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In this thesis I want to discuss five of Dickens's novels, written more or less in the middle of his writing career. These novels cover the years 1845 to 1857; they

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Introductory Comments

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In this thesis I want to discuss five of Dickens's novels, written more or less in the middle of his writing career. These novels cover the years 1846 to 1857; they

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briefly, is this: is there discernible, in all the variety of Dickens's work, a philosophy of life, or a Dickensian point of view? Is Dickens's view of the moral universe a specific and defineable one? In particular, are there any dominant ideas about the nature of fate and the ability of man to control his own existence?

Introductory Comments

My second question is very much tied up with the first, and hinges on the Dickensian concept of personality.

I am enquiring as to what are Dickens's most essential and pervasive views on the nature of people. How much can be deduced from the way he handles his characters and the career. These novels cover the years 1846 to 1857; they are Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, Bleak House, Hard Times and Little Dorrit. Dickens was forty-five years old when he finished Little Dorrit, so that this period spans the middle years of his personal life as well.

While I will be tracing what I consider to be a general line of development through the five consecutive novels, that will not be the real preoccupation of my thesis. I will primarily be looking at two closely linked general questions, which, despite the outpouring of Dickens's ideas on institutions, social abuses, his moral standpoint on contemporary issues, but not so much on the general concepts of man and morality which must govern and influence these more particular ideas. It must be admitted that Dickens does not lend himself particularly well to such general speculation; he seems to be the most personalised and non-theoretical of writers. Certainly he made only few and brief statements about the aesthetics or principles of his work, and he never gives the impression any dominant ideas about the nature of fate and the ability of man to control his own existence? Yet it is a mistake to assume that his spontaneity also means a lack

My second question is very much tied up with the first, and hinges on the Dickensian concept of personality. I am enquiring as to what are Dickens's most essential and pervasive views on the nature of people. How much can be deduced from the way he handles his characters and the moral judgements he makes on them? Mostly I shall be meshing the two questions together; i.e. looking at the Dickensian morality especially as it is expressed through characterisation.

I realise that these questions are general to the point of being tenuous, but I think there is some value in trying to answer them. Much has been written on Dickens's ideas on institutions, social abuses, his moral standpoint on contemporary issues, but not so much on the general concepts of man and morality which must govern and influence these more particular ideas. It must be admitted that Dickens does not lend himself particularly well to such general speculation; he seems to be the most personalised and non-theoretical of writers. Certainly he made only few and brief statements about the aesthetics or principles of his work, and he never gives the impression that his creativity is activated by dogma. Yet it is a mistake to assume that his spontaneity also means a lack

of thoughtfulness, or that the Dickensian variety and range precludes a consistency in ideas. Indeed, I will try to show that in all five novels, certain fundamental ideas keep reappearing, undergoing change and development, but always illuminating Dickens's themes.

Similarly, there has not been too much written on Dickens's overall conception of personality, so taken up have most critics been with analysing particular characterisations, or with resolving the impossible dilemma as to whether Dickens was a caricaturist, or a writer with profound insight into people. So I want particularly to look at Dickens's approach to personality, his view on the nature of personal interaction, and the judgements he makes on his characters.

But it can be asked, why do I choose these particular five novels in order to explore my concerns, when there is also ample material in the nine other major works, in the Christmas stories and so on. I want to talk about the period from Dombey and Son through to Little Dorrit partly because each book is an exceptionally fine example of Dickens's mature thought, but also because taken together, they mark an important and distinct stage

in his development as a writer.

Dombey and Son is itself something of a landmark, although it is not, as sometimes claimed, the book where a new, serious Dickens suddenly takes over from a jolly, happy Dickens. But it is a novel full of innovations. New directions are taken up which are continuously experimented with in the next four novels, so much so that Little Dorrit can be said to be a totally different novel in type from that (brilliant) novel preceding Dombey and Son - Martin Chuzzlewit.

I am aware that the matters which interest me do not open up any startlingly new lines of enquiry; any originality will be in emphasis and method. It remains an open question then, whether yet another thesis on Dickens is at all useful or necessary. Especially after the flurry of books on him in recent years, is there anything left to say? A brief and necessarily distorting sketch of the history of Dickens criticism may be helpful in answering that question. The Dickens who first emerges fully in Bleak House has given his novels a new base - a symbolic and moral structure that subordinates the story-telling elements to an overall purpose. In Little Dorrit, Dickens's personal vision, his desire to analyse the social, political and moral components of his society transcends all other

strands in the book.

In the ten years then, between Dombey and Son and Little Dorrit, there is a real change in priorities.

It can be said that Dickens turns from a predominantly naturalistic mode of writing to a predominantly allegoric mode; - I use 'allegoric' here as a cover word for the increasingly important use made of symbol, myth, imagery, and the symbolic juxtaposition of people to things and of people to people.

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There has been much fluctuation and contrast in Dickens criticism, both in his lifetime and since his death. During his life, he probably enjoyed a wider public than any great author before or since; he was read

equally by intellectual and working man. Even while he lived, critics voiced a suspicion that such wide appeal must rule out greatness. In the twentieth century, an era of specialist novelists commanding only a certain small section of readership, (this being considered a mark of their worth), this view became prevalent. Dickens was thought popular, vulgar, a great talent, but little more than a crude entertainer at heart. This twentieth century view was bolstered by the nineteenth century's critical emphasis on Dickens's high comedy or his unfortunate but supreme talent for pathos.

The trend of denigrating the later novels started with Dickens's friend and biographer, John Forster, who found Dickens's increasing sombreness uncongenial and hard to understand. Forster cited the more elaborate notes and memoranda that Dickens used for his later novels as evidence for a loss of the spontaneous and artless creativity of The Pickwick Papers or even of David Copperfield.¹ The 'real' Dickens at the height of his powers was considered to be a supremely spontaneous mixer of fantasy, humour and

1. Butt & Tillotson, by reproducing Dickens's notes for David Copperfield in full, contradict Forster's assumption. John Butt & Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work Chapter on David Copperfield, U.P. 1968.

tears. There is no doubt that the elements in Dickens to which his contemporaries most heartily responded, apart from the laughter, were the elements of pathos and sentimentality. His whole audience, even the best critics of the day, even the acerbic Thackeray, wept as sincerely as Dickens himself over the death of Little Nell, and hardly noticed the gradation to finer writing in the death of Paul - it was another heart-rending child-death by the author who knew best how to touch their hearts.

Dickens made such a direct appeal to the emotional mood of his day that all other elements of his work were virtually ignored. Even George Eliot, whose intellect and fair-mindedness went far in appreciating Dickens's worth, speaks like this of him:

We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population; if he could give us their psychological character, their conception of life, their emotions - with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies. But he scarcely even passes from the humorous and external without becoming transcendent in his unreality.....

1. Quoted by George H. Ford, Dickens and His Readers p.183 Princeton U.P., 1955.

There was a general agreement in literary circles that the finer arts of psychology and deep social observation were beyond Dickens. This view gained further strength from Chesterton's essays on Dickens around the turn of the century. Although Chesterton idolised Dickens, he over-identified with his hero, emphasising only the comic genius, the geniality, and the easy emotionalism. Shaw's assertion of Dickens's essential seriousness, the revolutionary implications of his social views, went largely unnoticed.

Till the thirties, Dickens criticism was at a low ebb. Dickens was accepted as a children's classic, but was assumed to be totally out of tune with the sophisticated concerns of the twentieth century. Edmund Wilson's famous essay¹ was the starting point for a real critical turn-about. Despite its major fault, a too facile relation claimed between Dickens's personal and writing life, Wilson brilliantly pointed out the 'other' Dickens, so long ignored, whose own psychological complexity was amply reflected in his novels, and whose concern was with the deepest parts of human nature. In that essay Wilson totally

1. Edmund Wilson, The Wound and the Bow U.P. 1961.

demolished the happy, carefree Dickens stereotype. George Orwell¹ also wrote a perceptive essay on Dickens in the same year, 1939, highly appreciative of Dickens's social sense, but condemnatory of the extreme vagueness of his radicalism. Since then scholarship and criticism have done much to demonstrate the extent and specificity of his social concern,² and so in part refuting Orwell, while such books as Christopher Hibbert's The Making of Charles Dickens,³ elaborate on Wilson's theories about the influence of Dickens's childhood experiences on his work.

That still definitive biography of Dickens by Johnson, which is interspersed with chapters of criticism, established the view for once and for all that Dickens was a writer who seriously and consistently used symbolism and imagery hitherto half-understood, and who exercised intense social concern and awareness in all his books.⁴

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1. George Orwell, Collected Essays, Mercury 1961.
 2. There is even an over-stated Marxist case made for Dickens: Jack Lindsay, Charles Dickens, Andrew Dakers, 1950.
 3. John Butt & Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work UP. 1968.
 4. Longmans, 1967.
 5. J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels, Princeton UP, 1958.
 6. Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, Victor Gollancz, 1953.
 7. The Clarendon Press, 1965.

The emphasis was now entirely on the 'dark' novels of Dickens and convincing studies, (such as Lionel Trilling's on Little Dorrit,)¹ emerged on the symbolic structure of the later books. Scholarly studies such as Butt & Tillotson's² also established that Dickens gave his novels much more careful planning and thought than had been realised, which fact raised his prestige in critics' eyes.

By the fifties, a new view of Dickens, as a true immortal, and as a writer ahead of his time in using techniques that heralded Dostoevsky, the Symbolists and Joyce, became popular, and an enormous amount of material was put forward to substantiate this view. Studies came to dwell entirely on the symbolic structure of the novels. This line of thinking reached its apotheosis with J. Hillis Miller's book,³ in which even the earliest books were discovered to contain the most mysterious allegoric meanings.

A probably inevitable reaction came in the sixties, and Robert Garise's The Dickens Theatre⁴ re-emphasised

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1. From The Opposing Self. Secker and Warburg, 1955.
 2. John Butt & Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work UP. 1968.
 3. J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels Harvard U.P. 1958.
 4. The Clarendon Press, 1965.

