

INTRODUCING RECEPTION STUDIES – ANCIENT ELEMENTS IN CHOSEN VICTORIAN NOVELS

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BUDA, Agata. 2021. „Introducing reception studies – ancient elements in chosen Victorian novels.“ *Philologia* 31 (1): 95–104.

Abstrakt: Cieľom štúdie je prezentovať a analyzovať literárnu recepciu v kontexte vybraných románov 19. storočia. Autorka skúma antické motívy v románoch ako *Náš starý spoločný priateľ* od Charlesa Dickensa. Výskum poukazuje na literárnu recepciu, ktorá je predstavená ako nový koncept navrhovaný pre študentov literatúry. Pozornosť sa sústreďuje na vedomosti získané počas čítania konkrétnych výňatkov diel v kontexte antiky (mýtov, archetypov a symbolov).

Kľúčové slová: literárna recepcia, antika, intertextualita, mýtus

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to present and analyse the idea of reception studies in the context of chosen novels of the nineteenth century. The author makes an attempt to search for ancient motifs in such novels as *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens. The search will show the reception studies which, as it seems, constitutes quite a new idea for students of literature. The attention will be paid to the acquired knowledge while reading particular excerpts from literary works in the context of antiquity (myths, archetypes, symbols).

Key words: reception studies, antiquity, intertextuality, myth

1 INTRODUCTION

The idea of reception studies, although it is not a new one, seems to gain more and more popularity, maybe because of the fact that interdisciplinary research, including transtextual references, constitutes a vast part of an academic output. Nowadays, in the world in which human beings are exposed to numerous

stimuli, the new things mix with the old ones, tradition with modernity, classical ideas with latest achievements. One of the examples of such a combination can be, for instance, the idea of computer games containing classical elements taken from the literature and culture of antiquity, myths and legends. Noticing these relationships can be perceived as an advantage, especially while teaching students particular subjects, such as British literature. The paper aims at discussing the reference of the old (Victorianism) with the older (antiquity), and at showing students the possibilities the reception studies offer.

2 OUR MUTUAL FRIEND AND ITS ANCIENT REFERENCES

Novels by Charles Dickens are usually analysed from the perspective of social and economic values. They are, however, a great literary material containing various references which seem to be distant from the subjects analysed (social conditions, technological development, child labour, etc.). The reception studies as an interpretative tool, enable academics to notice numerous connections with other cultures, ages, or ideas, among them ancient ones, which are visible through the primary text and form with it a palimpsestic experience.

Our Mutual Friend is a novel which presents a typical Dickensian view of life: poverty mixed with wealth, child exploitation, industrialised London and crime. Among these elements of a Victorian landscape, one may notice frequent references to antiquity: its history and values. The reception of the ancient world in this novel takes the form of transtextuality and its various types, according to the theory by Gérard Genette. The academic distinguishes, among others, metatextuality as one of the types of transtextuality. Metatextuality is a relation which is colloquially called “a commentary”, as it connects the given text with another, not necessarily quoting or recalling it, but definitely referring to it in a critical way (Genette 2014, 10). Another aspect of a metatextual reference can be a separate, compositional part of the text such as a title. According to Danuta Danek, the title can constitute a part of metatextual references, as it can indicate the border between the real world and the world of the given literary work, and at the same time it can point at the particular work, figure, an archetype, which enables to move towards literary polemics (Danek 1980, 76–77). Metatextual level of the novel by Charles Dickens can be noticed at the very beginning of the story presented. The examples are some of the titles of books and chapters in *Our Mutual Friend*, which constitute references to particular ancient values.

