

“ ‘I want some more’: The Triumphant Working Class in the Novels of Charles Dickens”

If you were middle or upper class during the reign of Queen Victoria, and hadn't squandered your wealth on wine, women, and song, you could be assured you would be well fed. It was a period of extravagance where, being entertained at a host's banquet, you might enjoy upwards of nine courses; enough to make the buttons burst off your dinner jacket or the ribs *crack* on your whale bone corset. It was the age of the rise of the afternoon tea, where scones hung in a delicate balance between perfectly buttery and downright disgustingly rich. The Victorian poet Christina Rossetti provides us with a mouth-watering list of the kinds of delicious foods available for consumption. In “Goblin Market”, a tale that at once dives into the secret erotic love life of a deeply repressed society, explores the nature of Christian sacrifice, and considers capitalism and the rise of Victorian market economy, we get a gastronomic orchestra of the kinds of food accessible to those with money:

MORNING and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
"Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpeck'd cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheek'd peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries; -
All ripe together

In summer weather, -
Morns that pass by,
Fair eves that fly;
Come buy, come buy:
Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces¹,
Rare pears and greengages²,
Damsons and bilberries³,
Taste them and try:
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy."

And buy they did. It was an age where money meant something.

But hasn't money always meant something? Well, yes, money or its equivalent has always served as a happy opiate for those lucky enough to have it. But it did have particular meaning in the first century after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, during which time *A Christmas Carol* was written, in part because of its *novelty*; the working poor, who had always been the working poor had, for the first time in their lives, a really good opportunity to be rich. Gloriously rich! Gluttonously rich! And they had the chance to remember from what gutters they

¹ A variety of plum.

² Another type of plum.

³ Bilberry (especially [Vaccinium myrtillus](#)) is known in English by a very wide range of local names. As well as "bilberry", these include blaeberry (🔊 [/ˈbleɪbəri/](#)), whortleberry ([/ˈhɔːtəlberi/](#)), (ground) hurts, winberry, winberry, windberry, wimberry, myrtle blueberry and fraughan. The berries were called black-hearts in 19th century south-western England, according to [Thomas Hardy's](#) 1878 novel [The Return of the Native](#).^[1] In several other languages its name translates as "blueberry", and this may cause confusion with the related plants more usually known as "[blueberry](#)" in English, which are in the separate section [Cyanococcus](#) of the [Vaccinium genus](#).

had emerged, or they could choose to avert their eyes when a child in a torn tunic asked, “please sir, can you help?”

This doesn't mean that the working poor hadn't given wealth a 'good go' prior to the 19th Century. The end of Feudalism centuries earlier was the foundational period for a much maligned *nouveau riche*. But with the invention of steam power and improved iron manufacturing in the 19th Century came an unprecedented opportunity for upward social mobility. And so you get poor characters like Pip in *Great Expectations*, who, with his “coarse hands” and “common boots”, has a, well, great-expectation to transform into a *gentleman*, a man of status, leisure, and wealth.

Where there is unprecedented production such as there was in the Industrial Revolution, there is unparalleled wealth...but there is also its corollary: extreme poverty. People crowded into the cities to get jobs and make money, but overcrowding meant more disease; added to this, factory jobs were insecure, provided exceptionally low wages, and usually were carried out under very dangerous working conditions. Worst of all, child labour was a rule, not an exception. Food, then, in novels like Dickens becomes a symbol of wealth and happiness, a fantasy of abundance. Indeed, Ghandi once remarked, “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.” It is a quote so apt for Dickens that it has even occasionally been falsely attributed to him instead. What he actually did say – less of an appeal to pathos, but equally true - is, “There is nothing better than a friend, unless it is a friend with chocolate.”

Rossetti's passage above is not unlike the symphony of gastronomic sound in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, where our “squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous” anti-hero-turned-hero finds himself in his own abode, accompanied by the ghost of Christmas Present, but his home now reflects the plenty he actually has:

“Heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with their delicious steam.”

I take note of two things in this passage that stand out above everything else. The first is the sheer joy Dickens must have taken in creating a verbal image of a culinary delight: words that leap out of the page and onto the tongue, and linger there before they head down the throat and rest delightfully in the stomach.