Dickens's theatricalism, and his debt to the popular theatrical conventions of his time. The Garis view opened up a new field of scholarly study, and has had some support. And now latest in line of major books on Dickens comes the Leavises' study,¹ reviewing (without admitting it), F.R. Leavis's previous condescension to Dickens. The Leavises are equally contemptuous of the 'psychological', 'symbolic' and 'theatrical' schools of thought and seem in the main to demand a recognition of Dickens's greatness solely and only as a novelist and a user of the language.

Thus it can be seen that there has been an exciting re-examination of Dickens over the last thirty years, particularly for those students brought up on the shortened versions^{of} Oliver Twist, David Copperfield and large doses of prejudice. But I don't think that everything there is to say has been said on Dickens yet; I can quickly think of two or three instances, beyond the scope of the present thesis, but of intense interest. My prediction for profitable Dickens studies in the near future is that they will try to anatomise Dickens's use

1. F.R. & Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist Chatto & Windus, 1970.

of language, if the equal to Shakespeare in the variety and depth of his language can be so anatomised. Such work on language may also give further clues to the place and importance, (which I believe is considerable), of the unconscious element in Dickens's writing, and may give a rationale of the unique way Dickens establishes several levels of meaning and consciousness within the single context of the sentence. Also fascinating, and a topic not yet explored in detail, is Dickens's influence on, and mutuality with, that other great nineteenth century genius, Dostoevsky.

But also, as I have said, despite the successful re-establishment of Dickens's greatness and relevance, and the quantity of discussion as to who is the 'real' Dickens - Lindsay's socialist, or Wilson's creative neurotic, or Garise's compulsive showman - there has not been over-much said on the Dickens 'point of view', the fundamental starting points on which his views on man and men's characters are based. It is with these general

questions in mind that I want once again to look at five of Dickens's novels.

1. An exception is his letters to Forster, in which he does work at length e.g. the long letter on the story line of Dombey and Son, but mostly these are little more than summaries of plot or general intention, or the foreshadowing of the next instalment and a request for an opinion on it.

of Martin Chuzzlewit "Selfishness". Perhaps Dickens was
CHAPTER I

DOMBEY AND SON

distinct and separable. So he posed a well-known vice -
 My major question, as to whether Dickens had any
 pride - leaving his readers in no doubt of his interest in
 recognizable "world view", is a very general one, and can
 be looked at in a variety of ways. One way is to ask how
 some key Dickens characters approach the world they live
 in, and what happens to them in consequence of this approach.
 In doing this, it may also be possible to isolate Dickens's
 own fundamental attitudes, through what happen to his char-
 acters, or through the authorial comments he makes on them.
 I look first at Dombey and Son, (the first book chronolog-
 ically), and in particular at the character of Mr. Dombey.

In Mr. Dombey, Dickens draws a man who pits himself
 Dickens never liked to analyse either himself or his
 books at length,¹ even his prefaces in defence of contemporary
 criticism tend to be emotional and perfunctory. So with
 characteristic simplification he announced the theme of
Dombey and Son as "Pride", following on from the grand theme

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of Martin Chuzzlewit - "Selfishness". Perhaps Dickens was pandering to the ethos of his age, its preoccupation with Virtues and Vices, which were supposed to be absolutely distinct and separable. So he named a well-known vice - pride - leaving his readers in no doubt of his interest in the Moralities. But the theme is anything but a simple treatise on the pitfalls of inordinate pride. Mr. Dombey's pride, the book very clearly demonstrates, is of a complex and subtle character; and the analysis of its components influences the structure and meaning of the book. It is a book about the attempt to control fate, the attempt to dehumanise personal relationships, the attempt to use other people as things in order to manipulate events.

In Mr. Dombey, Dickens draws a man who pits himself single-handed against the surrounding world. A man who believes that he, with the help of his instrument money, can control all around him. On the simplest level, the book is an account of how all of Dombey's aims are thwarted by fate or 'reality', and how he is eventually brought to realise that his enslavement to his own power and pride has been quite worthless.

1. Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son.
Penguin Classics, 1963.

The ironies of the contest between Fate and Mr. Dombey's pride are sounded in a low key on the first page of the book,

and accumulate in force and tragedy from there on.

Dombey and Son are the sole substance both of Mr. Dombey's business and private life, yet Son has only made his material appearance when Mr. Dombey is forty-eight years of age. Not daunted, he wants to set his long-planned schemes into action the minute Paul is born. Together now, he and Paul will pursue his twin gods of money and power. Their dual reign will be absolutely exclusive; the world will serve them, and they will depend on no-one. Yet Paul the baby is scarcely living when Death intervenes and he is left initially dependant for mother's milk, something that the firm of Dombey and Son is helpless to provide. Humiliated as he feels in having to beg Paul's nourishment from a humble source, Dombey comforts himself by trying to ensure that it will only be a matter of "bargain and sale, hiring and letting", and personally forbids emotional contact between wet-nurse and child.¹

This is the first of many small scenes which have their

1. Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son.
Dell Publishing Company, 1963.

All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition, and page numbers will be indicated in brackets beside the quotations.

ritual repercussions later; but Mr. Dombey is set on his obstinate course, and it is many blows, many "lessons of fate" later that he learns that there are limits to what a man alone can do. In the meanwhile, one of the patterns of the book is established; the reader is made to understand that Mr. Dombey transgresses what is human and natural, and for each unnatural act, he is inexorably paid back in kind. Each ritual punishment is ironically pointed out by Dickens, long before Dombey realises the nature of what is happening to him.

A useful instrument of irony is little Paul; he is a foil to Dombey in readily perceiving what his grown-up father refuses to see. For instance, it is he who points out early that money does not have power over death.

Paul asks;

"Why didn't money save me my mama? ... It isn't cruel, is it?"

"Cruel"! [replied Dombey] settling his neckcloth and seeming to resent the idea.

"No. A good thing can't be cruel". "If its a good thing, and can do anything", said the little fellow, thoughtfully as he looked at the fire, "I wonder why it didn't save me my mama". (p.124)

Of course all Dombey's dreams and plans founder when Paul dies at the age of six. But his struggle to self-realisation only begins at this point. In his innermost

thoughts he wonders whether Paul was right....

.....the impotence of his will, the instability of his hopes, the feebleness of wealth had been so direfully impressed upon him. What could it do, his boy had asked him. Sometimes, thinking of the baby question, he could hardly forbear inquiring himself, what could it do indeed: what had it done? (p.304)

But he silences such thoughts, takes refuge in the major's flattery, and postpones the struggle. His ever-present inner struggle has come to the surface with Paul's death, but it is much later that it resolves itself. In the meantime there are successive strong blows to his self-esteem. The disastrous marriage to Edith, his unsuccessful opposition of will to her, her flight with his trusted manager and friend, his bankruptcy and the fall of the house - none of these things, in themselves, serve to break down his defences. But even Florence, slighted and hated, yet presumed a constant factor in his life, leaves him. When he is at last forced to admit the need of others, specifically of her, she is not there. Only at this point does the breakdown occur.

Thus the man who has tried to control events has been controlled and checked by fate in no uncommon manner. His policy of isolation, even from a loving daughter, has left him completely alone and bereft; his staking all on money

and power has brought him financial ruin and helplessness; his obsession, a son with whom he could share his prizes, ends in a handfull of dust; his unnatural aversion to his daughter ends ironically with his need of her, of all people in the world. His buying a wife and trying to break her in like a horse results in her unprecedented and total defiance. His boorish patronage of his employee Carker leads to betrayal and social disgrace when Edith and Carker flee. It all resembles a grand-scale morality tale. Fate pays back Mr. Dombey for every error in his calculation of it. *to in order to survive.*

In his characterisation of Mr. Dombey, Dickens shows him not only as obstinate, proud and cold, but as someone whose only conception of human relations is the usefulness of others to himself. He judges all other people as to whether they can be used or invested in some way, and in so doing denies them their individual humanity. This is only another facet of his monomania, but Dickens puts considerable emphasis on it. This dehumanisation of people is a theme that crops up in all the five books I am going to discuss, but perhaps never so pervasively as here.

Mr. Dombey is the head of a set of characters who make desperate investments in others. His denial of others attempts to be total; with the surrounding characters this denial is relative and varied - thus they reflect and comment

on his. The original basis of his rejection of Florence is that she has no business use, and was never a part of his personal plans, and thus she is to be discounted as "base coin that couldn't be invested - a bad Boy - nothing more". (p.31) This justifies his original indifference, and is later an added reason for hatred. This useless piece of merchandise earns the love of Paul, and lives and flourishes, while Paul, his greatest investment, fails. Her good qualities only gall him because they are superfluities, and eventually even symbols of all that he rejects in order to survive.

There is some personal feeling, something like love, for Paul - or at least "a current of cares and anxieties" because of Paul "that impelled the springs of his character to a new action". (p.48) But he can only allow himself to love Paul if Paul becomes a part of himself, inseparable from everything he has always wanted.

And now when that [cold and distant] nature concentrated its whole force so strongly on a partial scheme of parental interest and ambition, it seemed as if its icy current, instead of being released by this influence, and running clear and free, had thawed but for an instant to admit its burden, and then frozen with it into one unyielding block. (p.78)

To allow love, Paul must be wholly swallowed up into Dombey's self, and into Dombey's plans - and the plans must

be carried out, at whatever cost; the grand design cannot be endangered. Thus Paul is not treated according to his human needs, but according to his predestined future as the Son of the firm. In Paul's death, there is more than pathos intended, and more than the plot surprise of his premature end. It is hinted that his father has not allowed Paul individual life, and Paul, dehumanised and incorporated in another, cannot survive. Dombey's plans for Paul have not included the possibility that the child may be sickly. So he refuses to notice the daily evidence of Paul's frailty, and only reluctantly acknowledges that something is wrong when Paul himself points out that he is not as strong as Florence, and that "his bones ache so". (p.125) He then eagerly falls in with the pat suggestion of sea-air, and after a short spell at Mrs. Pipchin's, he can no longer contain his impatience to send Paul headlong at his future:

"Now, Mrs. Pipchin, instead of being behind his peers, my son ought to be before them, far before them. There is an eminence ready for him to mount upon. There is nothing of chance or doubt in the course before my son. His way in life was clear and prepared, and marked out before he existed. The education of such a young gentleman must not be delayed. It must not be left imperfect. It must be very steadily and seriously undertaken, Mrs. Pipchin". (p.172)

So Paul is put into Dr. Blimber's forcing academy where

the constant and senseless round of work blights boys of twice his age and strength. He is also taken from Florence, who is all things maternal and protective to him. At Blimber's, he is also deprived of almost all emotionally sustaining relationships. His talk to the Blimbers about Glubb is a small and beautiful parable of confrontation between the forces of vitality and those of stultification and death. Says Paul:

"I wish you'd tell old Glubb to come and see me, if you please."

