The Whys and Wherefores of Dickens's Poetisation of Little Nell's Funeral

Armel MBON
Lecturer-Researcher, Department of Languages and Literatures, Teachers Training College, Marien Ngouabi University, Brazzaville, Congo.

Correspondence Author: Armel MBON, E-mail: armelegallois@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article discusses Dickens’s poetisation of Little Nell’s funeral with the aim of showing the whys and wherefores that drove him to that. This unfolds through an analysis of a passage put to verse years after the publication of The Old Curiosity Shop, his first novel with a child heroine. Among the various reasons that impelled Dickens to poetise his heroine’s funeral, stands in front the sudden loss of his sister-in-law Mary Hogarth. The epitaph he wrote on her tombstone, “Young, beautiful, and good, God in his mercy numbered her with His angels at the early age of seventeen” already displays this poetic inclination. The analysis of this poetisation shows that Dickens uses a great number of phonological devices which impact the reader’s hear with the echo that the words make in their utterance. This echo amplifies and justifies the immortal character of his portrayal of Little Nell.

KEYWORDS

The whys and wherefores, Poetisation, Death, Funeral, Immortality, Devices

1- INTRODUCTION

Little Nell’s Funeral

And now the bell—the bell
She had so often heard, by night and day
And listened to with solemn pleasure,
Almost as a living voice—
Rung its remorseless toll, for her,
So young, so beautiful, so good.

Decrepit age, and vigorous life,
And blooming youth, and helpless infancy,
Poured forth—on crutches, in the pride of strength
And health, in the full blush
Of promise, in the mere dawn of life—
To gather round her tomb. Old men were there,
Whose eyes were dim
And senses failing—
Grandmothers, who might have died ten years ago,
And still been old—the deaf, the blind, the lame,
The palsied,
The living dead in many shapes and forms,
To see the closing of that early grave.
What was the death it would shut in,
To that which still could crawl and creep above it!

Along the crowded path they bore her now;
Pure as the newly fallen snow
That covered it; whose day on earth
Had been as fleeting.
Under the porch, where she had sat when Heaven
In its mercy brought her to that peaceful spot,

She passed again; and the old church
Received her in its quiet shade.

They carried her to one old nook,
Where she had many and many a time sat musing,
And laid their burden softly on the pavement.
The light streamed on it through
The coloured window—a window, where the boughs
Of trees were ever rustling in the summer, and where the birds
Sang sweetly all day long.


“Little Nell’s Funeral” was not initially a poem, but was put into verse and published in 2012 by PoemHunter.com – The World’s Poetry Archive. This originally prose passage from Dickens’s The Old Curiosity Shop (See above), is one of the most poetic of the entire novel. If there is any single literary genre for which Dickens became famous, it is the novel. He is known neither as a dramatist nor as a poet, but as a novelist. Yet, he strove to describe his child heroine’s death and funeral, as this will be shown, in a poetic style for one reason or another. The mention of an old curiosity shop and at the very worst, its presence before a small child is, in fact, synonymous with throwing out the spectre of death. The shop Mr Quilp takes possession of because of his

1 The Old Curiosity Shop is abbreviated in OCS for in-text referencing.
credit to the Trents, has ipso facto become the very evil personified. This evil had, in fact, pervaded the English novel since the second half of the eighteenth century with the Gothic fiction, which feeds on a pleasing sort of terror. Like the Gothic novel designed to create such a fright to the reader that they remain awake all night, The Old Curiosity Shop takes them back to the misfortunes of a virtuous girl up against a malevolent male character, Mr Quilp, who is angry at her modesty.

Synoptically, Dickens’s first novel with a child heroine, The Old Curiosity Shop (first published 1841) is a disguised plea in favour of the vulnerable social strata, that is children and old age respectively represented by Little Nell and her grandfather. The novel tells the story of Nell Trent, a beautiful and virtuous young girl who has not attained the age of fourteen. Being an orphan, Nell lives with her grandfather (whose name is never revealed) in his antique shop, from which the novel takes its title. Although she is very much loved by her grandfather, Nell leads a lonely existence and has very few companions of her own age. Her only friend is Kit, a young boy and honest employee who also lives in the shop, and whom Nell is teaching to read and write.

