ISSN 1509-1619

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SOME FUNCTIONS OF "UTOPIAN BUSINESS" MOTIF IN *NICHOLAS NICKLEBY* BY CHARLES DICKENS

Dickensian characters find employment in a variety of public and private organisations: "Nearly everybody in Dickens has a job; there is a passionate interest in what people do for a living"[1]. Places of work are scatterred throughout Dickens's fiction and different types of them fulfil different functions in the novels. However, such businesses have several characteristic traits that enable one to probe Dickens's attitude to work, as well as to the characters, both as employers and employees. House, for instance, argues that "Work plays an essential part in the characters' approach to life: each sees another first as a business proposition"[2]; this opinion seems slightly exaggerated. On the other hand, Orwell emphasises that "one cannot point to a single one of his central characters who is primarily interested in his job. His heroes work in order to make a living and to marry the heroine, not because they feel a passionate interest in one particular subject"[3], a view which seems somewhat extreme.

Dickens is sparse in detailing workplaces, being, with a few exceptions, vague and ambiguous. The best example of this oblique approach is the presentation of the business of Ralph Nickleby, when the narrator is ironically imprecise in describing his company:

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[1] H. House, *The Dickens World*, London 1960, Oxford University Press, p. 55.

There is a vast discrepancy in the critical approaches to work in Dickens's novels. Whilst House emphasises the importance of being employed in the Dickens world, Orwell opines that Dickens "does not noticeably write about [...] work. In Dickens's novels anything in the nature of work happens off-stage". The critic avers that the only Dickensian hero who has a decent profession is David and "with most of the others, the way they earn their living is very much in the background". (G. Orwell, *Charles Dickens*, in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*, London 1994, Penguin Books, p. 60) Orwell's rather superficial assessment was informed by Dickens's quite vague treatment of business firms but since they frequently shape the characters and their fates it cannot be said that they are entirely in the background.

[2] H. House, op. cit., p. 55.

[3] G. Orwell, op. cit., p. 64.

> Mr Ralph Nickleby was not, strictly speaking, what you would call a merchant: neither was he a banker, nor an attorney, nor a special pleader, nor a notary. He was certainly not a tradesman, and still less could he lay any claim to the title of a professional gentleman; for it would have been impossible to mention any recognised profession to which he belonged. Nevertheless, as he lived in a spacious house in Golden Square, which, in addition to a brass plate upon the street-door, had another brass plate two sizes and a half smaller upon the left-hand doorpost, surmounting a brass model of an infant's fist grasping a fragment of a skewer, and displaying the word 'Office', it was clear that Mr Ralph Nickleby did, or pretended to do, business of some kind;[4]

Thus Dickens makes it difficult to analyse closely his institutionalised world of work. Usually so meticulous about detail, he deliberately refrains from identifying a particular type of business, whilst the physical conditions are often left unpictured. The significance lies in the very existence of the workplace, its function and methods of management which influence the characters. The writer concentrates on the individual and yet his presentation of the institutions is unique. Dickens's originality lies in the fact that "he is able to dramatise those social institutions and consequences which are not accessible to ordinary physical observation. He takes them and presents them as if they were persons or natural phenomena"[5]. The companies and workplaces are frequently depicted as leading their own lives and shaping the individuals in them. The Circumlocution Office of *Little Dorrit* may serve as a good example. Besides, the enterprise is generally linked to some kind of disaster, although as always there are exceptions.

With each novel Dickens increasingly emphasises one of two factors which ruin a company: the human factor "inside" the firm or the "outside" force linked to regulation or society's pressures. The "inside" human factor means some attribute, characteristic or attitude inherent in the owner of the firm, for example Dombey's attitude to life and his company brings the downfall of the eponymous Dombey and Son. The "outside" factor brings down the company without the active intervention by the proprietor, as with the Clennam and Doyce partnership in *Little Dorrit*. In the early novels, the disaster is often initiated by the outsider who is predestined to destroy an organisation because it is harmful. Such is the case of Nicholas whose mission, as a romantic and thus chivalrous hero, is to initiate the destruction of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*[6].