"What a dreadful low name," said Mrs. Blimber.

"Unclassical to a degree! Who is the monster, child?"

"What monster?" enquired Paul.

"Glubb", said Mrs. Blimber, with a great disrelish.

"He's no more a monster than you are" returned Paul.

"What!" cried the doctor in a terrible voice.

"Aye, aye, aye? Aha! What's that?"

Paul was dreadfully frightened; but he still made a stand for the absent Glubb, though he did it trembling.

"He's a very nice old man, ma'am" he said.

"He used to draw my coach. He knows all about the deep sea, and the fish that are in it, and the great monsters that come and lie on the rocks in the sun, and dive into the water again when they're startled, blowing and splashing so that they can be heard for miles. There are some creatures", said Paul, warming with his subject, "I don't know how many yards long, and I forget their names, but Florence knows, that pretend to be in distress; and when a man goes near them, out of compassion, they open their great jaws and attack him. But all he has got to do", said Paul, boldly

tendering this information to the very Doctor himself, "is to keep on turning as he runs away, and then, as they turn slowly, because they are so long, and can't bend, he's sure to beat them. And though old Glubb don't know why the sea should make me think of my mama that's dead, or what it is that it is always saying - always saying! - he knows a great deal about it. And I wish", the child concluded with a sudden falling of his countenance, and failing in his animation, as he looked like one forlorn upon the three strange faces, "that you'd let old Glubb come here to see me, for I know him very well, and he knows me." "Ha!" said the Doctor, shaking his head; "this is bad, but study will do much." (p.184-5)

So Paul, pampered and favoured, is at the same time denied and ignored in his real self. The clear implication is that his premature education, his enforced work-load and enforced solitude help to make his death inevitable. He may have lived had his limitations and needs been acknowledged, and Dickens hints that there is a responsibility - with Mr. Dombey and the dead spiritual values he represents. But with unusual subtlety at this stage of his writing life, he leaves the conclusion hanging in the air.

Dombey's attempt to use Paul has had an admixture of love; believing he loved Paul, he can sidestep any idea of self-blame. But Death has no traditional softening effect; he henceforth hardens even more in his relation to others.

As with his first wife, he looks at Edith as a useful adjunct to his self and his property - with the difference that this second wife will be a far better bargain. He again tries investment in another human being, and because of his first failure, he characteristically tries an even bigger gamble, and a harder line - and is again battered by the shocks he receives.

Edith pays him back in kind. Having been bought, she resolves to be as much of a purchase as possible, and never to grant him any personal feeling or submission. When Dombey is forced by the strains of the relationship to descend to a personal level of demand and counter-demand, he shows a total ignorance of human approaches or compromise. He is so far removed from the idea of personal interaction as a means of gaining what he wants - till now money and position have substituted for that - that he is helpless against Edith's defiance. His helplessness is human, and so is his desperate strategy of turning to Carker to help him subdue his wife. But he refuses to acknowledge his human weakness, or his dependance, and persists in treating Carker as his employee. This ultimate humiliation from Dombey's hands finalises Carker's resolve to ruin Dombey.

The only people that Dombey can tolerate around him are

flatterers and dependants: Mrs. Chick, Miss Tox, the Major, Mrs. Pipchin and Mr. Carker. He tolerates them because seemingly, they only give him homage and subservience, and seemingly, they do not presume to demand anything of him. He wants the humble Miss Tox to act as god-mother, because he can see no claim she could possibly make on him or Paul.¹

After Paul's death, his monomania increases, and while believing more and more that he needs no-one, he falls into some disastrous relationships. He never questions the motives behind flattery - he takes it as his due; consequently his cleverest flatterers, Carker and Major Bagstock, do what they like with him. The Major engineers his estrangement from Miss Tox and his marriage to Edith. Carker influences the unconscious Dombey's entire life; he widens the estrangement between Florence and her father, complicates Dombey's aversion to Walter, and subtly capitalizes on his own go-between power between Dombey and Edith. In pandering to Dombey's self-love, both in business and private life, Carker, the perfect dependant, is actually all powerful. And Bagstock, seemingly the sycophant, is the manipulator ("Shall we marry

1. Another of the ritual ironies; Mr. Dombey cannot see it, but Miss Tox's claim is very big indeed - she wants him herself, as a husband.

him to Edith Granger, ma'am?"). (p.400) When the Major has prepared the ground for the proposal, Dombey asks Carker down, for the specific purpose of looking over the bride (though Dombey never admits it and Carker pretends not to understand it). This ironic reversal of roles, where sycophant and employee manipulate their master, is dramatically realised in the scene where the major, Dombey and Carker dine together. Carker and Bagstock play ping-pong with the unconscious Dombey, making up his mind for him, creating the situation for him, attributing to him tender sentiments towards Edith which he does not possess.¹

While he condescends to flatterers and useful dependants, Dombey is absolutely cruel to the useless and those who stand in his way. If they come from a lower class, they are doubly punished for their presumption - he is a terrifying snob. He resents all human interference, but when it is interference from a lower level of society, he finds it intolerable. When he discovers Miss Tox's presumption, he cuts her completely. Polly's greatest sin in visiting her family is that she dared to take the baby Paul among money, the motives are mainly an assertion of power, and

1. See; "Dombey, said the Major, "you don't eat" and the following scene from p.406 on.

low people. Toodles's wearing black for Paul's death is insufferable because despite his poverty and ignorance, and he presumes to feel for Dombey and Son. Toodles has an instinctive feeling of emotional equality, which affronts Dombey deeply. Money, class and power must set him apart, and yet a common engine driver breaks down the "double door of gold" (p.312) that he and Paul would have built to shut out all the world, and forces him to share his exclusive mourning. Needs and emotions will break through, no matter

He has a dislike for Walter because Walter, despite his lowly position, gets under his skin. He is ardent, sentimental, lively; all things antagonistic to Dombey's world structure. And he too acts out of a sort of natural sense of equality that Dombey finds insulting. Still, Dombey can assert financial power over him - he punishes the boy's presumptuous emotionalism by sending him away on the "Son and Heir". Florence has similar qualities to Walter's, but there are class and blood ties; he is forced to tolerate her, and he does not like that. When he is benevolent to the lower classes, as in giving Sol Gills money, the motives are mainly an assertion of power, and in that particular case, to demonstrate to Paul what money can do. the same ends - hawking their daughters' sexual

Thus Dombey in his relationships dehumanises those around him. He reduces them to the status of objects and grades them according to usefulness. Dickens says pretty plainly that the attempt to control and use people is as disastrous as the attempt to control events. His major way of demonstrating this is through what happens to the people that Dombey tries to control; systematically he shows the rebound in Florence, Edith, Carker, and especially in Paul. Needs and emotions will break through, no matter how repressed. Florence's love cannot be killed by an effort of Dombey's will, his wife's repressed and bitter personality will come out, as will the humiliated Carker's desire for revenge. And Paul, so thoroughly invested and planned for as Dombey's Son, will go and die.

Mr. Dombey is an extreme representative of the principles of self-interest, glorification of materialism, and the dehumanisation of people. A set of characters who revolve around him, show different aspects of this life-style and influence and power. She gives Dickens a good opportunity to serve to both generalize and diversify the theme. Mrs. Skewton and Mrs. Brown parallel Mr. Dombey; all three make an investment in their children. They also parody each other; the class difference does not conceal that they pursue the same ends - hawking their daughters' sexual neglect Florence and to drop her "dear friend" Lucretia very

attractions for the highest price. The same kind of moral retribution falls on them as on Mr. Dombey; both women end up guilty and decrepit, eaten by an emotional emptiness that has the same origins, though Mrs. Skewton achieves luxury while Mrs. Brown remains poor.

Major Bagstock makes a nice calculation in the decision to become acquainted with Mr. Dombey, and he finds to his great satisfaction that he can use him to a dual purpose - he can revenge himself on Miss Tox, and make a fool of Dombey by marrying him to Edith.

Mrs. Pipchin invests in little children, and profits come inexorably from making their lives miserable. Her life meanwhile is an uninterrupted round of petty self-interest, epitomised by mutton chops and buttered toast, brought in "hot and hot". (p.134)

Mrs. Chick is determined to be a true partner in her brother's greatness, and so hang on to the coat-tails of influence and power. She gives Dickens a good opportunity for satire on the distortion of moral judgement when self-interest is the dominant motive. Mrs. Chick is a respectable and moral Victorian lady in the full flower of hypocrisy, and her devotion to her brother leads her to slight and neglect Florence and to drop her "dear friend" Lucretia very

suddenly when Dombey marries again. Mrs. Chick claims that her eyes have been opened all at once to Miss Tox's underhand intentions.

"In my own defence", faltered Miss Tox, "and only in my own defence against your unkind words, my dear Louisa, I would merely ask if you haven't often favoured such a fancy, and even said it might happen for anything we could tell?" "There is a point", said Mrs. Chick, rising, not as if she were going to stop at the floor, but as if she were about to soar up high, into her native sky, "beyond which endurance becomes ridiculous, if not culpable. I can bear much; but not too much. What spell was on me when I came into this house this day, I don't know; but I had a presentiment, a dark presentiment", said Mrs. Chick, with a shiver, "that something was going to happen. Well may I have had that foreboding, Lucretia, when my confidence of many years is destroyed in an instant, when my eyes are opened all at once, and when I find you revealed in your true colours. Lucretia, I have been mistaken in you. It is better for us that this subject should end here. I wish you well, and I shall ever wish you well. But, as an individual who desires to be true to herself in her own poor position, whatever that position may be, or may not be - and as the sister of my brother, and as the sister-in-law of my brother's wife, and as a connection by marriage of my brother's wife's mother, may I be permitted to add, as a Dombey - I can wish you nothing else but good morning". These words, delivered with cutting suavity, tempered and chastened by a lofty air of moral rectitude, carried the speaker to the door. There she inclined her head in a ghostly and statue-like manner, and so withdrew to her carriage, to seek comfort and consolation in the arms of Mr. Chick her Lord. (pp.446-7)

1. Edith person Dedlock With both, this ability to care for another, in both cases a young girl, with whom they identify for different reasons, is a cause of their downfall, and yet also the reason for their moral salvation.

