

APR 09 1994

DICKENS IN AMERICA, 1842

**AN ABSTRACT OF
A THESIS
PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF DANBURY STATE COLLEGE**

**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF SCIENCE**

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April 1966**

The development of Charles Dickens has been charted in many ways; from the Marxist view taken by T. A. Jackson some time ago to a new psychological survey by Mark Spilka, Dickens and Kafka. But whatever the viewpoint, there seems to be general agreement that, at a certain point in his career, between the writing of Barnaby Rudge and Martin Chuzzlewit, the quality of Dickens' work showed a startling increase in maturity and skill, an unfolding of genius. I have found little exploration, in the available published material, of why this change occurred at this time. However, it seems to me that a sound explanation is evident and that it has fairly strong documentation. The explanation is available from the evidence of his own work and activities, and requires little conjecture.

At the time of this change, Dickens underwent an extraordinary experience, extraordinary for him even though it was neither rare nor unusual. He recorded certain aspects of this in a small book, American Notes, and elaborated on it in many letters to his friend, John Forster.

From January to June, 1842, Dickens visited in the United States. He came full of the highest hopes for the success of the new democracy. Although he knew that America was not perfection achieved, he expected that it was, at

least, further along the road than his own country. He believed, firmly, before he came, that people were made mean and poor by the injustices of corrupt social institutions. Released from these chains, they would build a good life for themselves and each other. He expected to see this belief realized in America.

American Notes records his great disillusionment. He was bitterly disappointed in almost everything he found in America: the new political institutions the Americans had created for themselves, the economic exploitation, the venal newspapers, the degraded social life. He was appalled to find what an arduous, often tragic, task it was to settle a new country, and seems to have been amazed to find himself, contrary to his expectations, highly unsympathetic. He began to think more kindly of the comforts and institutions of his own country and, although he remained a liberal, began to revise his beliefs considerably.

This six-month long series of shocks was an eye-opening encounter with reality for Dickens and, as with any deeply felt experience, was extremely influential in his development. For Dickens, it was a particularly relevant experience; his basic concern in his work was with the true nature of man and the relationship of man with society. In America he was forced to recognize truths he had either not realized before, or had avoided realizing.

It was natural that this revelatory experience should have had a seminal effect on his succeeding work. Free of illusion, he was free to think more perceptively about the nature of man and man's relationship with society; the result was a new maturity evident in all his subsequent work.

Oddly enough, this is not a subject that has been studied in depth, although it has been lightly touched upon. It seems reasonable to believe that it was of extreme importance in Dickens' development from a writer of talent to a writer of genius.