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[4] C. Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, New York 1998 (1838-39), Tom Doherty Associates, p. 7. For the sake of convenience, all the subsequent quotations from the novel are referred to in the text as (*NN*).

[5] R. Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, London 1973, Chatto & Windus, p. 34.

[6] It is difficult not to agree with Chesterton's view that: "Nicholas Nickleby" is Dickens's first romantic novel because it is his first novel with a proper and dignified romantic hero (...). The hero of "Pickwick" is an old man. The hero of "Oliver Twist" is a child. (...) But Nicholas Nickleby is a proper, formal, and ceremonial hero. He has no psychology; he has not even any particular character; but he is made deliberately a hero – young, poor, brave, unimpeachable, and ultimately triumphant". (G. K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticism of the Works of Charles Dickens*, London 1911, J. M. Dent & Sons, p. 32).

However the company fails, there is always some connection between it and the family. Dickens's workplaces always influence family life and relationships. He builds "Houses" which serve as family home and as company, linking private and professional worlds. *Nicholas Nickleby* is the novel which initiates the motif, exploring it through different families. Dotheboys Hall, a private boarding school and the proprietors' home, is destroyed literally by the inhumanity of Squeers (which provokes the boys' rebellion) and his illegal schemes (the forged will). Mrs Mantalini's milliner business and thus household is ruined by an inside family factor, her husband and his "financial incontinency". Ralph Nickleby's unspecified business falls to ruin since it is synonymous with his mischievous life.

Dombey is the first proprietor whose character, comportment or misconceptions about employees or money ruin his own "house" and thus business. In his later novels Dickens uses, literally or metaphorically, the image of the "ruined house" in connection with business or different modes of employment/ unemployment. In *Bleak House* Skimpole and Mrs Jellyby and their respective ruined houses play the role[7]. *Hard Times* depicts two ruined families that embody opposing sides in the employer-employee nexus. Stephen Blackpool, his wife, and Rachel are the crushed employees, whilst the echo is provided by the disintegration of the factory proprietor's marriage. *Little Dorrit* looks at work from three different perspectives. The Clennams' house is synonymous with the business and both have been destroyed by human flaws of the proprietors. The Merdle crash is precipitated by internal factors, Merdle himself, and by the outside factor of a society which gave him the opportunity to embezzle all of the money entrusted to him. The fictional Circumlocution Office enables Dickens to analyse relations between the employers, the Barnacle family, and their employees who have been completely dehumanised by their work. Dickens finds the ultimate solution to the conundrum in *Great Expectations* by using the split personality of Wemmick who separates his family and business lives by physically and metaphorically building a castle as his house to protect himself from the harm caused by the dehumanising effects of office work.

This paper seeks to analyse a business venture which is unique in Dickens's fiction since it does not conform to the general characteristics of Dickensian enterprises sketched above. It concentrates on the Cheeryble Brothers of *Nicholas Nickleby* as the only fictional company that seems utterly perfect. To explore its uniqueness among other firms created by Dickens, some techniques of making the Cheeryble Brothers utopian are discussed, as well as some functions of the utopian business motif in the

[7] Both represent the development of the motif of the "ruined house". Skimpole, notoriously work-shy and thus neither an employer nor an employee, is the reversal of the theme since it is his self-inflicted unemployment that is the cause of his ruined household. Mrs Jellyby, a charity activist, employs no one and is not employed herself but she is a type of pseudo-employer within her family, forcing her daughter to work for her as a secretary.

novel which is a meeting place of different literary conventions and intellectual trends. In *Nicholas Nickleby* the reader may find traces of, among others, chivalric romance, picaresque, fairy-tale and realistic novel. Also different cultural models of the world are juxtaposed and the "utopian business" motif plays an important role in this juxtaposition.

