Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

THE ARTISTIC SPECIFICITY OF THE SKETCH-STORY GENRE IN CHARLES DICKENS'S WORKS OF THE 1830S

Jalalova Nodira Nosirjon qizi
Teacher of English Literature Department
Namangan State of Foreign Languages Institute
E-mail address: jalalovanodira3@gmail.com

Abstract
This article explores the genre transformations in the short prose of Charles Dickens, focusing on the artistic features of the sketch-story genre in Sketches by Boz. The study analyzes Dickens's combination of realism, journalism, satire, and social criticism in depicting Victorian London and its lower classes. Particular attention is paid to documentary detail, atmosphere, open endings, and moral issues in Dickens's early prose. The article concludes that Dickens's sketch-stories are not only preparatory works for his novels but also an important contribution to the development of nineteenth-century English short prose.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, Sketches by Boz, Victorian literature, short prose, sketch-story, realism, social criticism.

Introduction

It appears most productive to trace the evolution of the short story genre in early Victorian English prose through the example of the early works of the outstanding nineteenth-century writer Charles Dickens. Throughout his literary career, Dickens consistently turned to short prose forms. Many Russian and foreign literary scholars believe that short prose served as a kind of creative laboratory for Dickens, where he experimented with themes that he later developed more fully in his novels. In this way, they emphasize the dependence of the short story genre on larger literary forms and regard it as possessing secondary literary significance. Thus, V.V. Ivasheva writes:

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

"His stories, written for magazines, pursued the clearly conscious goal of entertaining the ordinary working reader with engaging reading material and distracting him from the hardships of life, which the writer considered insurmountable..." [Ivasheva, 1954, p. 362].

An even more critical opinion concerning the "short story" is expressed by E. Wilson. He agrees that the impression produced upon readers by Dickens's novellas was overwhelming. At the same time, however, Wilson remarks:

"Neither the novella nor the short story truly suited Dickens as genres <...> overall, Dickens's genius felt constrained within the limits of the short story: his humor, deprived of sufficient scope, became uneven; his pathos, wasted on trifles, turned into sentimentality; entirely absent were those overtones introduced into the novel through broader thematic layers of life, and therefore these stories rarely rose above the level of dull magazine prose..." [Wilson, 1975, p. 189].

The opinion of H. Orel is also noteworthy. He likewise believes that Dickens inherited from the nineteenth century the understanding of the "story" as a marketable commodity used to fill empty spaces in newspapers and journals. The scholar emphasizes that, during the period when Dickens wrote his novellas, the writer's primary task was to satisfy the cultural demands of society. Dickens did not write stories merely to take a break from the lengthy process of composing novels, which could occupy years of work. Rather, he created short prose works whenever he felt that the public needed them and stopped when readers became more interested in novels.

In his stories, just as in his novels, Dickens created his own unique world. The author himself did not regard these works as embryonic novels; whatever Dickens attempted to portray in his novellas, he generally achieved successfully [Orel, 1988, p. 64]. Such an attitude reveals Dickens's readiness for creative experimentation and his desire to elevate the short story genre to a new artistic level.

Like many writers of the first half of the nineteenth century, Dickens composed his short prose works without possessing a precise definition of the genre. The English literary scholar D.A. Thomas, author of the study Dickens and the Short Story, suggests that approximately seventy-five works written by Dickens may be classified as short stories in the sense understood by the writer himself. Yet

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

the scholar immediately acknowledges that Dickens changed his own understanding of the short story genre several times throughout his creative career [Thomas, 1982, p. 56].

Dickens's first literary experience, Sketches by Boz (1833–1838), demonstrates that the writer, following the traditions of his predecessors, created his short prose primarily to fill empty spaces in inexpensive and commercially successful newspapers and journals. Sketches by Boz consists compositionally of sketch-like sections united by the common social and moral issues they depict.

It should be noted that the peculiarities of Dickens's narrative style are connected with the genre transformations occurring in the 1830s in forms of everyday-life representation. As is well known, at the beginning of the nineteenth century the most widespread form of depicting daily life in English prose was the moral and descriptive sketch, accompanied by didactic and humorous narratives of a similar type. The sketch assumed such a role not accidentally. First, it was the genre least concerned with aesthetic significance. Second, it was the genre furthest removed from strictly artistic forms. It occupied the outer boundary of art, almost beyond it; therefore, the difficulties associated with the literary representation of everyday material — considered non-aesthetic at the time — were most easily overcome within the generic framework of the sketch.

