and Son is Mr. Dombey's One True Church, his second wife, Edith Dombey, is the Reformation. In his second wife, Mr. Dombey finds an inflexible pride equal to his; like him she has a world-centre of her own. Into Mr. Dombey's unequivocal world of certainty, Edith introduces an absolute difference that cannot be mediated in his terms and that positively forces him to find others.'[15]

In *Dombey and Son*, irony is particularly directed at Dombey: we are told in the first chapter of the book, in a mixture of ironic and religious discourse (religious activities also constituting a very important part of Victorian social practices as another ay of pretending to be respectable), that 'the earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light' and that 'AD had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei – and Son.'[16] On the other hand, the entire novel seems to be set on chastening Dombey's pride and to 'correct his Ptolemaic moral vision with a patently Copernican one,'[17] so that towards the end of the book Dombey no longer considers Florence a worthless 'bad boy' but his child: ' "To Walter and his wife!" says Mr. Dombey. "Florence, my child – " and turns to kiss her.'[18] If we read the novel from the first page up to the last, perhaps, due to the many pages and small stories we have to pay attention to, we may be misled into thinking what a great gentleman and good person Dombey has become. And yes, critics say that Dombey is a gentleman from the beginning up to the end of the novel, but the main reason for his changing and becoming a better and more loving person towards his own family is the simple truth that he needs and depends upon those close to him, although he does not realise it at first. His discourse clearly expresses his ideas of marriage and the duty of his wife, the fact a wife is supposed to entertain only those guests who matter for the prosperity of the family-business. The greatest irony is that no matter how loud and clear Dombey claims that only money is everything that matters and rejects any type of display of affection, in the end he will be among the ones to show such expressions of emotions. Irony is, of course, also directed at other characters such as Doctor Parker Peps, for example, who, being 'one of the court

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physicians, and a man of immense reputation for assisting at the increase of great families', 'was walking up and down the drawing-room with his hands behind him, to the unspeakable admiration of the family surgeon.'[19] The fact that he keeps on forgetting Mrs. Dombey's name, and calls her either Lady Cankaby, or 'her Grace the Duchess', or 'Countess of Dombey' makes one wonder if he is not in fact a real crook.

2. 3. *Little Dorrit*: a book about 'benevolent' patriarchs

Irony is directed at certain characters in *Little Dorrit*, particularly in relation to their social and material aspirations. For example, Bar describes Merdle as 'one of the converters of the root of all evil into the root of all good'[20], and this allusion to I Timothy 6:10 – 'For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil'[21] – demonstrates the extent to which English society has turned to the worship of false gods. But even Merdle's name, from the French word 'merde' (excrement) suggests that what he represents is not the glitter of gold but the colour and smell of waste matter, a truth exposed by his suicide. Mrs. Clennam's vocabulary 'mingles the accumulation and payment of debt with her self-condemnatory sense of sinfulness and her inexorable judgement of others'[22]:

> 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, was a prayer too poor in spirit for her. Smite thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them … this was the impious tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven.'[23]

Mrs. Merdle is also mocked at: she appears in the novel metonymically, as 'the Bosom' on which Merdle lays out the visible proof of his wealth; this status of cushion for the display of jewellery removes her form the realm of nature to that of culture, or rather to the cult of snobbism: she is not 'young and fresh from the hand of nature, but […] from the hand of her maid'[24]; her artificiality is further emphasized by her assertions of the contrary: ' "society […] is hollow and conventional and worldly and very shocking, but, unless we are savages in the tropical seas I should have been charmed to be one myself – most delightful life and perfect climate I am told), we must consult it" '; she considers herself 'a child of nature, if I could but show it' and 'pastoral to a degree, by nature'.[25]

Irony and realism also go hand-in-hand as far as Casby is concerned: he has cultivated his image as a wise benevolent Patriarch, but the narrative voice quickly points out his hollowness: 'a mere Inn sign-post without any Inn – an invitation to rest and be thankful, when there was no place to put up at … a heavy, selfish, drifting Booby, who, having stumbled … on the discovery that, to get through life with ease and credit, he had but to hold his tongue, keep the bald part of his head well polished and leave his hair alone, had had just cunning enough to seize the idea and stick to it.'[26]

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Moreover, in *Little Dorrit*, like in almost all of Dickens' novels, characters are used for generalizations concerning the Victorian society and England: 'in the great social Exhibition, accessories are often accepted in lieu of the internal character';[27] the design for the cover to the monthly parts of *Little Dorrit*, made by Hablot K. Browne, shows the figure of Britannia in procession. This procession is led by a blind old man and woman walking in another direction that showed by the signposts; then there follows a line of men, with dunce's caps, some with sparse hair and idiotic expressions; after them comes Britannia and behind her a group of gentlemen dressed correctly but with fool's hats and self-satisfied smiles; a smaller man hangs on the coat-tails of one of them, and on his coat-tails hang two more men, looking almost like animals, and others are trying to grasp the same man's coat; at the back of the procession is a group of nurses and children, probably representing the next generation.[28]

2. 4. *Great Expectations* – an ironic title

In *Great Expectations*, irony is particularly directed towards the relationship between ideals, be they social or romantic, and the circumstances of fulfilling such high aspirations, the backhand of revenge and, again, the clash between appearance and reality, expectations and outcomes. This gap between Pip's expectations and his real situation has almost nothing to do with the greatness of a tragic hero, but fits far better into a comic world in which pride is ruthlessly punished. The ironic tone may be perceived from the very title, 'Great Expectations': there is obviously something wrong with these expectations, the syntagm contains a hint of irony in itself, through the word 'expectation' which implies, to a higher or lesser degree, some kind of pride, pride that represents a sin and for a sin one is supposed to be punished. Nevertheless, Frederic Harrison does not necessarily blame human nature but rather the age, for the sin of expecting too much: 'Mr. Carlyle, Mr. Ruskin, the Aesthetes, are all wrong about the nineteenth century. It is not the age of money-bags and cant, soot, hubbub, and ugliness. It is the age of great expectation and unwearied striving after better things.'[29] But there is no irony in Harrison's use of 'great expectations', only his sense that hope and hard work should be mutually reinforcing activities.