The Cheeryble brothers represent a universal motif of "rags to riches", where immeasurable wealth is granted to the hard-working and honest. The writer, concerned that his creations should be "close to reality", defended them against charges that they were not authentic. In the Preface to the First Cheap Edition of 1848 he took particular care to inform the reader that they are taken from life, that they are not the figments of his imagination:

> [...] it may be right to say, that there are two characters in this book which are drawn from life. [...] the Brothers Cheeryble live: that their liberal charity, their singleness of heart, their noble nature, and their unbounded benevolence, are no creations of the Author's brain; but are prompting every day (and oftenest by stealth) some munificent and generous deed in that town of which they are the pride and honour. (*NN*, p. XX)

The Cheeryble brothers might have been based on actual Victorian businessmen, the brothers Daniel and William Grant of Ramsbottom and Manchester. Even if that was the case, they do not simply mirror the real people but serve a purpose for Dickens since: "We feel, with justice, that something is missing in this portrait; that in the world we know, or the world Dickens portrays, such total innocence and good humour could not amass such money"[8]. In any case, for the modern reader (unlike for the Victorian readers who tended to identify with fictional characters) the fact whether they were based on real Victorians is immaterial, what matters is their function in the novel where literary conventions intermingle and the bothers are as if in the middle if this merger. On the one hand, the "rags to riches" motif is realised through their history: they came to London poor and uneducated and accumulated an enormous fortune solely due to their virtue and integrity. On the other, once they have become rich they adopt the role of the fairy-tale good uncle/ guardian angel since the brothers' sole aim is to help those in need. Actually, as pointed out by Stone, Dickens made a mistake by stressing in his introduction that the brothers were taken from life because he mixed the fairy-tale convention with reality: "When Dickens testified that the Cheerybles were real, he invested a reassuring conception of storybook wish fulfilment with the possibility of tangible help"[9]. Unlike the brothers, the characters than can be

[8] M. Engel, *The Maturity of Dickens*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1967, Harvard University Press, p. 99.

[9] H. Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World. Fairy Tales, Fantasy and Novel-Making*, London 1980, Macmillan, p. 84.

discussed as realistic portrayals, although caricatured and satirised, are the Kenwigs and the Mantalinis.

The Cheerybles are infused with magical quality rather than verisimilitude. Everything about them, their style of management and their company, is unreal perfection. They both embody pure benevolence, innocence and virtue, immune to the seduction of dishonesty in a hostile business world, enabling the narrator to compare them to the symbols of purity: "As they shook each other by the hand, the face of each lighted up by beaming looks of affection, which would have been most delightful to behold in infants, and which, in men so old, was inexpressibly touching" (*NN*, p. 525). Dickens's insistence that they are taken from life is rather wishful thinking. As Horsman puts it, "The phrase 'as they really are' could also carry in some cases an implied contrast with things as they might be"[10]. The Cheeryble brothers might be their creator's wish to people the extra-textual world with his fairy-tale-like creatures. Such an interpretation contradicts Allen's view that: "Dickens's vision of the world and its inhabitants (...) is like a child's" and "the child's vision is just as true as the grown-up's". The critic felt that the characters are not exaggerated but that "they are so sharply differentiated one from another as to be plainly the product of intense accuracy of observation"[11]. While undeniably Dickens was a good observer, there are instances when his world is not mimetic in the sense that every detail in it suggests that it is almost "too good to be true" and that certain characters are conceived as travestying particular universal traces.

Both brothers exist on a metaphorical level as guardian angels in the Christian vision of the world or good uncles of the fairy-tale, whose mission is to help others, which is the main function of the "utopian business" motif. The great improvement in Nicholas's circumstances resulting from the coincidental meeting with brother Charles is of great importance in the plot of the novel: "As soon as Nicholas enters the Cheeryble brothers the picaresque element stops"[12]. Once Nicholas settles as a new employee in the counting house, all his misfortunes end and he no longer has to search for a way to provide for himself and his family. It is the moment when, in a novel in which different literary conventions are interrelated, one convention takes precedence of the other.

Up to the point when the Cheeryble brothers turn into Nicholas's protectors, the picaresque elements are clearly noticeable. The picaresque reminiscences can be, of course, found only in those episodes involving Nicolas's adventures, where the motif of travel is strongly pronounced. Nicholas, obviously, is not a typical picaroon. Neither is he a scoundrel nor

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[10] A. Horsman, *The Victorian Novel*, Oxford 1990, Clarendon Press, p. 99.