Miss Tox falls somewhere between the Mrs. Chicks and the innocents in the book, such as Captain Cuttle. She has ambitious motives for joining the Dombey bandwagon, playing sycophant, but her affections are real, and they remain when her ambitions are unrealized. She is one of Dickens's comic characters who do grow and change while retaining their comic function. When she visits the Toodles, she tells them very honestly that she wants to make a bargain; information about Mr. Dombey and company for her, a little teaching and her improving company for them. And of course she remains loyal to Mr. Dombey after he is ruined. In a sense Edith is in the same category as Miss Tox, because she can show a limited amount of feeling for others, and is occasionally capable of deviating from her fixed self-obsession. Dehumanised, and reduced to a purchasable object by her mother and Mr. Dombey, she is determined to revenge herself by being as inhuman and impersonal in return. No personal appeal is to be made to her, except by Florence. Her attempt to help Florence, her natural affection for another human being, makes her, like Miss Tox, redeemable.¹ But Edith's pride or self-obsession, allows

1. Edith is redeemed by showing an ability to care for one person. In this, her character strongly resembles Lady Dedlock's - proud and closed, but not wholly impervious. With both, this ability to care for another, in both cases a young girl, with whom they identify for different reasons, is a cause of their downfall, and yet also the reason for their moral salvation.

her only a very limited victory over herself; a life of retirement, and a conditional forgiveness for her husband is all she can manage.

In strong and deliberate contrast to this group of self-interested characters, is another group, including Sol Gills, Captain Cuttle, Walter, Florence, Mr. Toots, the Toodles and Susan Nipper. It is noticeable that these characters, all remarkable for their lack of self-interest, are either young, poor, or near-idiot in their simplicity. Dickens's dichotomies are still over-simple; only the poor, young and unsophisticated are beyond corruption, and their moral worth is due to their innocence. This polarization of characters, with a gallery of poor and innocent, and a darker gallery of the money-minded and soulless is more typical of the earlier Dickens, and destroys some of the validity of a new and mature attempt to portray a capitalist society. It is too black and white; in later books, with characters such as Richard Carstone, and Mr. Meagles, there is no such direct relationship drawn between money and evil. Goodness and money are no longer wholly incompatible.

Still, the contrast itself, of self-interestedness and unselfishness, is not unsubtle. Sol and Walter and Captain Cuttle are not entirely full of humble virtue. They dream about Walter's Whittingtonian future, and marriage to

Florence, and partnership in the firm, but the dreams are innocent and unadulterated by the slightest desire to plot or manipulate. Even Captain Cuttle's desire to help things along by going to see Mr. Carker only emphasises how harmless his intentions are, how ludicrously naive and kindly is his conception of artifice. Walter, while full of youthful ambitions, shrinks from the real opportunity through Florence. He shrinks from even the appearance of using her, and conceals his love for her in order to do so.

Mr. Toots and Captain Cuttle between them represent a recurring Dickensian idea, that simplicity and innocence are invariably accompanied by a total unselfishness. Around them is an attractive circle of warmth and humor; there is Mr. Gills's touching attachment to his nephew, Susan's devotion to her mistress, her ability to appreciate the qualities of Toots, and the Toodles who exemplify the Victorian virtues of poverty.

For all these characters, their personal relations are characterized by a shining gentleness, and an absolute regard for the other person, which often takes the place of intelligence.¹ The person, and personal relations are the

1. There is still a tendency, as in the earlier books to equate goodness with stupidity, or with an unbelievable holiness e.g. Agnes. The later books show a development; Mr. Jarndyce is good, intelligent and credible, while Arthur Clennam is a major advance - a subtle, full characterisation of a good man, very far from a stereotype.

supreme values. This value world is used to contrast to the world where persons are devalued, where there is an enforced loss of individuality.

After Mr. Dombey, Dickens seems to single out educators as the chief perpetrators of dehumanisation. Mrs. Pipchin is pictured as an "ogress and child-queller" (p.131), who terrifies the children in her castle into a state of semi-imbecility. The reason that Paul remains unquelled is by his very un-childishness. At Mrs. Pipchin's, the world consists of ogresses, castles, ^{and} ghome-like children. At Blimber's, the human world is no longer recognized; there are neither individuals there, nor children, only the "forcing process" and the dead god of learning:

"In fact, Dr. Blimber's establishment was a great hot house, in which there was a forcing apparatus incessantly at work. All the boys blew before their time. Mental green peas were produced at Christmas and intellectual asparagus all the year round. . . . Every description of Greek and Latin vegetable was got off the driest twigs of boys, under the frostiest circumstances. Nature was of no consequence at all. No matter what a young gentleman was intended to bear, Dr. Blimber made him bear it to pattern, somehow or other". (p.174)

Human relations are kept at a minimum. Witness the absurd scene when Dr. Blimber holds forth inexorably on the Romans, while a child is coughing fit to choke a couple

of feet away from him. The annual dance, which takes place without fail, is never acknowledged to do so, and human and ordinary preparations for it are kept very quiet. Learning is never connected to the individual. When Miss Blimber reads Paul's report out to him, it bears no relation to anything the reader has already learnt about him. When she says "we can't like you, you know Dombey, as well as we could wish", (p.219) Paul is hurt, being too small to realise that the remark is irrelevant to his personal self; it is directed at an abstract learning-machine Paul.

Everything at Blimber's, in short, tends to deaden vitality and destroy enjoyment and curiosity; all the pupils are dulled and maimed. Poor Toots has been "forced" too early, and has no mind left.

On many levels then, Dickens is concerned to show that a world reduced to materialism, and people reduced to the value of things to be manipulated, is an unnatural world. And because it is unnatural, the natural world will have its revenge. A false world, by definition, cannot live; it will destroy itself. So that the victory of Florence and Walter, and the humbling of Dombey is not just a sentimental victory; it is a victory that reasserts what seems a Dickensian idea of natural morality. Pride, self-obsession, materialism,

manipulation of others are not evil per se - they are evil in that they contravene fate, and contradict natural human impulses - therefore they are incapable of healthy life. There seems a fatalistic message here; if people persistently transgress the invisible natural laws, they will in the end be defeated and humbled; and natural law will reassert itself, and if not let the good reign, it will at least give room for love, disinterestness and simplicity of motive.

Some critics claim that Dombey and Son is Dickens's first really serious book. This is a vague judgment that raises the question of what such a value-judgment word as 'serious' really means. It also implies too summary a dismissal of the earlier works. But certainly it is true that Dickens gave Dombey and Son unprecedented thought, care and time. During the writing of Martin Chuzzlewit he had experienced a drastic fall in sales. Falling sales were quite a new thing to Dickens, and he realised that he must put a stop to his hitherto preternaturally prolific output. Two years and 8 months elapsed between the completion of Martin Chuzzlewit and the commencement of Dombey and Son - the largest gap between novels to date. He travelled abroad, dabbled in newspapers, dramatics and prisons and apparently went through considerable inner turmoil. When he did begin

"the Dombey" as he called it, he had great trouble, for the first time, in writing fast.¹ He even thought of dropping his usual Christmas book because it interfered with his concentration on the big novel. The unusually long letter to Forster on the story line written after the completion of the first chapter shows what a sure and detailed grasp he had on the book in advance.² He also showed a new severity with himself stylistically, cutting out extraneous comedy and curbing his usual exuberance. The preface defence of the Dombey characterisation indicates how seriously Dickens had thought out his character and what importance he placed on being able to convince his readers of his conception of it. It is interesting for me then to look more closely at the ideas that go into the making of Mr. Dombey and the methods of characterisation used, for it is here, if anywhere, that a genuine and unprecedented seriousness can be discerned.

It is Mr. Dombey, his pride and all its ramifications, which are the acknowledged motifs of the book. The two other major characters only highlight Mr. Dombey by their contrast.

(p.29) From here on Dickens uses all his amazing verbal

1. John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens Vol. I, pp.419-20. J.H. Dent & Sons 1966.

2. Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens Vol. I, p.423.

to him; Edith contrasts and parallels him, having a pride quite equal and quite different, while Florence is his opposite, suffering, if anything, from an excess of humility. Mr. Dombey is at the centre of the book's attention to an unprecedented and unrepeated degree. Never before or again does Dickens give so much of the stage to a single third-person character. This gives an added interest to asking what are the successes and failures of the characterisation.

Mr. Dombey as central character is examined at several levels, which also indicate the levels of the book as a whole. There is Mr. Dombey as symbol, Mr. Dombey as head of character groups, Mr. Dombey as a pictorial or tactile object, Mr. Dombey as a subject for satire, and most central (and new for Dickens) there is Mr. Dombey the psychological study.