Dickens himself indicates the genre affiliation of Sketches by Boz. The "sketch" is a distinct form of short fiction identified by American literary theorists. Originating in the tradition of the American Romantics, this genre is characterized primarily by the description of a place, person, or event. Action, if present at all, occupies a subordinate position and serves mainly to characterize the object of representation [Gardner and Dunlap, Forms of Modern Fiction, 1962, pp. 23–25].

The scenes from Sketches by Boz, while preserving the features of the traditional "sketch," represent something entirely new both in content and in form. What is innovative and unconventional is, first of all, the very subject of representation: scenes from the lives of the lower social classes of the English capital. Moreover, the sketches incorporate not only the author's observations but also the reflections associated with them. These reflections are expressed by the writer in a direct journalistic form. This combination of artistic narration with journalism, the

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

transitions from images and scenes to emotionally charged arguments and conclusions — that which brings Dickens's sketches closer to the essay form — is characteristic of most works in the collection.

Investigating this genre phenomenon, V.V. Buznik notes the particular flexibility of the sketch-story, which, according to the scholar, allows the emphasis to shift toward life-like authenticity and enables these genre variations to serve as "a means of introducing writers to everything unfamiliar and incomprehensible in a new era" [Buznik, 1975, p. 206]. Researchers such as V.V. Buznik and V.P. Skobelev regard the physiological sketch as the genetic basis of this phenomenon, with its tendency toward the "accumulation and analysis of the details of life <...> and the detailed depiction of the diverse aspects of social existence" [Buznik, 1975, p. 206]. A. Ninov, a scholar of short story theory, connects this with stylization tendencies, emphasizing that "a fictional story is sometimes written in the form of a sketch in order to inspire greater trust in the material among readers" [Ninov, 1969, p. 22].

Such phenomena may certainly include Dickens's Sketches by Boz. They contain criticism of the morals of Victorian society and a skillful journalistic portrayal of London life. Real facts are reproduced here together with the author's evaluative commentary. For the first time, Dickens demonstrated an extraordinary ability to capture and convey the atmosphere of London. The Dickens scholar H. Pearson accurately remarks:

"... Dickens was London itself. He merged with the city, became a part of every brick and every drop of mortar holding it together. One thinks and speaks of Dickensian London as though Dickens himself had built it, and as though it were called not London but Dickens-town <...> To what other writer does any other city owe so much?" [Pearson, 2001, pp. 93–94].

Many of the events described in the stories were experienced personally by the writer himself, although the author generally remains in the background. One may mention here the workhouse for bankrupt families, which Dickens encountered during his childhood. Dickens provides a vivid depiction of it in the sketch-story "Our Parish." From the very beginning of the narrative, his ironic attitude toward such institutions becomes evident:

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

"How many thoughts are contained in this single short word — 'parish'! How often there lies hidden behind it a story of poverty and misfortune, of ruined hopes and complete bankruptcy, of open misery and successful fraud" [Dickens, 1957, p. 49].

With a degree of reproach directed at the ruling classes of the country, the author continues by describing the tragic destinies of poor people and the circumstances that force them to seek assistance from the parish:

"A poor man with meager earnings and a large family barely survives from day to day, struggling to provide food for his household; his money suffices only to satisfy today's hunger, and he cannot think about tomorrow. He fails to pay his rent on time; the payment deadline has long passed, another one approaches, and he cannot pay — he is summoned before the parish authorities..." [Dickens, 1957, pp. 49–50].

Through a mixture of humor and sorrow, Dickens exposes a social problem widely recognized in England and urgently requiring resolution:

"First a man grows lazy, then he can no longer obtain work — the parish gives him relief; and when poverty and drunkenness have done their work, he, a quiet idiot muttering incoherently, is shut away in the parish lunatic asylum" [Dickens, 1957, pp. 49–50].

Dickens vividly portrays the London streets that had been familiar to him since his youth. He depicts the contrasts of the city, interpreting them from a social perspective, as in the sketch "Streets — Evening":

"But London streets appear in all their glory on a dark, damp winter evening, when enough moisture settles to make the pavements slippery, but too little to wash away the dirt and refuse <...> On the broader and more respectable streets, dining-room curtains are tightly drawn, kitchen stoves burn warmly, and the delicious smells of hot dinners tempt the senses of hungry passersby trudging wearily along the railings" [Dickens, 1957, p. 109].