The first book of the novel is entitled *The Cup and the Lip*. The title alludes to the myth of Ancaeus, who, after returning from a dangerous trip of the Argonauts, wanted to try the wine from his vineyard. When he filled the cup,

the prophet told him that a lot can happen on the way of wine to Ancaeus's lips. Before he tried wine, he went to chase away the boar which was destroying the vineyard and was killed by the animal. The reference to this ancient story can be analysed on several levels. First of all, one can notice the connection of the myth with the content of *Book the First* in the novel by Dickens. At the beginning of the novel the reader gets to know about the death of John Harmon, who was going to get some fortune after his father. The money now belongs to Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, who are visited by numerous people desiring to gain something from the couple. However, after some time John Harmon appears not to be dead; he pretends to be someone else – Mr. Rokesmith, Mr. Boffin's secretary. A true identity of Mr. Harmon comes finally to light and he is happy to marry Bella, his beloved woman. If any character from Dickens's novel planned to get Harmon's fortune, he or she committed a mistake like Ancaeus, who strongly believed that he will be able to try his newly produced wine. This direct analogy can be further analysed in the context of the ancient phenomenon, which is called *fatum*. Ancaeus was quite sure he will be able to try his wine and ignored the prophet's words that a lot can happen in the meantime. Ancaeus's confidence was strong, as he returned safe from the Argonauts' dangerous voyage. He underestimated his fate, which in ancient tales plays a crucial role. So was the importance of fate in Dickens's novel; John Harmon was alive and this changed the actions taken by the characters. The analogy is the expression of universal truth saying that appearances can be deceptive. This clear reference may be also perceived as a prefiguration, which is characterised by analogies in the structure of the world presented, as Stanisław Stabryła claims (1996, 8–9).

Another example of a title connecting the two worlds in a metatextual way is the title of the fourth chapter in *Book the Second: Cupid Prompted*. The story presented in this chapter concentrates on the figure of Mr. Fledgeby and Georgiana Podsnap. He was invited to the Podsnaps for dinner and, feeling quite uncomfortable, tried not to look into Georgiana's eyes. Seeing that, Mr. and Mrs. Lamble decided to intervene and they started to encourage the couple to take an active part in the conversation. However, it was not an easy task to do, so the narrator states:

More prompting was necessary. Cupid must be brought up to the mark. The manager had put him down in the bill for the part, and he must play it (Dickens 1865, 252)¹.

¹ All the quotations from the novel *Our Mutual Friend* come from its electronic version: <https://TheVirtualLibrary.org>.

Here, the figure of Cupid can be analysed on different levels. First of all, its presence in the very title can mean the direct reference to the ancient archetype and it indicates the major theme of the chapter discussed, which is love relationships. Moreover, the position the narrator puts Cupid in resembles the situation in which the director imposes certain roles on his actors. The usage of such words as: *the manager had put him...; he must play...* evokes in a reader the feeling that he or she is the witness of a rehearsal of a play in a theatre. These expressions are of a technical character, they are typical for a preparatory meeting with the actors supposed to take part in a performance. At the same time, it is a metatextual commentary on creating a scene, a performance.

A similar role of a title can be noticed in chapter five of *Book the Second: Mercury Prompting*. The figure of this ancient god of finance, commerce, and thieves serves here as the point of reference to the description of a particular group of people presented in the novel by Dickens. The name of Mercury constitutes a concise definition of the Victorians who deal with money-lending, not necessarily in a decent way. For instance, Mr. Fledgeby *feigned to be a young gentleman living on his means, but was known secretly to be a kind of outlaw in the bill-broking line, and to put money out at high interest in various ways* (Dickens 1865, 259). Both references to Cupid and Mercury can be perceived as revocation, which is a mention, a reference to a particular ancient figure, image, pattern without any essential change of meaning (Stabryła 1996, 8–9).

Another structural reference to antiquity in the novel can be noticed in chapter eleven, *Book the First*. There is a description of a party organised for Georgiana Podsnap to celebrate her eighteenth birthday. The microcosm of the house in which various guests move between different pieces of furniture represents the panorama of the British society with its habits, vices, and other characteristic features. The party in which people walk through the rooms, dance, and change their interlocutors is compared to the labyrinth which can either lock you in a situation with no escape, or, if you are skillful enough, let you go freely. At the beginning of the party there is a presentation of the arrangement of particular people, as if they were placed in a labyrinthine construction:

Bald bathers folded their arms and talked to Mr Podsnap on the hearthrug; sleek-whiskered bathers, with hats in their hands, lunged at Mrs Podsnap and retreated; prowling bathers, went about looking into ornamental boxes and bowls as if they had suspicions of larceny on the part of the Podsnaps, and expected to find something they had lost at the bottom; bathers of the gentler sex sat silently comparing ivory shoulders (Dickens 1865, 130).