The first level at which we become aware of Mr. Dombey is Dickens' most familiar level, and the one at which he was traditionally most skilful. It is the physical Mr. Dombey; his pictorial and tactile self. The key-words are given in the first page, when Dombey is described as being handsome "but too stern and pompous in appearance to be prepossessing". (p.29) From here on Dickens uses all his amazing verbal skills to give us an indelible impression of Mr. Dombey's character through his physical attributes. He is described as

"turning around in his easy chair, as one piece, and not as a man with limbs and joints", (p.45) and as "one of those close-shaved close-cut moneyed gentlemen who are glossy and crisp like new banknotes, and who seem to be artificially braced and tightened by the stimulating action of golden shower-baths". (p.47) All that is cold and stiff in the surrounding atmosphere bears a relation of affinity to Mr. Dombey:

Mr. Dombey represented is himself the wind, the shade, the autumn of the christening. He stood in the library to receive the company as hard and cold as the weather; and when he looked out through the glass room at the trees in the little garden, their brown and yellow leaves came down as if he blighted them.....The stiff and stark fire irons appeared to claim a nearer relationship than anything else there to Mr. Dombey, with his buttoned coat, his heavy gold watch-chain and his creaking boots. (p.84)

Mr. Dombey has more relationship to the cold and stiff things with which he surrounds himself - his house, his furniture, his money - than to other people. His closest similarity to human beings is that "he might have been hung up for sale at a Russian fair as a specimen of a frozen gentleman". (p.167) This is a new kind of language for Dickens, rich and pithy, evocative, but with nothing rococo or over-elaborate about it. It skilfully impresses on the typical of his class. For it cannot escape the reader that

reader the unnatural non-human-ness of Dombey. Dickens does this by constantly relating Dombey to surrounding objects which simultaneously brings the surroundings themselves to life, so that they too can comment on Mr. Dombey.

While there is constant and thorough emphasis on the image of Mr. Dombey, particularly in the first chapters, he is also early made into an ideological pawn, an object of satire through which Dickens makes his moral priorities clear.

considerable portion of the book to explaining and analysing Dombey and Son had often dealt in hides, but never in hearts. They left that fancy ware to boys and girls, and boarding schools and books. Mr. Dombey would have reasoned: that a matrimonial alliance with himself must, in the nature of things, be gratifying and honourable to any woman of common sense. That the hope of giving birth to a new partner in such a house could not fail to awaken a glorious and stirring ambition in the breast of the least ambitious of her sex. That Mrs. Dombey had entered on that social contract of matrimony: almost necessarily part of a genteel and wealthy station, even without reference to the perpetuation of family firms: with her eyes fully open to these advantages. That Mrs. Dombey had daily practical knowledge of his position in society. That Mrs. Dombey had always sat at the head of his table, and done the honours of his house in a remarkable lady-like and becoming manner. That Mrs. Dombey must have been happy. That she couldn't help it. (pp.30-31)

Dickens uses this satiric tone most when he wants to poke savage fun at those aspects of Dombey which are also typical of his class. For it cannot escape the reader that others, he says,

Dickens despises, and through Dombey, satirises the new rich middle class for its pomposity, its nouveau-riche snobbery, its aping of the nobility, its unrelenting materialism, and its total inability to live imaginatively.

So there is Mr. Dombey pictured as the man of wood, stone and ice, and Mr. Dombey satirised as the epitome of his class and its values. This combination makes a vivid enough portrait in itself, yet Dickens wants to devote a considerable portion of the book to explaining and analysing him from a psychological angle. Dickens's reasons for this are interesting. Certainly he has a theoretical conception of Dombey that he sets out to prove. In particular, he wants to show that Mr. Dombey's eventual reform is quite consistent with his personality because the potential for good was within him all along. The psychological insight on which Dickens bases his characterisation is that just such a personality is capable of reform. The greater his pride, the more self-struggle, and the greater need for concealment from the outside world. It is a careless reading of the novel that brings the (quite common) criticism that the ending is inadequately prepared for, and is nothing but a sentimental solution. Dickens defends himself vigorously against contemporary accusations of this kind in the preface. One of the ~~two~~ most common mistakes made by men in observing others, he says,

is the not understanding that an obstinate nature exists in perpetual struggle with itself. Mr. Dombey undergoes no violent change, either in this book or in real life. A sense of his injustice is within him, all along. The more he represses it, the more unjust he necessarily is. Internal shame and external circumstances may bring the contest to a close in a week, or in a day, but it has been a contest for years, and is only fought out after a long balance of victory. (The Author's Preface p.1)

It is questionable whether Dickens succeeds in making this theory of Dombey wholly credible, but that is something I want to discuss later. What I want to point out first is how sustained, and complex is the psychological study of Dombey, and I think I can demonstrate this by taking one important aspect of the characterisation - Dombey's relationship to Florence. A father's growing hatred of his daughter is not a very usual theme for a Victorian novelist, but to my mind Dickens traces its development through from indifference and neglect, to dislike, and finally to aversion and paranoia, with great skill and insight.

From the beginning, Florence plays two roles in her father's emotional life. Firstly, he is just not interested in her because being a girl, she cannot be his partner and heir; she is no use. But also he already finds her repellant because merely by her presence, she is a reminder of what is missing from his own emotional life. He is made

uncomfortable by her, knowing that she possesses the warmth and humanity he lacks. He remembers the last scene of his wife's life as she dies in Florence's arms.

He could not forget that he had had no part in it. That, at the bottom of its clear depths of tenderness and truth, lay those two figures clasped in each other's arms, while he stood on the bank above them, looking down, a mere spectator - not a sharer with them - quite shut out, (p.60)

He has an incipient resentment of Florence because he has a vague feeling that the 6 year old child "held the clue to something secret in his breast of the nature of which he was hardly informed himself". And he tries not to think of her because of a "half-formed idea that he might come to hate her". (p.61) In short, she is the ever-present embodiment of one side of his inner struggle, and while hardly conscious of this, he instinctively shrinks from her. From the beginning the dislike is not really personal - a reluctant appraisal of her good qualities is always present in him, but her love for him and implicit demand for love, her gentle and affectionate manners, are all representative of what he rejects and struggles against in himself. While she is a child and his daughter, naturally living in his house, he is helpless against the threat of her love - there

is no getting rid of her - and this very helplessness fuels his dislike.¹

The repressed but genuine love he has for Paul only exacerbates his dislike for Florence, for now jealousy and pride play a part. Paul's solemn little face lights up for Florence, his unchildishness, disturbing even to his father, disappears when Florence is around. He is jealous witness to the tender scene in which Florence toils up the dark staircase, singing, with Paul in her arms. This tableau comes back to Dombey after, first as a catalyst for his growing hatred, later for his remorse. Florence seems to him his rival and enemy; she gives to Paul the indefinable and important things he can't give. She triumphs over him in the matter dearest to his heart. It galls him that Paul cannot bear to be separated from Florence, and that the whole of his childish love goes to her. He knows very well what a blow it is to Paul to leave Florence to go to Dr. Blimber's. In the end he stops going down to Brighton; he cannot bear to see the tender companionship of his two children and again be only a spectator.

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1. Dombey never really hates Florence, only the symbolic threat that her daily presence is to him. Thus when he starts to love her devotedly at the end of the book, this is not a total reversal; the threat is removed and he is now free to express his love for her.

He is not only jealous of Florence because of Paul's love; he is jealous of her on Paul's behalf. Florence the unwanted is healthy and normal, Paul the treasure-trove of all his hopes is weak and under-sized. When Paul dies, Dombey is once again the non-participant. These two death-scenes - the first in the opening pages of the mother, then in mid-novel of the son, show Dickens's growing ability to give unity and depth of meaning by the use of parallel scenes. Dombey was not greatly grieved by the death of his first wife, but he still resented his emotional separateness. When Paul dies however, Dombey is utterly involved, yet he is still a spectator, left out, and this causes him the deepest pain. Florence is all to the dying child, and even the unsympathetic reader begins to understand how Dombey can hate Florence when Paul says to her from his death bed, "Floy, are we all dead, except you?" (p.237). For Paul, she represents all things living, vital and good; implicitly and unconsciously he rejects his father's values. At one point Paul even fails to recognize him and thereafter Dombey will not, in his pain, even go near the bed, except at Paul's specific request.

After Paul's death, Mr. Dombey allows his hatred for Florence to come out in the open. The consciousness of his injustice to her is now buried under his need to make her a and to how he can subdue and defeat both of them. It is

scapegoat for his grief and anger. It becomes "a gall to him to look upon her in her beauty and her promise: thinking of his infant boy!" (p.288) On his train journey to Brighton the face of Florence haunts him, and his thoughts about her start to take on a paranoid tinge. He sees her in league with his enemy, Death, and more than ever wants her out of his sight:

Her patience, goodness, youth, devotion, love were as many atoms in the ashes on which he set his feet. He saw her image in the blight and blackness around him, not irradiating but deepening the gloom. More than once upon this journey..... the thought came into his mind, what was there he could interpose between himself and it? (p.315)

The marriage to Edith only worsens the situation. Dombey has been content with Edith's coldness as long as he thought it universal. But he finds out that Edith softens to and cares for only one person, Florence. In one of those stagey dramas that tend to spoil the general thoughtfulness of the book, Dombey has a momentary relenting to Florence, and is about to call her to him, when Edith enters. He witnesses a magic transformation in his wife, just as he witnessed a transformation in Paul. It is another victory for Florence with her unknown weapons. Now his thoughts turn to revenge on both his wife and daughter, and to how he can subdue and defeat both of them. It is

one of the great psychological insights of the book that timid, defenceless, powerless Florence seems to her father to be all-powerful. His paranoia is now full-blown.

It seemed his fate to be ever proud and powerful; ever humbled and powerless where he would be most strong. Who seemed fated to work out that doom? Who? Who was it who could win his wife as she had won his boy? Who was it who had shown him that new victory as he sat in the dark corner? Who was it whose least word did what his utmost means could not? Who was it who, unaided by his love, regard or notice, thrived and grew beautiful when those so aided died? Who could it be but that same child at whom he had often glanced uneasily in her motherless infancy, with a kind of dread, lest he might come to hate her; and of whom his foreboding was fulfilled, for he DID hate her in his heart.

Florence. In his sullen and unwholesome brooding, the unhappy man, with a dull perception of his alienation from all hearts, and a vague yearning for what he had all his life repelled, made a distorted picture of his rights and wrongs, and justified himself with it against her. The worthier she promised to be of him, the greater claim he was disposed to ante-date upon her duty and submission. When had she ever shown him duty and submission?..... In his pride, a heap of inconsistency, and misery, and self-inflicted torment, he hated her.