One example of irony in *Great Expectations* is the fact that as Pip becomes a gentleman and also a snob, he learns that his education had been paid for by a convict. His dreams of becoming respectable are mocked at by the fact that they are nourished and supported by an outlaw. Miss Havisham's desire to use Estella as a tool of her revenge against Pip as one who belongs to the male gender, gradually leads her into becoming attached to the boy. Irony can also be traced in Pip's despising Joe and Biddy in order to be finally confronted with their happy simple life and warm house with

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flowers on the windowsills; and irony does not leave aside Estella, the princess proven to be a gleaming fake. Thus, Joe and Biddy's happy and simple way of life is, indeed, used by Dickens to show what true respectability, domesticity and stability mean.

But irony is also in the writing of such novels: the writer himself may have ridden to glory on the shillings of a public which may very well have included such people as Bob Fagin or Magwitch; or of those social philosophers that he criticized so much; or on such worldly real beings as Mr. Bumble. And who knows how many 'Pips', 'Olivers' found themselves within the pages of Dickens's novels.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, irony was and still is one of the most powerful tools of a writer for subtly describing characters, societies and ages, for sharply criticizing social ills and political wrongs, injustice, but also one of the pleasant devices to offer advice, to correct some straying judgment or to support and enliven weakened beliefs. As we have seen from the fragments we have analyzed, the confident ironic tone of the writer also highlights a 'darker and more targeted stylistic comedy'.[30]

Colebrook (2004: 3) supports our statement from the beginning of the paper that Dickens was able to reveal through irony more than historians could have ever revealed through direct telling, by arguing that: the practice of explaining a certain epoch and culture relies on being able to identify and understand each writer's specific culture or context; 'in many ways then, we have to be ironic: capable of maintaining a distance from any single definition or context, quoting and repeating various voices from the past. But, we also have to be wary of irony, we have to be sure that the past we grasp means what it seems to mean.'

Thus, the 'elysium' of the workhouse reveals nothing else but the 'respectable' way in which the Victorian society saw fit to deal with the poor; the crumbling of Dombey's firm of a house and his expectations concerning his wife reveal nothing else but the feeble domestic balance in most conventional marriages; *Little Dorrit* continues the idea of the decaying Victorian paradigms with the lack of stability that most Victorians were confronted with; but the story of Pip, and his 'poor labyrinth'[31] places the first-person narrator into the centre of irony: This phrase – 'poor labyrinth' – is explained by Hagan (2009: 50-51) as Pip becoming the focal point for Miss Havisham's and Magwitch's retaliation; he is a scapegoat, the one caught in the midst of the crossfire directed against society by two of the parties it injured, who, in turn, display in their desire for proprietorship some of the very tyranny and selfishness against which they are rebelling. He is the one who must pay for original outrages against justice and the result is that

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he, too, takes on society's vices, its selfishness, ingratitude, extravagance and pride: "the worst qualities of society seem inevitably to propagate themselves in a kind of vicious circle" (idem: 50). Pip, too becomes something of an impostor, similar to Compeyson, following in the fatal footsteps of the man who is indirectly the cause of his future misery. Respectability, stability and domesticity have thus become only 'great expectations'.

Notes

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3. Idem, p. 431.
4. Payne, Michael, *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997, p. 263.
5. *Ibidem*.
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7. Leech, N. G., Short, M. H., *Style …*, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-280.
8. Charadeau, P., Maingueneau, D., *Dictionnaire …*, *op. cit*., p. 331.
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11. Dickens, Charles, *Oliver Twist*, Chatham, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2000, p. 150.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 11.
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14. *Ibidem*, p. 27.
15. Ermath, Deeds, Elizabeth, *The English Novel in History 1840-1895*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 30.
16. Dickens, Charles, *Dombey and Son*, Chatham, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2002, p. 6.
17. Ermath, Deeds, Elizabeth, *The English …*, op. cit., p. 30.
18. Dickens, Charles, *Dombey …*, *op. cit.*, p. 803.
19. *Ibidem,* p. 7.
20. Dickens, Charles, *Little Dorrit*, Chatham, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., p. 238.
21. *The Holy Bible*, The New King James Version, New York, American Bible Society, 1990, p. 1142.
22. Peter Preston, Introduction to Dickens, Charles, *Little …*, *op. cit.*, p. x.
23. Dickens, Charles, *Little …*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
24. *Ibidem*, p. 227.

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25. *Ibidem*, pp. 228, 229, 371 respectively.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 142.
27. *Ibidem*.
28. Illustration reproduced in the Introduction to Dickens, Charles, *Little …*, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.
29. Harrison, Frederick, "A Few Words about the Nineteenth Century" in *Fortnightly Review*, NS, 30, 1882, 12, *apud* Introduction to Dickens, Charles, *Great Expectations*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. xxiii.
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