The character of a labyrinth means for people taking actions that will enable them to survive in the jungle of unexpected situations and various people. One of these situations is dancing, which in guests evoked the feeling of embarrassment or even terror. For Georgiana, it was a torture, when one of the men appeared to be a terrible dancer:

Georgiana having left the ambler up a lane of sofa, in a No Thoroughfare of back drawing-room, to find his own way out, came back to Mrs Lamble (Dickens 1865, 135).

The presentation of dancing people resembles maneuvering among various situations in life and searching for the best way out:

And now, the grand chain riveted to the last link, the discreet automaton ceased, and the sixteen, two and two, took a walk among the furniture (...).

At length the procession was dissolved by the violent arrival of a nutmeg, before which the drawing-room door bounced open as if it were a cannon-ball (Dickens 1865, 132–133).

Of course, the symbolism of a labyrinth in the novel *Our Mutual Friend* can refer to the structure of society, presenting women as passive and men as active participants of the “party”. Social conventions impose on both sexes particular ways of behaviour and subjects of discussions. The society is a complicated construction with its internal relationships. Females try *to escape into a corner* (Dickens 1865, 131) like an animal hunted in the forests, and they observe others, especially men who either approach them or move away. The reference of the structure of a Victorian society to a labyrinth can be perceived as a prefiguration, due to the similarity of both forms.

Among numerous ancient references in the novel by Charles Dickens one may distinguish particular allusions to the ideals of ancient love and beauty, which take a typical intertextual form. One of them is the presentation of characters and their appearance by comparing them to ancient figures. At the beginning of the novel Mr. Veneering tries to look as if he were taken out from ancient Greece, *having this very evening set up the shirt-front of the young Antinous in new worked cambric* (Dickens 1865, 15). This comparison tells a reader quite a lot about the Dickensian character. The narrator, comparing him to Antinous, suggests his desire to stay young and attractive, to stand out from others. As Benjamin Acosta – Hughes underlines, *Antinous serves as an emblematic case, his early death, by drowning, insures that his memory (and subsequent wide-*

*spread cult) remains that of an idealized adolescent*². His figure portrayed in numerous literary works and many sculptures is characterised by *thick-lipped ephebic beauty of markedly over-morphed pectoral muscles*³. Therefore, the figure of Mr. Veneering, trying to make an impression with his appearance, is the epitome of a universal, timeless human desire to stay young and beautiful. The attempt to attract others and to show oneself as unusual is also visible while observing Mrs. Toppins who is preparing herself for a festive breakfast:

How the fascinating Toppins gets on when arraying herself for the bewilderment of the senses of men, is known only to the Graces and her maid (Dickens 1865, 387).

The narrator refers to the goddesses of beauty, happiness and charm to underline the exaggerated efforts Victorian females put to attract a male's attention. The same mood accompanies the characters of the novel while preparing the wedding of Sophronia Akershem and Alfred Lamble, which is going to take place in the house of the Veneerings:

While the Loves and Graces have been preparing this torch for Hymen, which is to be kindled to-morrow, Mr Twemlow has suffered much in his mind (Dickens 1865, 112).

The narrator employs the personification of love and gives it and Graces the possibility of active participation in the wedding preparations. The whole event seems to be dominated by the charm of the ancient context; the figures of Love and Graces are combined with Hymen, the god of marriage ceremonies. The author of Polish translation of the novel, Zofia Popławska, goes even further; she continues the idea of the author to exploit ancient sources and finishes the utterance with the reference to tantalizing torments which Mr. Twemlow suffers (*pan Twemlow przeżywa męki Tantala* – Dickens 1865, 173)⁴. In this way, the whole passage creates the coherent whole.