(pp.586-7)

Now intent on humbling both Florence and Edith, Dombey uses Florence to threaten Edith, a move about which he may previously have had scruples. But his monomania and paranoia are, increasing, as Dickens shows in several dramatic

scenes, notably his confrontation with Susan Nipper. When Edith leaves, he strikes Florence, telling her to go too, "since they had always been in league". (p.687) It may be high melodrama to have father strike daughter to the chill marble floor and curse her, but it is still perfect psychologically, because in his mind she is his enemy, only pretending love at his moment of humiliation. Moreover I think this scene rises above the purely melodramatic, for Dickens charges it with more than its surface meaning and gives it an allegoric force. Dombey at the peak of his misery, gives in completely to that 'worse' half-mad self, and finally rejects that symbol of his 'better' self, Florence. In ordering her out of the house, his "pride" has gained a final victory - the representative of humility and goodness has left his hearth. It is only when he eventually realises that she is really gone, that he starts to struggle to regain all the things that she has secretly meant to him. In such a scene where there is a confrontation of more than human forces, a gathering together of accumulated significances, there is an inherent power which makes one think that Dickens used the melodramatic convention as a means of conveying his special meanings, not, as it may at first seem, for cheap thrills. I would not argue that the deeper significance wins decisively over the melodrama in this

scene (and some scenes, such as Edith trampling on his jewels are purest melodrama), but I do think that this scene is to be taken at a double level. Such deeper levels of meaning will be increasingly found in the later Dickens, particularly in the melodramatic conventions surrounding Lady Dedlock. Here Dickens tries to make a multiplicity of meanings fit within a pretty straightforward narrative structure; in later books he starts to search for a more complex form that will flexibly accomodate his range of meanings.

It is more than a year after Florence actually leaves, that Dombey acknowledges to himself that she is gone for good. After the crash of the firm and the news of Florence's marriage, he sits alone in the big house and starts to understand what her loss means. There is only one chapter on this terrible year in Dombey's life, and it is therefore tempting to look at it as a most cursory treatment of subjects highly important to the book as a whole - his mental breakdown and subsequent conversion. But on close examination, I think this chapter proves to be a condensed, severe, yet detailed account of what happens in that solitude. As an account of the various stages in that breakdown, it is more than adequate, if not wholly a success. As to its brevity, it is arguable that Dickens deliberately made it

short, as a way of pushing his point - that a quick conversion is possible if the seeds of it have lain within all along. - The chapter is highly condensed, as if to emphasise the literal crumbling of a wall up for so long; but it is by no means sketchy or vague as is that similar chapter in David Copperfield.¹

There are several stages in Mr. Dombey's breakdown, and all of them are to do with Florence. She is the centre-point of his realisation and remorse. In week after week of brooding alone in his room, he starts to remember her, and the details of her existence. Left alone by the world, he perceives that she is the one person who would have stood by him, yet she is gone, and through no fault of her own. For the first time he acknowledges a need of her. "She had never changed to him - nor had he ever changed to her - and she was lost." (p.855) He starts to wander through the empty house, first with visions of Paul - then of both; he comes to the emotional realisation that she was as much his child as Paul, and his agonised mind finds some comfort in the daydream that they are both dead and that he is the bereaved and tender father of two children. Memories of

1. In which David retreats to Switzerland to mourn, starts to write, and starts to fall in love with Agnes.

The scene is also about the regenerative power of pure love.

Florence haunt him more and more. All other considerations - "his false wife, his false friend, servant, his false grounds of pride" - are put by, "and [he] he only recalled miserably, weakly, fondly, his two children". (p.857)

Dombey sits in his house alone, unable to leave the place so associated with his children. This solitude, time, and the sheer weight and number of his misfortunes, the last and most unexpected of which is that Florence has left him, are the key factors in his breakdown. There has simply been too much; opposition and misfortune once goaded him to fresh heights of arrogance but now, totally alone, he can no longer avoid self-knowledge. As Dickens says:

Strong mental agitation and disturbance were no novelty to him, even before his late suffering. It never is, to obstinate and sullen natures; for they struggle hard to be such. Ground, long undermined, will often fall down in a moment; what was undermined here in so many ways, weakened and crumbled, little by little more and more, as the hand moved on the dial. (p.858)

Just before Florence returns, he is in danger of complete disintegration, and, as Dickens rather luridly hints, considering suicide. The reconciliation scene also teeters on, and perhaps over, the edge of melodrama, but again Dickens tries to give it added intensity by an overlay of meanings. The scene is also about the regenerative power of pure love.

This pure love (nearly always that of a good woman - Sissy and Agnes are two other examples of this idea) is supposed to have a positive and special power. Normally I find of this Victorian convention about the power of pure women very clumsily handled by Dickens; he flounders about confusing sex, spirituality and vague Christianity, but here the inner logic of the story carries him over his difficulties. The lasting devotion of the daughter, the father's long hatred and private remorse, the terrible mental condition in which she finds him, all make for the plausibility of the strong and redeeming effect of Florence's love. Dickens wants us to see that it is the power of her love and humility that brings about the real and final change. Till the last he might have been too proud to show her his remorse, but astonishingly, it is she who asks for forgiveness. "I was frightened when I went away - I could not think." Only then does he break down, and asks God to forgive him.

I think I have said enough to show that Dickens can be easily defended against the charge that Mr. Dombey is a cardboard character, externally manipulated, who undergoes an incredible change at the end in order to furnish his creator with a happy ending. The portrait of Mr. Dombey is certainly a most serious, substantial one, but once that is

acknowledged, there are certain criticisms that can be made. Dickens's major method of analysing Mr. Dombey consists of lengthy passages of explanation and supposition. Most of them have insight and power; some are moralistic and ponderous in tone, and only serve to show up the lack of actualised scenes or particularised thoughts that would do far more to show up the 'inner man.' The inner Mr. Dombey always just eludes us, despite Dickens's copious explanations of him. We are often told of his inner struggles, but are never given any demonstration of them - a telling detail of a struggle won, or the substance of an inner dialogue. Dombey is just too inflexible and too consistently pompous to make the idea of a better person lurking inside quite credible. He is too absurdly rigid (as in the scene with Susan Nipper or his private talks with Carker) to make us believe that he is aware of his own rigidity and struggles against it. Perhaps Dickens gives him too few characteristics; he is too much of a 'fait accompli,' seemingly born into the world stiff, cold and proud. He is presented, finished, on the first page, and he is like that, unvaryingly, till the end. The reader is not allowed to get to know him a little better as the book goes on, to know his secrets or his past life; rather he is given a set of characteristics which are then emphasised and reemphasised with limited variation. It is

wrong I think to see this as a failure of psychological insight in Dickens; his conception of the character is to present him both as he wants to be seen and as he appears to those around him. Also he thoroughly believed that a person's most inner secrets were to be respected by the author as well as the reader, and that part of a novel's mystery and interest consisted in not laying them bare.¹ But to have so much of the interest of the book centred on Mr. Dombey, and then to rely on explanation of rather than demonstration of his inner self, is just too much of a risk. Dickens cannot quite pull it off, and it is because of this, I think that he never again puts such emphasis on a third person character. First person characters like David and Pip leave him much more freedom for his particular methods.

An important source of failure too is Dickens's inability to really integrate the presented physical Mr. Dombey with the analysed Mr. Dombey. Perhaps because of his new seriousness about this characterisation, Dickens gives him none of the eccentricities and distinctive speech mannerisms that usually individualise a Dickens character so

1. Richard Strong, The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870. Chapter Three. "Dickens's Attitude to His Readers." Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959.

vividly. He does give constant and successful physical descriptions. Dombey's stiffness, coldness, deadness and so on are effective in themselves, but their very success removes Dombey's inner mind further from comprehension. There is no adequately worked out relationship between the serious and hidden aspects of Mr. Dombey and his pictorial aspect as a man of wood and ice. There are very few scenes that effectively translate the inner man into the acting character, and this creates a gap in his total credibility as a character.

However I do not think that such criticisms invalidate the characterisation, or take away from its importance in Dickens's writing life. I am not taking the preposterous view that a new serious psychologically orientated Dickens has sprung up out of the nothing. To claim that is to forget many subtle and brilliant portraits, (Hugh in Barnaby Rudge and Pecksniff in Martin Chuzzlewit to name just two), but Dombey and Son does show a shift in emphasis and a new experimentation. The psychology of Mr. Dombey is only one aspect of this; but it is not within the scope of this thesis to do more than just mention some of the others not yet talked about - such as the portrait of capitalism as a social force, the interweaving of the new railways into the patterns of change of the whole novel,

the sophisticated use of the naturalist symbols of the Sea, the River, and Death within the narrative, and so on.

Dombey and Son is also remarkable for its new distinctive prose style - Dickens writing to Forster after finishing Part Four, said; "I have avoided unnecessary dialogue so far, to avoid overwriting; and all I have written is point."¹ The resulting prose is rich, vigorous, rarely overblown, with a balance between all its parts; it contributes to making Dombey and Son, in my opinion one of Dickens's three or four most brilliant books.

My primary interest has been to highlight the world view that Dickens expresses through this novel. His theme is articulated in a variety of ways, never categorically stated, but it can be roughly summarised like this: A viable social structure must follow the natural laws of individuality and spontaneity of emotion; it must give room for natural goodwill, it must resist the forcing of others into a mould, and it must fight the dehumanising effect of institutions on people. If Dombey and Son makes a moral affirmation it is certainly not about a victory for the good; it affirms only that the survival of the natural and the good is a cause for hope.

1. Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, Vol.II, p.20-21.