In contrast to this comfort and beauty, Dickens presents another scene for the reader's judgment:

"... On such an evening, the streets around Marsh Gate and the Victoria Theatre are bleak and filthy, and the people seen there do nothing to dispel this impression <...> That miserable woman holding a sickly child in her arms, carefully

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

wrapping it in the remnants of her torn shawl, tried to sing a popular ballad in the hope that compassionate passersby would spare a few pennies. But people merely laughed rudely at her weak voice...” [Dickens, 1957, pp. 110–112].

The writer also documents the organization of prisons and criminal courts, institutions Dickens became acquainted with following his father’s financial ruin, as seen in the sketch “Criminal Courts”:

“Driven by curiosity, we often attended the proceedings of both courts at Old Bailey. Nothing strikes a first-time visitor more forcefully than the cold indifference with which these sessions are conducted <...> There is much order here, but no compassion; there is interest, but no sympathy...” [Dickens, 1957, p. 270].

Thus, the protagonist of all these sketch-stories is London itself — but it is London viewed through Dickens’s eyes. Old quarters, streets, alleys, clerks, beggars, dandies, scholars, court buildings, schools, theatres, street fights, elegant shops, smoke-filled taverns — London abounds in all these things. Dickens delights in them, and through his vision the reader perceives them as well.

If Sketches by Boz may be called an encyclopedia of London life, then it is a highly distinctive encyclopedia. The sketches encompass an enormous variety of themes connected both with the external life of London and with the author’s inner world. In all these sketch-stories there emerges with extraordinary clarity a subtle and flexible intellect, playfully and ingeniously engaging with its themes, investigating reality through humor so as not to confine itself within a conventionally serious and monotonous perception of the world and its problems. Indeed, following the traditions of Enlightenment essayists and the “London” romantics, Dickens sought through his sketch-stories to exert a moral influence upon his readers. Writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries idealized their heroes and often depicted elevated historical subjects, while considering the portrayal of everyday life to be a lower form of art. The early nineteenth-century writer Charles Lamb characterized English literature of the 1830s in the following way:

“Puritan sluggishness of feeling and foolish childish morality are spreading among us, displacing the strong passions and virtues clothed in flesh and blood...” [Dyakonova, 1981, p. 197].

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

Dickens, however, taught by revealing the contradictions of life itself. He sought to influence readers indirectly, avoiding simplistic moralizing conclusions.

One of the central themes in Dickens's artistic world is the problem of good and evil. The writer frequently reflects upon the meaning of life and the nature of happiness. Dickens recognizes the reality of evil both in the surrounding world and within the human soul. He sees the presence of evil in the streets of London, feels its influence within himself, and understands its threat to humanity. The eternal questions concerning humanity's path through a complex and confusing world are explored in his sketch-stories, where Dickens attaches great importance to atmosphere. In creating this atmosphere, Dickens sought to influence his readership, believing in the "innate capacity of the reader" (a term used by Thomas Carlyle) to sympathize with the experiences of the hero while foregrounding the social problems of contemporary reality.

In the sketch "A Visit to Newgate Prison," while describing the death cell, Dickens helps the reader imagine the emotional state of a person spending his final night there:

"It was a stone cage — eight feet long and six feet wide — with a bench against the far wall, and on the bench a coarse blanket, a Bible, and a prayer book..." [Dickens, 1957, p. 284].

The prison atmosphere intensifies the feeling of hopelessness and fear.

Descriptions of London entertainments, to which several sketches are devoted, evoke feelings of joy and amusement in Dickens. Such scenes are numerous throughout Sketches by Boz. One example reads:

"Gentlemen in waistcoats of astonishing colors, adorned with steel watch chains, stroll three abreast, impressing everyone with their importance; ladies, waving handkerchiefs the size of small tablecloths, frolic upon the lawn with charming playfulness <...> Gentlemen in pink shirts and blue waistcoats flourish their canes, occasionally knocking themselves and other walkers off balance <...> These costumes often provoke smiles, yet overall the people appear neat, contented, good-natured, and eager to socialize with one another..." [Dickens, 1957, pp. 153–154].

A sense of comfort and peace is created in the sketch "A Christmas Dinner" through the description of the festive atmosphere reigning in Uncle George's

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

house, where the entire family is expected to gather. For Dickens, the background and atmosphere of the narrative are more important than character development. There is not the slightest doubt that something good will happen to the characters on Christmas Eve. Indeed, George's sister Margaret, who had previously offended the family, is forgiven by her parents due to the shared spirit of joy and kindness. The mysterious atmosphere of Christmas is associated with the hopes and expectations of London's inhabitants. The touching scene in which Margaret and her poor husband embrace their relatives persuades the reader to believe in the magic of the holiday.