[11] W. Allen, *Six Great Novelists: Defoe, Fielding, Scott, Dickens, Stevenson, Conrad*, London 1955, Hamish Hamilton, pp. 111–112.

[12] P. Hobsbaum, *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens*, Syracuse, NY, 1998 (1972), Syracuse University Press, p. 49.

a servant who recounts his escapades in the first person narrative. He can be rather considered as a permutation of a chivalric romance hero – son of a worthy gentleman, noble and honourable, protecting the poor and the females of his life. He is even involved in what can be seen as a chivalric fight in defence of the oppressed children in Dotheboys Hall. For some time he platonically loves Madeline Bray (Nicholas falls in love in chapter 40 and is able to marry her in chapter 65) who is promised as wife to the miser Arthur Gride. The love plot is eventually resolved in a fairy-tale-like style where last-moment deaths and interventions unite the two lovers who live happily ever after[13]. Thus the term picaresque can be applied to the novel only in a sense of a loosely structured sequence of episodes united by the presence of the main character who enjoys adventures "on the road". The picaresque begins in chapter 5 when "Nicholas starts for Yorkshire" and finishes in chapter 35 in which "Nicholas ... meets with new Acquaintances and brighter Days seem to dawn upon the Family". In the first half of the book (65 chapters altogether) Nicholas travels, changes his place of residence and company. He moves from London to Yorkshire where he resides with the evil master of Dotheboys Hall; once he leaves the Squeers family he is again on the road returning to London where he looks for a new employment and encounters new company. Unsuccessful, in chapter 22 "he sallies forth to seek his Fortune" and is afresh "tourin", this time with the theatrical troupe of Mr Vincent Crummles. In the meantime many low-life episodes are narrated. The picaresque convention is actually most pronounced when Nicholas is on the road with the Crummles Company, although the fictional reality becomes infused with the elements of the stage reality. Suddenly, however, Nicholas leaves the theatre and returns to London where he settles down and his adventurous life is turned into a quiet existence overwhelmed by coincidences and "interventions" characteristic of fairy-tale.

Yet fairy-tales motifs cannot be said to begin once the picaresque ends. On the contrary, they are present from the opening sentence of the story, clearly reminiscent of the fairy-tale convention: "There once lived in a sequestered part of the country of Devonshire, one Mr Godfrey Nickleby..." (*NN*, p. 1). Then, in chapter 6 the main narrative is actually interrupted by two self-contained fairy stories: *The Five Sisters* and *The Baron of Grogzwig*, appropriately told in a public-place over a bowl of hot punch, which at the same time echoes a tradition of oral literature. However, fairy-tale motifs are most noticeable in certain themes and structures of the novel[14]. The Nickleby family may be said to be a travesty of a fairy-tale. Nicolas and Kate's mother, Mrs Nickleby is a poor widow who comes to seek help from her prosperous relative, who turns out to be an unhelpful monster. Ralph Nickleby, the rich and wicked uncle, commits suicide which can be

[13] See: H. Stone, op. cit., p. 83.
[14] For details see: H. Stone, op. cit.

considered as a self-judgement following the archetypal crime – he murders his own child, Smike. Nicholas and Kate form a perfect brother-sister relationship, he the protector, she the obedient sister, mutually helping each other. Nicholas, an honourable hero, marries as a reward for his virtuous conduct, his princess Madeline Bray (who is actually princess in disguise, as initially impoverished she is restored to her fortune as a result of certain "coincidence"). Kate Nickleby, the loving sister, marries the nephew of the family's protectors – Frank Cheeryble. Eventually, all live happily surrounded by children and grandchildren.