The celebration of happiness accompanies the characters throughout the novel. Going to the celebration of the 25th wedding anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Wilfer, Bella fulfils the family tradition and brings some fowls to sacrifice

² The Breast of Antinous. The Male Body as Erotic Object in Hellenistic Image and Text (openedition.org), accessed on 21.03.2021

³ The Breast of Antinous. The Male Body as Erotic Object in Hellenistic Image and Text (openedition.org), accessed on 21.03.2021

⁴ All the quotations from the Polish translation of the novel *Our Mutual Friend* come from its electronic version: Dickens Charles – Nasz wspólny przyjaciel – Pobierz pdf z Docer.pl

them *on the altar of Hymen* (Dickens 1865, 427). Love relationships and the wedding celebrations in the novel by Dickens are dominated by the figures of ancient gods and goddesses. It seems as if the characters were directed by them, and subjected to their will and actions. This situation resembles the structure of ancient myths, in which *destination* constitutes a crucial part of a character's life.

Among the numerous references to antiquity, one may notice vast passages referring to the history of ancient Rome. The most popular form of the presentation of antiquity in the novel is the intertextual revocation of particular elements of ancient history. One of them that moves through the novel is the history of the Roman Empire. At the beginning of the novel the reader gets to know Silas Wegg, who sells books from his sale-board in the open air. Mr. Boffin invites him to his house and offers him a job – reading chosen passages from literary or historical works. Mr. Boffin chooses the story of the fall of the Rooshan Empire, while Silas Wegg suggests changing the reading material to the story of the fall of the Roman Empire. While listening to the story of the Roman Empire, Mr. Boffin was shocked and amazed with the number of terrible events that occurred in the ancient world, as well as with the variety of important figures presented in the passage. Mr. Wegg was reading the passages describing geographical and biological aspects in detail, as well as mentioned the figures of Hadrian, Trajan and the Antonines, *stumbling at Polybius (pronounced Polly Beeious, and supposed by Mr Boffin to be a Roman virgin)* (Dickens 1865, 59). The more he was reading, the bigger surprise could be noticed on the faces of Mr. Boffin and himself:

[Mr. Wegg was] finally, getting over the ground well with Commodus: who, under the appellation of Commodious, was held by Mr Boffin to have been quite unworthy of his English origin, and 'not to have acted up to his name' in his government of the Roman people. (...) 'Commodious fights in that wild-beast-show, seven hundred and thirty five times, in one character only! (...) And even now that Commodious is strangled, I don't see a way to our bettering ourselves.' Mr Boffin added as he turned his pensive steps towards the Bower and shook his head, 'I didn't think this morning there was half so many Scarers in Print. But I'm in for it now!' (Dickens 1865, 59–60).

The above passage is the source of some information about the Victorians and their knowledge of history. First of all, the narrator, using irony, presents them as ignorant of the past (distorting the names of the historical figures and criticising their way of ruling the empire). However, this "history lesson" leads Mr. Boffin to a conclusion of a universal character: he cannot see any

improvement in human behaviour, he expresses his concern by comparing his world to the ancient one and concludes that nothing changes. In this way, the reference to antiquity becomes the mirror in which the Victorians can reflect themselves, and which tells them the truth about themselves. This comparison can be analysed as the reference of ancient expansion to the expansion of England in the nineteenth century, as well as it may serve as a warning, taking into consideration the fall of the Roman Empire. In this way, Dickens emphasises the importance of the knowledge of the past, he imposes on it the instructive role, the role of a teacher. Further in the novel, the narrator frequently refers to this knowledge; Mr. Boffin seems to be very absorbed in the stories about ancient Rome, and he constantly thinks about it, even while working on something totally different. When he was given a large inheritance, he went to Mr. Lightwood to consult it, and on his way he was *much pre-occupied in mind by the uncertainties besetting the Roman Empire, and much regretting the death of the amiable Pertinax: who only last night had left the Imperial affairs in a state of great confusion, by falling a victim to the fury of the praetorian guards* (Dickens 1865, 86).