Speaking about atmosphere, which constitutes an integral part of Dickens's sketches, one must acknowledge the important role played by inanimate objects — clothing, furniture, and tools. Dickens endows them with an independent existence. Thus, in the story "Meditations in Monmouth Street," while presenting various old costumes to the reader, Dickens attempts to reconstruct the lives of their former owners, thereby tracing the path of a human being from innocent childhood to criminality:

"First on the rack hung a patched and heavily stained skeleton suit <...> a clever contrivance designed to display to advantage the slender figure of a child <...> And then — the final chapter: a coarse jacket, a ragged neckcloth of calico, and other equally miserable articles of clothing" [Dickens, 1957, pp. 134–136].

By animating inanimate objects, Dickens simultaneously reflects upon human existence itself. This may be explained by the writer's fascination with death and crime. Dickens understands that a human being may become spiritually frozen forever. Therefore, in "Meditations in Monmouth Street," he demonstrates how a living person can gradually be reduced to the condition of a corpse.

Dickens shows no sympathy toward criminals. He is filled with hostility toward the criminal underworld. Its representatives are disgusting creatures deprived of hope. They embody evil in Sketches by Boz. Yet positive characters also appear in the collection. Through satire and humor in his portrayal of snobs from all social classes, Dickens divides participants in events into "good" and "bad."

In the sketch "Thoughts About People," Dickens distinguishes several types of London inhabitants. Characterizing his heroes, the writer reflects upon the meaning of life and happiness. He portrays the type of Englishman whose life is

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

so monotonous that one day is indistinguishable from another. Such people allow themselves no excesses — neither at work, nor in communication with others, nor even when ordering dinner. Dickens emphasizes:

"These pitiful, harmless creatures are content, but not happy. Broken and submissive, they perhaps do not suffer greatly, yet neither do they know joy" [Dickens, 1957, p. 291].

Another category of people observed by the writer appears as follows:

"An elderly gentleman of this sort always lives in luxuriously furnished rooms, collecting books, antique silver, and paintings in enormous quantities — not so much for his own pleasure as for the satisfaction of feeling superior to those who possess the desire but lack the means to compete with him <...> One fine day he dies after dinner from apoplexy, having first bequeathed his fortune to some charitable institution" [Dickens, 1957, p. 292].

Comparing these two social types, Dickens concludes that both are threatened by loneliness, and the tragedy lies in the fact that both feel unhappy despite their different positions in society.

Reflections on happiness are inseparably connected with the theme of love. The comic scenes depicting Mr. Watkins Tottle's courtship of Miss Lillerton in the sketch "An Episode in the Life of Watkins Tottle" end tragically. In an ironically humorous tone, the author narrates the suicide of the protagonist.

The plots of Dickens's sketch-stories reveal that the objects of representation exist within a static moral-descriptive time frame and characterize situations that are repetitive and constant. The individual interests the author only insofar as he serves as material for generalized characterization of the social order and as a representative example illustrating its overall qualities. Therefore, Sketches by Boz reveal a peculiar suppression of natural human impulses, and this peculiarity becomes a permanent feature of the characters populating the stories.

In the sketch "Our Parish," many such characters appear:

"The parish beadle is one of the most important — perhaps the most important — figures among the local authorities. He is, of course, not as wealthy as the churchwarden, nor as educated as the parish clerk, nor does as much depend upon him as upon those two. Nevertheless, his authority is considerable, and for his

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

part he makes every effort to preserve the dignity of his high office...” [Dickens, 1957, pp. 50–54].

In “Thoughts About People,” describing one of London’s inhabitants, Dickens writes:

“... from the behavior and appearance of this man one may imagine his entire life, or rather any single day of it, for among people like him one day differs little from another...” [Dickens, 1957, p. 288].

The writer then compares him with another category of city residents:

“These people may be encountered everywhere, and you will always recognize them easily. In coffeehouses they loudly express dissatisfaction while consuming luxurious dinners; in theatres they invariably occupy the same seat and cast bitter glances at nearby young people; in church they distinguish themselves by the solemnity of their gait and their loud responses during the service...” [Dickens, 1957, p. 291].

Here Dickens relies upon a cultural code familiar to readers — a system of recognizable social stereotypes. Its foundation appears to be the Enlightenment idea that natural human qualities are suppressed by the artificial structures of modern social existence. This cultural code determines the principal structural characteristics of the emerging short story genre.