Secretly obsessed with ensuring that Nell does not die in poverty, her grandfather turns to gambling in a misguided effort to make money. However, he has little luck, and becomes heavily indebted to Daniel Quilp, a malicious and deformed moneylender (who then drowns in the river Thames towards the end of the book). Unable to repay his debts, Nell’s grandfather loses the shop. He and Nell are driven out onto the streets and survive by begging, wandering all over London and surrounding area. As they meet different and peculiar characters, everything now seems to be going well, but Nell’s grandfather loses the shop, and Nell is teaching to read and write.

Much ink has been spilled on Little Nell’s plight, death, burial, and immortality in such critical studies as Dunn’s “Reviewing Dickens: The Old Curiosity Shop”, Jacobs’s “The Art of Mourning: Death and Photography”, Smiley’s Charles Dickens, Collins’s Dickens and Education, Monod’s Charles Dickens, Chesterton’s Charles Dickens, Wilde’s “Laughing at the Death of Little Nell: Sentimental Art and Sentimental People”. These exhaustive studies have described Dickens as using high sentimental scenes thereby neglecting to discuss the aesthetic side of Dickens’s portrayal of the heroine in her last days and funeral.

Why does Dickens poetise Little Nell’s death? Given that Dickens’s poetises his heroine’s funeral, to which poetic devices has he recourse? On the face of his poetisation of Little Nell’s funeral, it is a commonplace that Little Nell’s death has something in common with Dickens’s own experiences as a brother-in-law. This poetisation is pervaded by imagery and immortality-sounding words. Hopefully, with recourse to psychological and formalistic approaches, these questions will help us discuss Dickens’s poetisation of Little Nell’s funeral.

2- THE WHYS OF THE POETISATION OF LITTLE NELL’S FUNERAL

There are two simple reasons why Dickens poetises Little Nell’s funeral. The first is his refusal to accept her untimely death. Unable to prevent “the closing of that early grave” (line 13), he starts poetising it. The second is his try at consoling Little Nell’s mourners thereby deadening the shock that her sudden death might produce.

1- Refusal to Accept Little Nell’s Untimely Death

It is convenient to say that child premature death which characterises Dickens’s novels is first and foremost natural. What is irritating for the Victorian novelist is, however, that its causes among which long suffering and abandonment in the then prosperous Victorian England, hold an important place. Reviewing Dickens’s works, Monod (1958, p.77) alleges that the theme of child death is too boring for critics. It is also for the author himself. It is a fait accompli, and they cannot do without.

Many a time Little Nell dies by proxy, and if she were not a heroine she would have died sooner because of her painful condition. If there has ever been something from The Old Curiosity Shop, which has moved readers and shown them how engrossing a work of literature is, it is Little Nell’s death. For critics, it often takes a long time to pluck up enough courage and write on after the heroine’s death. Critics are thus helped by the intervals to which Dickens alludes at the beginning of his novel, which deaden their shock before the heroine’s fatal end. In fact, with the speed at which she was being drifted, Little Nell could not really reach the end of the novel. That is why her death has resulted in a controversy as stated by Chesterton (1992, p.94):

Around “Little Nell” of course, a controversy raged and rages; some implored Dickens not to kill her at the end of the story; some regret that he did not kill her at
the beginning. To me the chief interest in this young person lies in the fact that she is an example, and the most celebrated example of what must have been, I think, a personal peculiarity, perhaps, a personal experience of Dickens.

In doing so, Chesterton cannot go unnoticed. Only if Chesterton had already known Dickens very well, and how long critics would focus their attention on this death and how plain it was to be, he would not have said “I think (…) perhaps (…)” (Chesterton, 1992, p.94).