The kernel of fairy-tale evil is undeniably Dotheboy Hall. Squeers is clearly a monster, both in terms of his behaviour and physique. Not only is his demeanour violent, but also his appearance resembles the one-eyed Cyclops. His wife is witch-like, unpleasant and fiendish, and feeds the children with disgusting mixtures. As a result of their conduct the schoolchildren are physically deformed. Yet when the forces of good finally triumph the Squeerses lose their power which is properly signified by the way Mrs Squeers is humiliated by the boys who feed her with the hated brew. From the beginning of the novel the dark forces of evil are also constantly represented by Ralph Nickleby, his scheming and selfishness. Halfway throughout the novel, however, its centre of goodness, the Cheeryble brothers, takes precedence. Once they are introduced gradually all the hardships end, the virtuous are rewarded and the wicked punished or self-punished. The main function of the brothers or the "utopian business" motif, is then providing the novel with the antithesis of the wickedness, as well as initiating a truly positive change in Nicholas's life, which concurrently marks the end of the picaresque since the change involves stability and "immobility".

Dickens shines little light on the business, the counting house, itself. Almost the only physical details he provides are that it is "the oldest and cleanest-looking house of business" and that it is situated in "a quiet shady little square" (*NN*, p. 523). The absence of descriptive features suggests that he was less interested in verisimilitude than in providing Nicholas with a proper award for his earlier virtuous behaviour. Thus, Nicholas meets the idealised employer in a firm close to perfection in management, employee-employers relationships and atmosphere. Even the brothers' name, implying "cheering up"[15], buttresses this idea for they will cheer

[15] Brook, who assigns an entire chapter to proper names in Dickens, observes that "Dickens devoted a lot of care to the choice of suitable names for his characters. Some of the most familiar Dickensian names were arrived at only after many changes ". (p. 209) There can be little doubt that the name of the brothers is not incidental. Brook actually quotes Cheeryble as an example of the name in which only a part "resembles a common English word, but the resemblance is enough to make the name significant ". (p. 215) For more on proper names in Dickens, see: G. L. Brook, *The Language of Dickens*, London 1970, Andre Deutsch.

Nicholas up in hard times and provide his family with a safe haven, producing a happy ending for all those wronged by Ralph Nickleby. As the antithesis of the violence and wickedness of the two other business ventures: Squeers's school and Ralph Nickleby's unspecified firm, and the centre of goodness which thoroughly changes the lives of worthy characters, the Cheeryble Brothers as a company paradoxically operates through a realistic convention in a sense that the firm provides Nicholas with proper employment which allows him to settle down and support his family.

Hence Dickens presents the brothers as successful businessmen (which is repeated several times in the text), but he also implies that neither they nor their company can be real:

> Passing through a warehouse which presented every indication of a thriving business, Mr Cheeryble (for such Nicholas supposed him to be, from the respect which had been shown him by the warehousemen and porters whom they passed) led him into a little partitioned-off counting-house like a large glass case, in which counting-house there sat – as free from dust and blemish as if he had been fixed into the glass case before the top was put on, and had never come out since – a fat, elderly, large-faced, clerk, with silver spectacles and a powdered head. (*NN*, p. 524)

The office is separated from the outside world by the glass. It is physically disconnected from "the wilderness", the expression used by both Nicholas and Charles Cheeryble (who repeats it three times) to describe London and its complexities[16]. The business can thrive and be guided by "pure openness of heart" only by being disentangled from the corruption of the outside world. In a novel otherwise full of aggression the brothers are conspicuous in having none since they are insulated from it and are "almost genetically incapable of any radically individualistic impulse by virtue of being parts of an inseparable pair, like andirons"[17]. Another function of the "utopian business" motif is, then, to present an ideal form of business relationships not based on materialism but on virtuous integrity. The brothers represent the Christian world model where sharing wealth with the poor and thanking God by good deeds for whatever good fortune one has been given in life, which is contrasted with the *laissez-faire* approach of Madame Mantalini or Squeers's dishonest business dealings.

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[16] During their first conversation Nicholas points out to brother Charles that he seems out of place in London:

'What d'ye mean, eh? What d'ye mean?'

'Merely that your kind face and manner – both so unlike any I have ever seen – tempted me into an avowal, which, to any other stranger in this wilderness of London, I should not have dreamt of making,' returned Nicholas.