Driven by moral-descriptive interests and focused upon stable forms of life, Dickens’s sketch-stories are saturated with social sympathy and detailed situational descriptions. One may trace the development of the plot in the sketch “Seven Dials,” which is highly typical of Dickens’s early works. At first, the author provides a detailed external description of the impoverished and crime-ridden London district of Seven Dials:

“But what confusion could compare with the confusion of Seven Dials? Where else could one find such a labyrinth of streets, alleys, courts, and dead ends? And where else could one encounter such a mixture of Englishmen and Irishmen as here, in this most tangled quarter of London? <...> From the irregularly shaped square streets and alleys diverge in every direction, but their depths disappear into the haze of unhealthy vapors hanging over the rooftops, obscuring and distorting the perspective...” [Dickens, 1957, pp. 125–126].

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

Dickens then describes the houses and their inhabitants in detail. The reader sees "dirty, smoke-blackened houses set crookedly together, a narrow courtyard crowded with miserable and ugly huts." Characterizing the "native Londoners," Dickens presents scenes of street quarrels resolved only through violence. The writer carefully reproduces the speech, manners, and habits of the characters, thereby revealing the cultural level of the district's inhabitants.

However, after investigating the atmosphere of the streets and houses, the narrative suddenly ends. The impression arises that the theme remains incompletely раскрыта. The story develops smoothly and consistently until the final paragraph, where it abruptly breaks off, suggesting that the writer himself is uncertain what the central plot should become. Consequently, the plot remains unresolved.

Dickens often leaves readers of Sketches by Boz perplexed through his abrupt endings. Such a method of plot construction may be considered characteristic of the writer's earliest creative experiments.

The principle of incompleteness and openness of action constituted an essential element in the conception of the short story developed by the American writer and critic Edgar Allan Poe, who in 1836 first attempted to examine the genre as an independent literary form. This principle played an important role not only in the development of the American short story popular in England during the 1830s, but also in the formation of short prose in general, demonstrating the connection between Dickens's early творчество and the progressive tendencies of European novella literature.

Thus, the stable characteristics of Dickens's stories of this type include: adherence to the traditions of didactic and moral-descriptive prose established by Enlightenment writers and the "London" romantics; a narrative openly oriented toward sketch-like characterization of heroes and social environments without concentrating on the development of personality through conflicts with society; the immutability of character; documentary realism; attention to everyday detail; the acquisition of aesthetic significance by the sketch-story; comic coloring; incompleteness and openness of plot; and traditional plot construction lacking intrigue or carefully tied narrative knots.

Modern American Journal of Linguistics, Education, and Pedagogy
ISSN (E): 3067-7874
Volume 2, Issue 5, May, 2026
Website: usajournals.org

Before proceeding to an analysis of Dickens's later works, it is worth citing E. Wilson's opinion that:

"... almost everything that constitutes Dickens's literary world before 1850 had already appeared in Sketches by Boz, and much of it remained with him forever" [Wilson, 1975, p. 93].

Dickens's sketch-stories undoubtedly represent a major achievement of the writer. While constituting vivid and highly concrete portrayals of the lives of the urban poor, they simultaneously reveal the broader meaning of that existence, exposing the depth of the social and everyday contradictions of Victorian England.

References

1. Charles Dickens Dickens, C. Sketches by Boz. — Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1957.
2. Buznik, V.V. Russkiy sovetskiy rasskaz: ocherki istorii zhanra [The Russian Soviet Short Story: Essays on the History of the Genre]. — Leningrad, 1975.
3. Dyakonova, N.Ya. Angliyskaya literatura XIX veka [English Literature of the 19th Century]. — Moscow, 1981.
4. Ivasheva, V.V. Tvorchestvo Charlesa Dickensa [The Works of Charles Dickens]. — Moscow, 1954.
5. Ninov, A. Teoriya rasskaza [Theory of the Short Story]. — Moscow, 1969.
6. Orel, H. The Victorian Short Story: Development and Triumph of a Literary Genre. — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
7. Pearson, H. Dickens. — Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 2001.
8. Poe, E.A. Selected Critical Essays. — Moscow, 1965.
9. Thomas, D.A. Dickens and the Short Story. — London: Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd., 1982.
10. Wilson, E. The Two Scrooges and Other Essays. — Moscow, 1975.
11. Gardner, J., & Dunlap, A. Forms of Modern Fiction. — New York, 1962.
12. The Short Story in America. — Chicago, 1952.
13. Carlisle, J. Studies in Victorian Literature. — London, 1982.