CHAPTER 2

DAVID COPPERFIELD

In Dombey and Son, Dickens is being distinctly polemical, in the sense that he takes care not to leave his moral viewpoint in doubt, and one of the main organising principles of the book is the affirmation of this viewpoint. There are no such clear and obvious moral priorities in Dickens's next novel. Superficially, David Copperfield is a return to the loose picaresque structure of a novel like Nicholas Nickleby. Certainly it is a return to a narrative style, full of incident, coincidence, things picturesque, and big, vivid characterisations. The happy combination of these factors, the ease of tone, the constant flow of glorious detail and intimate realistic recall, certainly are a break from the careful plotting and thoughtful symbolism of Dombey and Son. In the previous novel too, there is an obvious concern with social questions, including strong attacks on a money society, on snobbery, on education etc. David Copperfield, relying mainly on the first-person narrative of a not-too-analytic, not-over-fiery David, lacks the same obvious purpose of social comment. In Dombey and Son, though there is no wholesale

2. Mainly the satire on the Murdstones' gloomy religion.

attack on the social structure, as say in Bleak House or Little Dorrit, Dickens does make his first attempt to analyse the social manifestations of a capitalist system. There is no such attempt in David Copperfield: Dickens confines himself to relatively mild tilts at some of his pet dislikes - the law, the pretensions of society people (that marvellous conversation on Blood),¹ and religious fanaticism,² but there is nothing consistent or overall in these attacks.

However, one cannot infer from this that David Copperfield is a light or somehow frivolous novel. Nor should the reader be misled by its charm and near constant lightness of tone. David Copperfield contains some of the most impressive and powerful things in Dickens; it is definitely not simply a throw-back to Dickens's earlier days. In many ways it is a direct continuation of Dombey and Son, and an important novel in Dickens' maturing thought. But to understand the book fully, the reader must look for new emphases, new kinds of significances.

David Copperfield is set on a personal scale. Its moral

1. See pp. 349-50. Charles Dickens, David Copperfield (London: Collins 1961). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

2. Mainly the satire on the Murdstones' gloomy religion.

messages are not deliberately given a broad application; its social content is implied, its symbolic structure is buried fairly deeply within the narrative. This has encouraged those who dislike the "dark" Dickens to praise David Copperfield, and it also leads some critics who praise the "dark" novels to see it as a freak or retrogression in Dickens's development. Here critics can point to such things as the pathos and sentimentality surrounding Little Emily and Martha, the dark-ages moralising on their plight,¹ and the impossible idealisation of Agnes. They can point to the easy haphazard use of coincidence after its schematised and restrained use in Dombey and Son - the improbable fairy god-mother role of Miss Betsey, or the convenient death of Dora, or the way the Micawbers turn up again and again for the sole purpose of entertainment. Admittedly, there is much, beside such points, to criticise in David Copperfield, and just because so much of the book is a perfect mingling of style and content, its weaknesses are all the more obvious. But while there are many inconsistencies and contradictions in the work, essentially they

1. But as Butt and Tillotson point out, Dickens was actually trying to soften the hard Victorian attitudes to fallen women, by inducing the reader's compassion, and showing that a return to the ordinary world was possible. See John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work, p. 148. U.P. 1968.

are the same kind of flaws as in the other four books I am discussing. What I want to emphasise is that David Copperfield is not a deviation from Dickens's dominant preoccupations into an easy world of semi-fantasy, semi-autobiography; that is to under-estimate the novel entirely.

Many of the ideas and themes of Dombey and Son are again explored in David Copperfield; some are taken up more fully and given a different emphasis. Perhaps the most striking similarity between the two novels is the interest in the parent-child relationship, and in neglected children. Another way of looking at Dombey and Son is to see it as a novel about parents and children, mainly about inadequate parents who refuse to cater for the essential needs of their children. Florence, though housed and wealthy, is a deprived child; Edith's personality is distorted by an abnormal childhood, as is Alice's. All the children sent to the Pipchin or Blimber establishments are neglected or treated in unnatural ways by their parents. Dickens provides plenty of contrasting examples too; the happiness of the poor but united Toodles, the substitute-father love of Sol Gills for his nephew, and the mutual love of the father and motherless children who live across the street from Florence. But this is hardly the most

important theme in Dombey and Son; it is much more pervasive in David Copperfield where parent-child relationships dominate the patterns of the book. Its autobiographical form, starting with David's birth, and ending with his second marriage, encourages a life-cycle theme as well. So more broadly, it can be said to be a novel concerned with birth, marriage, death - the cyclic events of life - with a particular interest in the child-parent relationship and its effects on the child.

At the centre of the book is David, who, orphaned as a child, grows up under constant threat to his physical and emotional survival. He gets some protection and aid from his grown-up friends, and successfully attains manhood. As George Ford points out, around the central story of David is a host of orphans, neglected children, and children with only one parent.¹ Little Emily and Ham, Rosa Dartle, Traddles, Clara Copperfield, even the Micawbers' Orfling are all parentless. Dora has only a father, Steerforth only a mother, as has Uriah. Annie Strong lost her father when very young, just as Agnes lost her mother.

For David, orphanhood is a blow which he has to contend with all his childish strength. Deprived from the first of a father, his total dependance on his childish and pretty mother suffers severely when she marries again. Mr. Murdstone

1. George H. Ford Dickens and His Readers. Aspects of Novel Criticism Since 1836. Princeton University Press, 1955.

not only intrudes on Davy's exclusive relationship with his mother, but is a threat to his existence and a blight on his development. Mother and son are separated, and the child becomes a prisoner to the Murdstones' gloomy religion and discipline of cruelty. His mother is no longer capable of providing him with parental protection, and the child is truly helpless but for Pegotty. She is the only one, in a limited way, with the strength to defend him, and in her protective role she fills a place in his heart that his mother has abdicated.¹ After Davy has bitten Mr. Murdstone and is imprisoned in his room, Pegotty creeps up one night to tell him he is to go to school, and to swear her undying loyalty:

..... we both of us kissed the key-hole with the greatest affection - I patted it with my hand, I recollect, as if it had been her honest face - and parted. From that night there grew up in my breast a feeling for Pegotty which I cannot very well define. She did not replace my mother; no one could do that; but she came into a vacancy in my heart, which closed upon her, and I felt towards her something I have never felt for any other human being. It was a sort of comical affection too; and yet if she had

1. As Q.D. Leavis acutely observes, the 2 "mothers" of David's emotional life are both called Clara - Clara Copperfield and Clara Pegotty. "It is evident that for his purpose of examining the role of women Dickens has split the dual nature of it into separate identities, the two Claras". F.R. & Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist. p. 49. Chatto & Windus, 1970.

He goes to the poor, ignorant, and alone, died, I cannot think what I should have done, or how I should have acted out the tragedy it would have been to me. (p.72) how long

this utter misery will last. Dickens, in that well known

But Pegotty cannot do much against the all-powerful passage, which is almost duplicated in his autobiographical Murdstones, and David is sent to Creakle's school. Here fragment, emphasises the traumatic shock of the time at he is befriended by the orphaned Twaddles and the fatherless Murdstone and Grinby's. Steerforth. Steerforth takes David under his wing and becomes part-hero, part-father figure to him. Much of David's adoration stems from this protective role; Steerforth's patronage shields him from other boys; he shows David incidental kindness and encourages his talents. He has, however carelessly, taken over the parental role, and David is grateful for anything of the kind. The strength of this early relationship between them does lend psychological accuracy to David's blindness to Steerforth's faults. Steerforth fulfilled a childish need, and David has the same kind of blind love for him as for a parent; the same reluctance to see him as frail and mortal, the same kind of earth-shaking shock when the truth about Steerforth's character can no longer be avoided, and the same lingering tenderness that survives all disillusion. without a protector, is a

But when his mother dies, and he has to leave Steerforth and the school, David is truly left with no benevolent grown-up to rely on. The adult world now threatens him in a total way. He is cut off from every aid and every resource.

He goes through the true nightmare of a child; he is alone, poor, ignorant, without counsel, and with no idea how long this utter misery will last. Dickens, in that well known passage, which is almost duplicated in his autobiographical fragment,¹ emphasises the traumatic shock of the time at Murdstone and Grimby's.

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionshipand felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my bosom. The deep remembrance of the sense I had, of being utterly without hope now; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and emulation up by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. (pp. 155-6)

David has enough instinct for survival, enough resource and sense of his own worth to find a way out. But these qualities only just save him from the dangers of the actual flight to Miss Betsey. The journey itself is a remarkable distillation of the horrors and unexpected dangers that can beset a child. The adult world, without a protector, is a

1. He showed this fragment to Forster, and no one else. He never published it, and kept this part of his life secret even from his wife.

real threat to David. He is also hampered by his innocent

vicious place. The boy with the donkey steals David's belongings. He takes to pawning his clothes, and is set upon by the ghastly gooroo man.

to his aunt. When he does arrive at Miss Betsey's, his

"Oh, how much for the jacket?" cried the old man, after examining it. "Oh - gooroo - how much for the jacket?" "Half-a-crown" I answered, recovering myself. "Oh, my lungs and liver", cried the old man, "no! oh! my eyes, no! oh, my limbs, no! Eighteenpence, gooroo!"

Every time he uttered this ejaculation, his eyes seemed to be starting out; and every sentence he spoke, he delivered in a sort of tune, always exactly the same, and more like a gust of wind, which begins low, mounts up high, and falls again, than any other comparison I can find for it. "Well", said I, glad to have closed the bargain, "I'll take eighteenpence". "Oh, my liver!" cried the old man, throwing the jacket on a shelf, "Get out of the shop! oh, my lungs, get out of the shop! oh, my eyes and limbs - gooroo - don't ask for money; make it an exchange."

I never was so frightened in my life, before or since, but I told him humbly that I wanted money, and that nothing else was of any use to me, but that I would wait for it, as he desired, outside, and had no wish to hurry him. So I went outside, and sat there so many hours, that the shade became sunlight, and the sunlight became shade again, and still I sat there waiting for the money. (pp. 181-2)

The incident with the tinker is another perfect small picture of what terrifying proportions the merely harmless can assume. Ignorance and helplessness make the tinker a real threat to David. He is also hampered by his innocent

trust in adults. The effect is sometimes ludicrous, as when the waiter eats his dinner for him, or sometimes pathetic as when he is cheated and slighted on his journey to his aunt. When he does arrive at Miss Betsey's, his troubles are more or less over; his aunt becomes a surrogate mother for him, and he once again has an adult's protection and financial support.

There are only hints of the profound effect this time must have had on the later David. It is one of the disappointments of the book that the influence of this time hardly shows on David later - he is the same mild and affectionate young man as he was a boy; whereas for Dickens himself this experience was both a source for neurosis and a source of intense creativity. It is one of the biggest moral and artistic evasions of the book that this period of David's life is described in full, yet its implications and results are almost ignored.