'Wilderness! Yes it is, it is. God. It *is* a wilderness,' said the old man with much animation. 'It was a wilderness to me once. I came here barefoot - I have never forgotten it. Thank God!' (*NN*, p. 522)

[17] M. Magnet, *Dickens and the Social Order*, Philadelphia 1985, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 36.

Dickens uses physique to bolster the image of the brothers. They are not of the contemporary world but from a more benign past. Throughout the entire episode when Nicholas is looking for a job, the narrator refers to Charles as the "old gentleman", never once using his Christian name, and everything about him is portrayed as old or old-fashioned:

> He was a sturdy old fellow [...]. He wore his coat buttoned; and his dimpled double-chin rested in the folds of a white neckerchief – not one of your stiff starched apoplectic cravats, but a good easy old-fashioned white neckloth that a man might go to bed and be none the worse for it. But what principally attracted the attention of Nicholas, was the old gentleman's eye, - never was such a clear, twinkling, honest, merry, happy eye, as that. And there he stood, looking a little upward, with one hand thrust into the breast of his coat, and the other playing with his old-fashioned gold watch-chain [...] with such a pleasant smile playing about his mouth, and such a comical expression of mingled slyness, simplicity, kind-heartedness, and good-humour, lighting up his jolly old face [...]. (*NN*, p. 520)

Dickens's descriptions are meant to provide much more information than a dry enumeration of details associated with a particular person. The portrayal of Charles Cheeryble projects an aura of quiet happiness and indescribable goodness. Dickens draws him in a manner indicating that he does not belong to the harsh world of *laissez-faire* (the wilderness of London). Charles Cheeryble's appearance exudes the past: the minute details of his neckcloth and watch place him in an era, long gone, when (if ever) there were good employers. The old-fashioned neckcloth is contrasted with the stiffness of the now-fashionable cravats, implying the inflexibility of the latter compared with the essential goodness of Charles Cheeryble.

Dickens injects one more utopian dimension when he allows shared management of the counting house[18]. The relationships in the company are based on mutual trust and respect, becoming symbiotic. More than a decade after the publication of *Nicholas Nickleby*, when discussing the Birmingham Mechanics' Institution, he gave his personal views on the issue:

> Now I want the Birmingham people, from the first, to appeal to the working man's sense and spirit; to give him his rightful share in the management of this place; to associate him therein with his Employer, to the enduring advantage and improvement of both[19].

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[18] Magnet argues that Dickens's idealised picture of the House of Cheeryble Brothers is false since it is "an all-in-one combination of home, brotherhood, and business, in which all relationships are personal ties of affection, and doing business is chiefly a matter of vigorous corporate philantropizing (...)". (M. Magnet, op. cit., p. 37.)

[19] Letter to Dr Lyon Playfair of 20 December 1853, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 7, (1853–1855), G. Storey, K. Tillotson and A. Easson (eds), Oxford 1993, Clarendon Press, p. 231.

The world model presented in *Nicholas Nickleby* advocates the idea of self-help (although Nicholas is assisted in finding a job, he is never idle wasting his time; he looks for it actively) and it appears as a virtue in the early novels. The reward for the worthy worker trying to "better himself" ought to be a share in the enterprise's management, linking him even more closely with his employment[20].

Tim Linkinwater serves as an example. A workaholic and a veteran of 44 years with the Cheeryble counting house, he has become one with the company to the extent that he will not hear of retirement, preferring to remain in his room in the company, as he says: "If it wasn't inconvenient, and didn't interfere with business, I should request leave to die there" (*NN*, p. 529). He foreshadows the Wemmick of Little Britain, a man whose life revolves around work. However, Wemmick is provided with an alternative life at his Walworth residence, Linkinwater has none. He is perfectly happy because his employers treat him more like a friend than an employee and: "For the Cheerybles, economic life and communal life are wholly reconciled with each other"[21]. Linkinwater's happiness is one of the few examples in Dickens's fiction where the interweaving of the private life and the business does not lead to tragedy, and this is solely due to the role of benevolent angels given to the brothers.