It has long been a commonplace that the life and death of Little Nell owe something to his feelings for his young sister – in – law Mary Hogarth” (Collins, 1965, p.176). According to Monod (1958, p.29), it is a sorrow that Dickens could not get rid of all his life. Thus, through the little boy’s supplications, he declines to accept Little Nell’s premature loss, “You will not go. You know how sorry we should be. Dear Nell, tell me that you’ll stay amongst us. Oh! Pray, pray, tell me that you will” (OCS, p.334). Chesterton (1992, p.53) sorts of lambast those who have written on the death of Little Nell when he argues that:

they have nearly all of them entirely failed to notice that there is in the death of Little Nell one quite definite and really artistic idea. It is not an artistic idea that a little child should die rhetorically on the stage like Paul Dombey; and Little Nell does not die rhetorically upon the stage like Paul Dombey.

A close look at Little Nell’s death shows that it is written in poetic prose, and contrary to Chesterton’s assumptions, she did die rhetorically though not on the stage like Paul Dombey. Her admirers’ prayers could not do anything against this natural compulsion. Dickens’s long hesitation to announce Little Nell’s death in spite of the arrival of her friends such as Mr. Morton, the poor schoolmaster, Little Kit…proves a heartrending moment to a reader who knows that she is doomed to death. Consequently, he poetises her death on purpose, “For she was dead. There, upon her little bed, she lay at rest. The solemn stillness was no marvel now” (OCS, p.438).

It is known that Little Nell’s life and mainly her death have made a peculiar impression on Dickens’s audience. Tamai (2006, p.752) maintains, “Dickens uses the death of Nell to awaken a humane sensibility in the reader’s mind and to realize his vision in the real world beyond the world of fiction.” In fact, in Britain as well as in America, this death has afflicted many hearts. Among the accusations that have been directed against the author, Monod (1958, p.29) emphasises Dickens’s writing Little Nell’s death in blank verse. It would have been better if he had done so in rhymed verse to give a certain poetic unity around this death. I personally hold this death to be Dickens’s key for attraction; and for this, I owe much to Ruskin who alleges, “Nell was simply killed for the market, as a butcher kills a lamb” (Collins, 1965, p.176). In addition, Dickens was probably to let her survive into adulthood if his pen friend, John Forster, did not suggest this tragic ending of the heroine.

When Chesterton (1992, p.52) speaks up his mind with such dismay as, “It is not the death of Little Nell, but the life of Little Nell, that I object to”, one may infer that infant mortality in Victorian England occurred through mere negligence. In fact, as the story goes on, Little Nell’s health begins to deteriorate. The journey to the countryside is a one-way trip for her as she is intentionally doomed to death at the end of the novel. Before Little Nell’s death, Dickens could not help being heartbroken as well as he could not choose but write words of comfort to the heroine’s mourners.

2- A Try at Consoling Little Nell’s Mourners

Many people have strong reactions to Little Nell’s death as Dickens portrays it. However, those reactions vary widely from person to person. Some readers were greatly moved by her death, others were not. Wilde (1989, p.269), the famous British dramatist, said of this death, “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.” As Dickens was writing it, he felt as though he were experiencing the death of his own child. It also brought back painful memories of the death of his sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth.

In 1837, the pretty Mary Hogarth, his sister-in-law, at seventeen, came to share the joys of these honeymooners, Catherine and Dickens. Mary was a favourite with the couple and had become like a little sister to Dickens. On the evening of May 6th, Mary went with the couple to the St. James Theatre. The group returned late in the evening and Mary retired for the night. Shortly after that, Dickens heard a cry from Mary’s room. She was ill. Despite her doctor’s care, Mary passed away in Dickens’s arms on May 7th. On her tombstone, Dickens wrote these words, “Young, beautiful, and good, God in his mercy numbered her with His angles at the early age of
seventeen.” To Forster, Dickens wrote, “Old wounds bleed afresh when I think of this sad story.” What Dickens wrote in the preface to The Old Curiosity Shop already betrays what his portrayal of the child would be like:

I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed. (OCS, Preface, iii)

A child’s death is among many things in real or virtual life that move people the most. In “Variety of Death Scenes in Dickens”, a study by Halldórsdóttir, Avery and Reynolds (https://oatd.org/oatd/search, Retrieved December 2018) argue, “Of all deaths, the deaths of children arouse the strongest emotions and may lead to the deepest questionings. When Dickens writes of them he brings us face to face with our own deepest convictions.”

The fact that “American dockworkers met the chip carrying the instalment wherein Nell died with shouts of: Is Nell still alive?” may well be a legend (Smiley, 2000, p.28), and is a “rumor” to Dunn (http://caxton.stockton.edu, Retrieved December 2018). But is it a true or false rumour? The essential point is, however, that Dickens has made Little Nell never-to-be-forgotten in the readers’ hearts and minds. Metaphysical concerns are therefore revealed in his comforting description of Little Nell’s death, which is, beyond its heart-rending aspect, the greatest and most fascinating English metaphysical passage ever written in prose. We can add hereby that in matters of child death Dickens was walking on the footprints of the metaphysical poet John Donne whose words, “One short sleep past, we wake eternally, /And Death shall be no more: Death, thou shalt die!” (“Death Be Not Proud”, Holly Sonnets, 1611) may be applied to children’s immortality.

While serialising The Old Curiosity Shop, Dickens complained to Forster in these words, “I am inundated with imploring letters recommending poor little Nell to mercy” (Bachman, 2007, p.307). However, shortly after her sorrow, because she thought she would be forgotten after her death, and after the comfort given by Mr. Marton, she resolutely declares:

There is nothing (...) innocent or good, that dies and is forgotten. Let us hold to that faith, or none. An infant, a prattling child, dying in its cradle, will live again in the better thoughts of those who loved it, and will play its part, through them, in the redeeming actions of the world, though its body be burnt to ashes or drowned in the deepest sea (...) (OCS, p.330)

Such a declaration is an anticipation of comfort by Little Nell herself. Words of comfort may appear effectless when said by someone else after a given fate, but when uttered by the victim herself, make witnesses, like Little Nell’s mourners, feel stronger.

No writer can have such an unstinting love for a child like Dickens’s, and remain in the portrayal of her eternal loss. He or she must do everything to rescue her, give her shelter, facilities, people and the like she may stand in need of. Such is Dickens’s attitude towards his Little Nell. The refusal of her departure from this life and the comfort for her mourners being Dickens’s reasons for poetising her funeral, to which devices has he recourse in this poetisation?

3-THE WHOREFORES OF THE POETISATION OF LITTLE NELL’S FUNERAL

The stylistic elements used by Dickens in this poetisation consist most in phonological and semantic devices to which is added imagery known not only as metaphor and simile, but also as the image of Little Nell’s immortality that Dickens creates in readers’ minds.

1- Sound and Meaning of Words

As we read it, Dickens’s poetisation of Little Nell’s funeral echoes around our ears through the sounds of the words he uses. He juxtaposes these words to achieve specific kinds of effects, and the sounds that result from this cluster strike us as clever and pleasing, even soothing. In doing so, he has recourse to alliteration, those similar repeated consonant sounds at the beginning of the words as evidenced in the last lines of the second and fourth stanzas:

What was the death it would shut in, / To that which still could crawl and creep above it! /Sang sweetly all day long.