Mr. Boffin's raising knowledge of the events in the history of ancient Rome led him to change his attitude from the initial surprise and shock caused by the brutal actions depicted in the book read by Mr. Wegg to understanding and even sympathy towards particular historical characters presented in the stories. The process of acquiring historical knowledge seems to evoke in Mr. Boffin the analytical mechanism referring to particular events and decisions and enabled him to observe them from a certain perspective. In time, he became very much interested in the figure of a Roman soldier called Belisarius, and his career as a military leader (Dickens 1865, 178). He also identified himself with this figure and willingly listened to his adventures, either cheering on him or sympathizing him when, for instance, the weather was not good enough to start the expedition against the Persians (Dickens 1865, 180).

Mr. Boffin's interest in ancient history was growing bigger and bigger, and, after finishing the story of the fall of the Roman Empire, he decided to get to know the work *Ancient History* by Charles Rollin. Being, however, very boring in the eyes of Mr. Boffin, the book was put aside and replaced by the work by Plutarch. His *Lives* became another source of knowledge for Mr. Boffin, nevertheless, he admitted that it is difficult to believe in everything Plutarch describes (Dickens 1865, 453). In conclusion, all these direct references to ancient history, interspersed with the events from Mr. Boffin's life serve as the instructive source for his contemporaries; people should know the past and draw conclusions from cause and effect relationships. William J. Palmer emphasises the importance of the past for the Dickensian characters, saying

that *Boffin sincerely hopes that his study of the past can give direction to his actions as a rich and influential man in present-day England*. He also pays attention to the fact that Dickens depicts the meaning of the past as crucial for the future, but this cycle of history is not understandable for some of the characters in the novel (Palmer 1974, 487).

The references to ancient history as educational source are also enriched by the allusions to the formal way of acquiring knowledge. These are connected with learning classical languages and studying ancient scholars. The Reverend Frank Milvay is one of the figures who know Latin and Greek, and uses this knowledge to earn for a living:

He was under the necessity of teaching and translating from the classics, to eke out his scanty means, yet was generally expected to have more time to spare than the idlest person in the parish, and more money than the richest (Dickens 1865, 102).

Of course, the knowledge of the classics was the privilege of men in Victorian England, that is why women frequently felt embittered over being kept away from certain branches of education. Bella was aware of that, and although she tried to accompany her husband, John Rokesmith, in everything he does, for instance in studying Euclid, she could not attract John's attention as much as the subjects he was preoccupied with (Dickens 1865, 644), as ancient topics constitute for the Victorians an outstanding, unique part of one's education. Knowing classical languages, especially Latin, was necessary for a male student of the Grammar Schools (Ogilvie 1964, 97). It was also a must in the process of elite education, it showed the man's connection with the middle or upper class of society (Haynes 2006, 44). Dickens then, though revocation, employs in his novel this part of a human educational experience not only to draw the readers' attention to the importance of acquiring knowledge of the past, but also to underline the differences between male and female education, to show the necessity of enabling women to deepen their horizons.

3 CONCLUSION

The novel by Charles Dickens *Our Mutual Friend*, although evolving around the image of nineteenth-century England with its social problems, exploits ancient motifs extensively and imposes on them particular roles. First of all, antiquity serves as a warning; a human being should remember mistakes from the past and draw conclusions, as in the case of Ancaeus or the fall of the Roman Empire. The society of Victorian England is described by metatextual references

to a labyrinth or to a mythological figure of Cupid. These comparisons show the resemblance of a human life as portrayed in an ancient drama: people are actors, whose fate is dependant on various factors. The intertextual references in the novel are also connected with the unattainable ancient ideals of beauty (Antinous) and elite education (Latin and Greek). Dickens perfectly notices the importance of the past, history and myth in creating national awareness of the dangers of his contemporary world.

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