Tim is so symbiotically linked with the company that he believes he is indispensable to it, and it is only after careful manipulation by the managers that he can be convinced that Nicholas could be as valuable to the company as him:

> 'Do you suppose I haven't often thought what would become of these books when I was gone? Do you suppose I haven't often thought that things might go on irregular and untidy here, after I was taken away? But now,' said Tim, extending his forefinger towards Nicholas, 'now, when I've shown him a little more, I'm satisfied. The business will go on when I'm dead as well as it did when I was alive – just the same; and I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that there never were such books – never were such books! No, nor never will be such books – as the books of Cheeryble Brothers.' (*NN*, pp. 547–548)

Tim Linkinwater is actually rewarded for his inflexibility, punctuality, conscientiousness and devotion to the company, signifying the narrator's approval of the employee's almost organic union with the company which earns him a partnership in the firm. Modern critics have perceived the actions of the Cheerybles more harshly, as exemplified by House's assessment:

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[20] Dickens expressed his approval of self-help on numerous occasions; one of the more explicit examples will suffice: "you can no more help a people who do not help themselves, than you can help a man who does not help himself". (Letter to A. H. Layard of 10 April 1855, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 7, op. cit. p. 588.)

[21] M. Magnet, op. cit., p. 37.

> Even children have a horror of their [the brothers] smiles and hand-rubbing seen through glass, of their placid unremitting unctuousness. But the horror has another added to it – horror at the utter dependence of their employees upon them. The whole Nickleby family falls into their hands and is as firmly chained to their goodwill as Tim Linkinwater has been for years[22].

In the course of his writing career Dickens moves from approving of this symbiosis of employee and company to treating it as a threat with Wemmick. There is a moral dimension in that Linkinwater's behaviour is worthy because his company is managed by the morally superior Cheerybles. It is a privilege to be under their care. In the case of other employers (in the Circumlocution Office or in Jaggers's office) such dependence can, in a metaphorical sense, potentially threaten the employees' lives.

Interestingly, the Cheeryble brothers are also infused with Puritan work ethic where working equalled serving God, and so another function of the "utopian business" motif is to emphasise the ethical dimension of employment. In the Puritan understanding of the world earning one's living was a moral obligation whilst unemployment or being supported by others was equated with moral deficiency. An individual's worth was to a great extent defined by their profession and commitment to work. Tim Linkinwater who "has been a faithful servant" and as a clerk provided "faithful services" is highly esteemed, respected, and his efforts must be duly "recompensed" (*NN*, p. 526). By contrast, Charles Cheeryble criticises the unemployed because losing one's job, or being unable to find work, constitutes something close to a sin: a moral and social deficit.

In his fiction Dickens is equivocal in his attitude to unemployment. Provided they are "good people", he heaps no blame on the poor who, despite their best efforts, are unable to find work as can be seen in *Little Dorrit* in the case of the inhabitants of the Bleeding Heart Yard. And yet, he has Charles Cheeryble exclaim to the unemployed Nicholas: "'What! Dear me! No, no. Well-behaved young gentleman reduced to such a necessity! No no, no no.'" (*NN*, p. 522). He pointedly uses the word "reduced" to express his disapproving attitude. Even the good Charles Cheeryble regards unemployment as something unworthy of a gentleman and he immediately employs Nicholas to spare him further degradation. Thus the function of the fairy-tale good uncles is "supported" ethically by the Puritan world model and the reason for employing Nicholas can be viewed as a meeting point of a literary convention and an ethical trend.

The above is also true in terms of the brothers' charitable activities. On the one hand their function as good uncles/ guardian angels means that they unselfishly help others; on the other their charitable impulses are rooted in the Christian attitude to charity where kindness is contagious

[22] H. House, op. cit., p. 65.

and many who knew hardship are customarily charitable in better days. The Cheerybles fit this pattern. They came to London "bare-footed" and once they became rich they seek to help others. They build a firm relationship with Trimmers who provides them with the facts about those in need:

> 'He is a good creature,' said Mr Cheeryble [...]. 'He is a kind soul. I am very much obliged to Trimmers. Trimmers is one of the best friends we have. He makes a thousand cases known to us that we should never discover ourselves. I am very obliged to Trimmers.' (*NN*, p. 524)

The utopian element in the charitable activities of the brothers is achieved through their complete trust in the recipients of their assistance and in their belief that providing help to the unfortunate is their sole function. Their charitable impulses are not unreal but the degree to which they are willing to sacrifice their time and money departs from reality.