Another example of this device is in the last phrase of the first stanza: “— Rung its remorseless toll, for her.” It is not only the repetition of initial
consonant sounds, repetition of the entire word comes in this poetisation. In fact, when Dickens sounds the death knell for Nell, ‘bell’ is used twice. It is a purposeful re-use for an effect, which simply explains the fact that in loving memory of our dear deceased Nell we observe a minute’s silence. This silence is symbolised by the use of dashes in the whole passage and throughout the novel. Tillotson (1966, p. xxxviii) argues, “Working over the text of 1841, Dickens constantly substituted colons and semi-colons for commas and dashes (...) of course, with the consequent reshaping of a sentence.” Dickens’s unstinting love for Little Nell, as we notice it through the following simile, compels him to a sort of human attributes to the bell (as a living voice). We also notice that the second dash preceding the past participle “Rung” is symbolically the elliptical use of the auxiliary “has”. In the way this past participle is used, the ringing bell understandably loses its active effect for a passive one thereby weakening the effect of its “remorseless” toll on readers’ ears.

Other repetitions include those of “so” in the last words of the first stanza, followed by “and” in the first words of the second stanza. Dickens associates metaphor with polysyndeton (excessive insertion of the conjunction and where one is enough) for people from every walk of life, who attend Little Nell’s funeral. The disabled, in spite of their condition, attend this funeral, so do the living dead, who are the child’s hosts of the hereafter. He uses polysyndeton (Decrepit age, and vigorous life, and blooming youth, and helpless infancy, poured forth—on crutches) for a rhythmic and euphonic effect to convey a sense of beauty and harmony to his description and the people who gather at Nell’s tomb. This polysyndeton is built like a plot with the exposition of the issue at stake, that is Little Nell’s funeral, the rising action expressed by a sort of pyramid built with a soaring enumeration of people from the weaker old age to the stronger adulthood, the falling action with “helpless infancy”, and the resolution or relaxation of the rush of these people round her tomb.

Another figure of repetition Dickens uses in this poetisation is epanaphora, which is another term for anaphora. Obviously, Dickens repeats the phrase “in the” according to the definition provided by Brook (1970, p.30), who has it, “From time to time Dickens made use of the figure of speech known to medieval rhetoricians as epanaphora, a series of parallel phrases each beginning with the same word or group of words.” In fact, all the words following this device convey the idea of force and suggest the liveliness that lies in Little Nell. It is no wonder that he use simile to compare her to “the newly fallen snow” in the first sentence of the third stanza.

All these devices taken together belong to figures of repetition, which has been a central part of poetry in many cultures. In this connection, Lodge (1992, p.92) writes, “Repetition is also a favourite device of orators and preachers, roles that Charles Dickens often adopted in his authorial persona.” Apart from the sounds of words, this repetition lies in the words which are spelled the same in their final syllables (as if they rhymed), but are pronounced differently. Dickens uses these sight rhymes or eye rhymes with “now” and “snow”, “through” and “boughs” respectively in the first line of the third stanza, and the last line of the fourth stanza.

In the fourth stanza, the arrival and lying of Little Nell’s corpse on the pavement with a reference to where she used to play, the recalling of the shining light (and not of darkness, which would correspond to her death) and of the ever-singing birds are as well images showing that her death is swallowed up in her survival and eternity. The girl’s wish, “When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always” (438) brings to our minds, the image of such a saint as the Virgin Mary, whose painting, among other things, makes her immortal. Schiefelbein (2001, p.94) argues:

Nell becomes, like the Virgin Mary engraved on her bed, finally elevated to the level of legendary. Just as the Virgin lives on in the popular Marian cult that celebrates her Assumption, so Nell gains immortality in the great death-bed description in which she is preserved exactly as she was in life.

2- Imagery and Immortalisation of Little Nell

Numerous are the circumstances in which Dickens’s child characters are survivors. He tends to pile on such circumstances to invigorate his depiction of Little Nell’s immortality. That children died, mattered little because he reacts with energy only against their plight in Victorian England. What is worthy of note is that the green colour or the evergreens with which he paints their death, is the symbol of his implicit evocation of Little Nell’s immortality. This colour gives Little Nell the surviving force whenever she has ghastly thoughts. One can see that to her question of knowing the owner of that grave during her visit in the churchyard, her child friend answered, “that was not its name: it was a garden - his brother’s. It was
greener, he said, than all the other gardens (…)” (OCS, p.320). Horne (1993, p.498) says:

What is comparable to God's holy city lies outside the bounds of the novel. This is the place to which Nell's spirit goes after death. But the lesser spot-paradise, the place of the saints – is something very much akin to the place of the graveyard and the church. The church and its landscape stands in relationship to Nell's heavenly afterlife as paradise does to the holy city.

