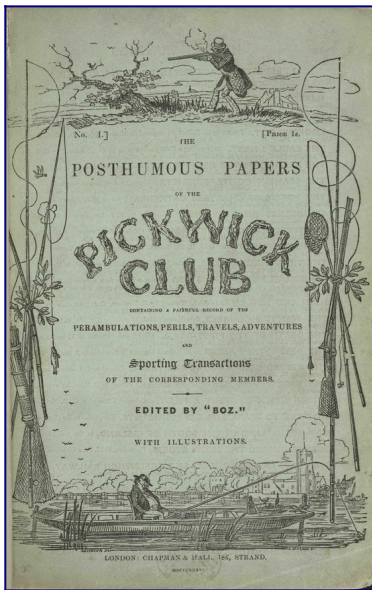


The Pickwickian Sentiment
Posted on 24 January 2012 by [cjf](#)



I tuned in to the Pickwickian sentiment some 30 years ago when I first read [Charles Dickens'](#) inaugural novel [The Pickwick Papers](#). Thanks to the impetus of [The Free Library of Philadelphia's celebration of the 200th anniversary of Dickens' birth](#), I've re-read it and had the chance to think through its meaning more carefully. It seems to me that *Pickwickian* refers to the quality of certain expeditions, [slice of life](#) adventures or ordinary events which entail the strife and mettle incumbent upon most trials and tribulations which with good-heartedness, good-humour, patience, nurturing and some surprise tend to bring forth general benevolence and joy. It is a great sentiment which we could use more of in this world!

It seems to me this Pickwickian sentiment is the thread that holds together the plot of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, the title in the original publication. The sentiment emerges explicitly with Mr. Bolton's clamour in chapter 1 and continues with the cab driver in chapter 2 who assaults Pickwick for taking notes on their conversation. Throughout there are countless incidents of turmoil and challenge which after at least some modicum of sound and fury end with wholesome benevolence and good will.

In the big picture of the novel, it is Pickwick's relationship with Nathaniel Winkle which exhibits Pickwickianism in its most dramatically nurturing and good-hearted sense. It is Winkle, the sportsman, whose careless shooting wounds fellow Pickwickian, Tracey Tupman. Winkle's disastrous outing on ice skates results in Pickwick's scathing admonition "[You're a] humbug, sir. I will speak plainer, if you wish it. An impostor, sir." Then at Pickwick's trial, it is Winkle who volunteers the "one instance of suspicious behavior towards females" which helps the jury decide against our good natured and innocent protagonist.

Through all these ills borne of Winkle's youthful ineptness, our eponymous leader embodies Pickwickian good spirit and supports his protégé. He intervenes after the unfortunate incident with the Dowlers in Bath which sends Winkle in flight. The dénouement of the novel is Pickwick's difficult mission to reconcile Winkle with his father. I was struck at Pickwick's remarkable devotion to Winkle and how that relationship exudes the Pickwickian sentiment through and through. Is this the plot that [GK Chesterton missed in critiquing the novel](#)?

These good-hearted and good-humoured adventures in the large as well as the innumerable little scenes throughout the novel reinforce my view that the plot of *The Pickwick Papers* is a tale of adventure showcasing *the Pickwickian sentiment* which through numerous fun and funny tribulations end with good-humour, pride and exultation. A comedy indeed!

It may be that my exalted view of Pickwick is unjustified. For a more conventional perspective see [Edward Pettit](#)'s write-up [Dickens Literary Salon: Pickwick Papers](#) with its sundry references.

How would you characterize "*Pickwickian*"? Does "the Pickwickian sentiment" constitute a plot?

Pickwick and Bucky

When I discovered [Buckminster Fuller](#) it was his benevolence ("the planet's friendly genius") that attracted me. Could my enchantment with Pickwick have led me to another humanist like Bucky? I do not know. But both the great character and the great thinker share Pickwickian qualities. The one that seems most striking is Bucky's [Mistake Mystique](#) — Pickwickian indeed!

Do you see connections between Bucky and Pickwick?

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3 Responses to “The Pickwickian Sentiment”

1. **mom** on 24 January 2012 at 8:30 pm



it is up to us to find a glimmer of fun in those situations that can appear at first disturbing.

[Reply](#)

2. [Edward Pettit](#) on 7 February 2012 at 6:05 pm

CJ, You are so right about the development of Pickwick's relationship with Winkle throughout the novel. And to think this was relatively unplanned on Dickens' part. He hadn't really mapped out the story ahead of time to pursue this kind of relationship. And that's why, towards the end, it seems a bit incongruous to introduce Winkle's father and make known Pickwick's relationship with the young man. I think Dickens must have also realized what you see in the novel, that Pickwick was Winkle's mentor all along. By introducing the absent father, and making it explicit, a narrative thread can be seen throughout the entire work. So I'll have to agree with you on that.



However, it's still a bit wanting for a "plot." This is more of a development of the characters, not necessarily a plot. For even if we grant this part of their relationship, the moments that show it are few and far between. I wouldn't go so far as Chesterton in saying *Pickwick Papers* has no ending or is not a novel, but I do recognize in it the picaresque quality of an 18th Century novel that ignores a central, cohesive plot.

I don't think sentiment can take the place of plot if we define one as a narrative thread, causally linked with a beginning, middle and end. Pickwick's adventures are all over the place, sometimes causally linked, sometimes not and if you could shuffle the adventures, many of them could happen at any time with no damage to the narrative. And it is precisely all of this that makes me love Pickwick all the more (and Chesterton loves this, too). The Pickwickian sentiment that binds together the adventures does make this book a novel, just one that is different from what readers then were beginning to expect from a novel and what readers now almost demand from one. But I don't think sentiment can replace a plot.

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3. [Stephen Jarvis](#) on 14 January 2015 at 10:33 am

Hello



That's a very interesting post, on Mr Pickwick's relationship with Winkle. One thing which might be of relevance here is that Winkle could be seen as symbolic of Dickens's relationship with his first illustrator, Robert Seymour, who of course had a certain penchant for sporting matters. Having said that, the traditional view of Seymour's involvement with Dickens is – I have to say – wrong. Seymour was interested in much more than sport. And this brings me to my reason for leaving a comment here.

I have actually written a novel about the origins and afterlife of *The Pickwick Papers*, in which Seymour is the main character. It's called *Death and Mr Pickwick*, and it will be published in May by Jonathan Cape, of the Random House Group (in the UK) and in June by Farrar, Straus & Giroux (in the USA).

You can find out more at: <http://www.deathandmrpickwick.com>

Best wishes

Stephen Jarvis

[Reply](#)

4.