However, the Puritan view on charity made a clear distinction between the deserving and undeserving. Failure to provide for one's family signified non-fulfilment of a near-religious duty and thereby was sinful, so many in receipt of charity were stigmatised. It is not clearly specified in the novel whether the brothers make such a distinction, yet the two explicitly described cases show that they are ready to help those who are in need as a result of objective reasons or who actively try to help themselves. The latter case is represented by Nicholas; the former by "the widow and family of a man who was killed in the East India Docks (...) Smashed (...) by a cask of sugar" (*NN*, p. 524). Since it seems that they deal with "the deserving" ones, the Cheeryble brothers are not simply benevolent but they distribute their largesse in such a way as to avoid humiliating the recipients. They take care to disguise their philanthropy, since as they say: "We mustn't look ostentatious" (*NN*, p. 525). They become ingenious at giving assistance without it being explicit or open, following Charles's principle that "it would help to preserve habits of frugality (...) and remove any painful sense of overwhelming obligations" (*NN*, p. 530).

It has been argued that Dickens uses the brothers' management techniques to plead that all social problems could be solved if only all employers followed the example of Pickwick, the Cheeryble brothers and Garland[23]. This seems a far-fetched conclusion. In *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens does not seriously engage with contemporary social problems other than child abuse by sadistic schoolmasters, exemplified by the Dotheboys Hall motif. He creates the brothers as a contrast to the company of the villainous Ralph Nickleby. The novel also requires a kernel of goodness to counteract the evils of Squeers and to reward Nicholas for his steadfastness in not having joined Squeers in his villainy. From the beginning, Nicholas's

[23] See: T. A. Jackson, *Karol Dickens* (original title: *Charles Dickens*, translated by Andrzej Konarek), Warszawa 1953, Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza Czytelnik, p. 112.

"adventures on the road" are an odyssey in search of becoming self-sufficient and so the end of his journey is properly marked by perfect employment. To see the novel as a fairy story, and treating the Cheerybles as the fairy godfathers of Nicholas, is much more convincing than analysing it as a social debate[24].

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Summary

The article aims at presenting some of the functions of the "utopian business" motif represented by the Cheeryble Brothers in *Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens, as well as indicating some of the ways in which the utopian dimension is achieved. Shown in comparison with other Dickensian companies, the Cheeryble

[24] Stone notes: "In Nickleby the demons and goblins and monsters of life, the Squeers, and Grides and Ralph Nicklebys, despite their seemingly invincible power, are overcome by the naive yeomen, godfathers, and heroes of this world, the Browdies, and Cheerybles and Nicholas Nickleby – a magical victory indeed". (p. 83.) The critic points out that in *Nicholas Nickleby* the fairy tale operates in the structure and the motifs of the work, rather than infuses in detail the texture of the novel. For more about *Nicholas Nickleby* as a conflict between the fancy (fairy tale) and fact (reality), see: H. Stone, op. cit.

Brothers seems unique. The uniqueness lies in the fact that in the majority of cases the firms are destructive forces in the novels whereas employment in the brothers' company equals the highest happiness possible. The firm is an ideal, almost symbiotic merger of private and business lives of the characters, moving it to the realm of utopia. The functions of the "utopian business" motif are numerous. The company is seen as the centre of goodness in the novel and the antithesis of evil represented by Ralph Nickleby and Squeers. The motif ends the picaresque element in the novel by providing the main character with proper financial stability which in turn enables him to support his family and seek for emotional stability. At the same time it reinforces the fairy-tale convention in the novel where the brothers, through their helpful attitude, act as good uncles of other characters. From a different perspective, the "utopian business" motif is used to advocate the idea of self-help and charity thus indicating the cultural model of the world based on the Christian in a general sense, and Puritan in a narrower sense, ethics.