Children’s association with graves in The Old Curiosity Shop is but a rite of passage to everlasting life. This shows besides that the novelist was a very religious man. He did profess Christianity, a religion whose belief in resurrection and eternity for the righteous is no more to be proved. Some critics have failed to labour Dickens’s child characters’ immortality through their association with Heaven. In fact, while he depicts child environment, with a far-fetched style, one can read sentences such as, “the children yet at their gambols down below – all, everything, so beautiful and happy! It was like passing from death to life; it was drawing nearer Heaven” (OCS, pp.323-24). This simile could well mean immortality although the author did not go straight to the point. It is easy enough to understand that to Dickens, death means nothing but forgetfulness, and that immortality means remembrance.

One of the elements of poetic construction being diction, we can see, when it comes to write on the yard on which children are buried, how surprising Dickens prefers the word church to grave. In fact, looking at the word grave and its components throughout the novel, we realise that there are 34 occurrences for grave, 63 for church, 17 for churchyard, and 0 for graveyard. In fact, Dickens does not describe Little Nell’s funeral like a pauper’s, nor is she buried in a pauper’s graveyard, but in a churchyard. The churchyard here is for him, a sort of Machpelah in the Old Testament (Genesis 23: 19) where resurrection is possible. Like Moses who ordered the Israeli not to leave Joseph’s bones behind in Egypt, Dickens prefers to bury her in the Promise Land. Refusing to accept the child's loss, Dickens takes the place of her grandfather, who goes to and comes from her grave:

And thenceforth, every day, and all day long, he waited at her grave, for her. How many pictures of new journeys over pleasant country, of resting-places under the free broad sky, of rambles in the fields and woods, and paths not often trodden—how many tones of that one well-remembered voice, how many glimpses of the form, the fluttering dress, the hair that waved so gaily in the wind—how many visions of what had been, and what he hoped was yet to be—rose up before him, in the old, dull, silent church! (…) ‘Lord! Let her come tomorrow!’ (OCS, pp.444-43)

Dickens makes this poetry of child survival possible through the association of words such as God, and angels respectively understood as the Author of ever-lasting life, and purity. Hence, Lester (2005, p. 22) concedes, “In creating Nell, Dickens pickles Mary, immortalising her purity”. After Dickens, people have searched for Little Nell as if she were a real person. This search only justifies their love for such a wonderful child and their disbelief in her eternal oblivion.

4- CONCLUSION
This article was premised upon the investigation of the whys and wherefores of Dickens’s poetisation of Little Nell’s funeral. It is worth noting that if this initially prose passage has been put to verse, it is that people have perceived its poetic nature. Therefore, the author’s description of this funeral likely to arouse feelings, emotions, and images in means of cadences, sounds, and figures of speech, has motives of personal, familial, and social nature. The inability to bear the sudden loss of his young sister – in – law Mary Hogarth coupled with the high child death toll in Victorian England, are his reasons for beautifying his description of Little Nell’s funeral.

A stylistic analysis has also attempted to show the devices Dickens uses in this description. They consist most in phonological and semantic features. Effort, energy, enthusiasm and liveliness are felt everywhere in this description. The sentimentality for which Dickens has often been indicted in Little Nell’s portrayal dates, in fact, back to the eighteenth century novelists Fielding, Mackenzie…on the footprints of whom he was walking. Dickens has somewhat taken their javelin and thrown farther with the poetisation of Little Nell’s funeral thereby making her immortal.
REFERENCES