The second is its autobiographical aspect. Listed here is a cornucopia about which Dickens himself, as a young boy, once remembered and then had to dream of. Charles Dickens, was born in 1812 to a middle-class family in Portsmouth. He has left record of early memories of New Year's Day parties, where his nursemaid would carry him down and let him peep at the guests, carousing and wishing each other good health. His early childhood was filled with stories, but many of them were ghoulish tales of dreadful captains who chopped their wives into pies – stories that were possibly the root of a childhood filled with nightmares and fears. Notice in his own writings, the pies are purely mincemeat and figgy pudding is order of the day.

But what *is* figgy pudding, you may wonder? We have all sung a thousand times the order that it must be brought in “We Wish You a Merry Christmas”. But what if we don't like it once it has arrived? Well, a figgy pudding, to put your minds at ease, is a steamed cake of sorts with figs, fruit, dates, and spices, along with a copious amount of rum and brandy. We know it has been around since at least the mid-1600s because, as the story goes, that is when the Puritans banned it, along with such other trivialities as, for example, Christmas. It reached its peak of popularity in Dickens's time, where the expansion of the figgy pudding industry reached a near bursting point. Its interminable preparation time caused its stock-market-style crash soon after, when speed became the order of the day.

But for Dickens and the people who he wrote into his stories, figgy pudding was worth any time it took. An hour or so ago, you heard as part of Ron Reed's marvelous adaption of *A Christmas Carol*, a piece about Christmas pudding. I'd like to re-read it here so as to point out a single matter of significance:

Mrs. Cratchit left the room alone—too nervous to bear witnesses --to take the pudding up and bring it in.

Suppose it should not be done enough! Suppose it should break in turning out! Suppose

somebody should have got over the wall of the back-yard, and stolen it, while they were merry with the goose --a supposition at which the two young Cratchits became livid! All sorts of horrors were supposed.

Hallo! A great deal of steam! The pudding was out of the copper. A smell like a washing-day! That was the cloth. A smell like an eating-house and a pastrycook's next door to each other, with a laundress's next door to that! That was the pudding! In half a minute Mrs. Cratchit entered -- flushed, but smiling proudly --with the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quartern of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top.

Oh, a wonderful pudding! Bob Cratchit said, and calmly too, that he regarded it as the greatest success achieved by Mrs. Cratchit since their marriage. Mrs. Cratchit said that now the weight was off her mind, she would confess she had had her doubts about the quantity of flour. Everybody had something to say about it, but nobody said or thought it was at all a small pudding for a large family. It would have been flat heresy to do so. Any Cratchit would have blushed to hint at such a thing.

The subtle note I take from this excerpt is the reference to the delight the Cratchits take in a pudding that is frankly much too small. Though Dickens was born into a family with a modest amount of money, by the time he was nine years old his father had brought them to a place of serious financial difficulty, which would set Dickens on a course he would never forget. His became of life of hard work and financial strain, and we can see the passion he feels for the poor as he lashes out in a determined critique of a political and social system that could be so blind to the needs of so many. When he penned his second novel, *Oliver Twist*, it seems clear that memories of his own hungry childhood had come flooding back. Certainly his tone is deeply personal as he tells the tale of Oliver's struggle for survival in a brutal workhouse and then in the violent and frenzied slums of London.

And yet. And yet. Life for Oliver was a triumph. Dickens refuses to rest for long on a tone of deep self pity. In the same phrase that we learn that Oliver, on his ninth birthday, was "pale and thin", due to his being raised "without the inconvenience of too much food and too

much clothing”, we also are told that “nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver’s breast.” It is the spirit that lends him the fortitude to turn to his superior – a “fat, healthy man” – and state, “Please, sir, I want some more.” Dickens’s lengthy descriptions of food in so many of his stories are laced with the optimism only those who have known fear and starvation dare cling to. They are culinary fantasies indulged in by the very hungry, but fantasies that are often fulfilled. I don’t want to tell you how all Dickens’s novels end, largely because that would take far too long... But rather than publishing works that finish on notes of self-pity, where the poor are victims disabled by their own poverty, those same poor are active participants in their redemption. David Copperfield remarks that he must be the hero of his own life; in *A Tale of Two Cities* we are reminded that strength lies in one’s own decision to be happy, against all odds. Indeed, the tales of this great champion of social justice tend to finish in ways where characters, once starving and desperate, get to have their figgy pudding and it eat it too. Thank you very much.