However if the theme of "David parentless" is not deeply enough explored, this is partly compensated by the scope given the theme through other characters. There is a varied range of other characters, all in some way maimed or disadvantaged by inadequate parentage.

Firstly, there is the one-parent group, and here Dickens seems to be itemising the various effects of disproportionate

love and indulgence. Leading this group is Steerforth. His mother's indulgence and obsessive love have encouraged his worst qualities, as he himself, in times of self-doubt is aware. After his death, Rosa Dartle points a vicious and accurate finger at his mother:

"You, resent his self-will!" she exclaimed. "You, injured by his haughty temper! You, who opposed to both, when your hair was grey, the qualities which made both when you gave him birth. You, who from his cradle reared him to be what he was, and stunted what he should have been! Are you rewarded now, for your years of trouble? . . . you were exacting, proud, punctilious, selfish. My love would have been devoted, would have trod your paltry intriguing under foot! Moan? Moan for what you made him; not for your love. I tell you that the time was, when I loved him better than you ever did!!" (pp. 727-8)

Sometimes such a single-minded love rebounds more on the parent than on the child. Mr. Wickfield eventually admits that his love for Agnes was a "diseased" love, stemming from his own neurosis, not from a pure disinterested affection as he had long believed. Agnes endures much suffering and loneliness because of her father, but Dickens says her basic character is not much affected; if anything, strengthened. He seems to link her with David in this - both have a purity or strength of basic character to survive unchanged the inadequacies of parentage. It is an unsatisfac-

tory formula, and is at the root of the reader's dissatisfaction with both characters.

Mrs. Heep is a curious counterpart to Mrs. Steerforth. Mrs. Steerforth develops pride in her son, Mrs. Heep encourages "umbleness". The kind of role they wish their sons to play is entirely different, but the type of influence over and devotion to their offspring is the same. It is one of those unobvious parallels that Dickens loves to point out.

On Dora, the effect of having only a father is to make her dependant and childish, and demanding of the world the same indulgent protection that her father gave her. She is not naturally stupid, but her environment has reduced her practically to that level. Her twin is David's mother who was left orphaned and flew early to the protection of her older clergyman husband. Is Dickens giving a sort of Freudian explanation to the marriage of Dora and David, in that David marries a virtual replica of his mother, and tries desperately to give her the sort of protection he had been unable to give his mother when small? In any case David is quite unsuited for this role, and his clumsy attempts to be a wise guide and protector are one of the failures of the marriage.

There are also the orphan children with one substitute parent. Ham and Emily have Mr. Peggotty, who is "more than a father" to them. For all his good-will, Mr. Peggotty makes the same mistake as the other lone parents. He adores little Emily beyond the point of seeing her as a reality. He is blind to her real needs and motives, and so cannot help her in the decision whether to run away with Steerforth or not. But after she has run away, the real quality of his love emerges. Mrs. Steerforth, Mrs. Heep, and Mr. Peggotty, all witness the downfall of the person most beloved in the world to them, and in showing their different reactions to this calamity, Dickens draws some quiet and subtle moral distinctions.

Mr. Peggotty's mistake was solely one of love and ignorance, and in the uncomplicated love he has for Emily, he forgives her freely and dedicates himself to finding her, and from then on schools himself in analysing her every thought so as to be able to help her. Mrs. Steerforth's love is much more rooted in the self; she takes her son's behaviour as a rebuttal of herself, and although she does not admit this, neither will she forgive it. As well, her action is complicated by pride and snobbery. She pits her will against her son's. Mrs. Heep, on the surface the more

But if David Copperfield is about parents and children, it is almost as much about marriage. Many marriages take

ignoble figure, yet has a purer love for her son. When he is exposed, she thinks of nothing but protecting him.

Rosa Dartle's life is wholly conditioned by her connection made between these marriages, no heavily stated orphanhood; she is the opposite end of the spectrum to Traddles, who by virtue of his cheerful uncomplicatedness is unaffected by formidable and persistent set-backs. Rosa's personality is wholly affected by her position in the Steerforth household. She is forced to depend on mother and son, both economically, and for love, and she daily feels the falsity of her position. One moment she is scornful and defiant, the next asking for love and consideration; at times filled with resentment for their careless treatment of her, at other times full of love for the two beings who are everything in the world to her. She is reminded constantly of her inferior position; she is a "mere disfigured piece of furniture", (p. 728) yet she cannot leave. She lives out the rest of her life in a tormented attachment to the dead son and half-dead mother.

This is the roll-call of disadvantaged children in David Copperfield, completed by the Micawber's "orfling", and by that "child" Mr. Dick, threatened by the world till Miss Betsey becomes his guardian.

But if David Copperfield is about parents and children, it is almost as much about marriage. Many marriages take

place within the narrative, and many existing marriages are looked at, with emphasis placed on the compatibility and adjustment of the partners. There is no explicit connection made between these marriages, no heavily stated theme, yet I think there are connections. It is just not Dickens's intention in this book to make its preoccupations explicit - the narrative acts as the unifying principle, the rest is implicit. But the very number of marriages, as with the number of deprived children, indicates that Dickens is exploring and re-exploring the topic - something in the manner of a musician who reiterates the basic tune and composes a number of variations on it.

Look at the actual marriages that take place; Clara Copperfield to Mr. Murdstone, Pegotty's marriage to Mr. Barkis, David's marriage to Dora, his second marriage to Agnes, Steerforth's "marriage" to Emily, even Traddle's marriage to his Sophy. There are also existing marriages looked at closely, such as Mr. and Mrs. Strong, Mr. and Mrs. Micawber, and the story of three ill-starred marriages told - that of Clara and David's father, Miss Betsey's and Mr. Wickfield's. Unlike Dombey and Son there is no careful schematisation, no stark contrasts such as that between the sterile marriage of the rich Dombey and the happy marriage of the poor Toodles. The comparisons and contrasts

are much more casual, and are only in faint relief against the narrative, as is consistent with the natural air of autobiography.

But there does appear to be a generalised assessment of marriages based on the criteria of suitability of mind and purpose.

I have already mentioned the marriage of Dora and David. David grows up without any person who fulfills all his needs. Both his mother and Pegotty were in their different ways inadequate for him; the Micawbers, his substitute parents for a while, ignored the fact that he was a child. Steerforth treated him carelessly, and Miss Betsey was more fairy god-mother than intellectual and emotional companion. At 17, David has no idea what he wants from a relationship. He only obeys "the first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart." (p. 607) As Q.D. Leavis¹ nicely points out, David is helplessly conditioned to falling in love with Dora because of the immediate unconscious association with his mother, a point most cleverly underlined by the reappearance of Miss Murdstone as jailer for the second time, and further reinforced by David's lack of surprise at seeing her in this role. This is indeed a good example of Dickens writing at a double level of appeal. He may well be bringing back Miss

1. F.R. & Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, p.54.

Murdstone, already proved to be a successful character, for her repeat performance to a delighted audience, but he is also undoubtedly using her to establish a psychological truth about David - that his love for Dora is intimately bound up, even if unconsciously, with his love for his mother. How typically Dickensian is the technique of externalising David's innermost psychology through his reaction to a third personage, especially brought in for the purpose.

David learns quickly, even Dora learns, that the "first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart" is an inadequate basis for marriage. His real self gets little help or understanding from Dora, and he cannot give her the uncomplicated affection and protection she needs. The similarities and differences of Dora's marriage to Annie Strong's gives added point to Annie's dictum that "There can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose". (p. 605) Annie, like Dora, lost one parent as a small child; she too, in confusion and in need of emotional support, makes a choice when very young. But she chooses someone who can be a genuine father-figure to her, and can genuinely give wisdom, protection and kindness. Thus her marriage, despite the age and decrepitude of her husband, has a solid basis, while Dora's, superficially so romantic, has not. If Annie

had followed the first impulses of her heart, she would have married Jack Maldon and would have raised no eyebrows, but she would have been very unhappy. David's uneasiness after witnessing the reconciliation scene between Mr. and Mrs. Strong is not a simple one. Annie's words make an impression as somehow related to his own situation, but more important is a dim intuition that in her example is an example in marriage to himself and Dora. She can say "My love was founded on a rock".(p. 607) Can he?

Yet neither Dickens or the reader is easy with the "perfect happiness" of the Strong's marriage. I believe however that Dickens is trying to push a theoretical point, not propound a deliberate hypocrisy. His awareness of the inevitable sexual and emotional inadequacies of the marriage comes out in the language, in every line of his treatment of the subject. There seems at one level, that of used language, to be an analysis of the morbid and compulsive aspects of the relationship, and at another, the level of propaganda and popular comprehension, a sentimental stand for the happiness of the marriage. Again Dickens is working at a double level of awareness, but this time uneasily, unable to reconcile his own contradictory attitudes.¹

1. Q.D. Leavis has some interesting things to say on this point. See F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, pp. 66-7.

The story of the Strong's is seen by some as an uneasy interpolation, a tale in the picaresque style, introduced solely for the dramatic or touching effect it can make. It is true that the story is poorly integrated with the rest of the narrative, and in the telling is often forced and clumsy, but its importance is hardly incidental - Dickens intended it to have both a vital relevance to the rest of the book, and a theoretical importance. The world is sceptical of Mr. and Mrs. Strong, Mr. Wickfield is suspicious, but the marriage turns out to be a shining instance of true compatibility and affection. In a sense it is the standard against which the other marriages in the book are treated.

Nearly all fail. Clara Copperfield and Mr. Murdstone are totally unsuited both in mind and purpose; while she marries for love and protection, he marries for domination and control. He reduces his wife to an anxiety and fear of him that finally make her ill. Betsey Trotwood shows a nice capability for analysing Murdstone's particular brand of sadism, yet she herself made a similarly disastrous marriage. She married for love too, a handsome man younger than herself who used her for her money, and she pays for it in grief and misanthropy for a large proportion of her life. Mr. Wickfield overestimated the strength of his wife's purpose in marrying him despite her parents. Their continued disapproval breaks

her heart, and she dies in the approved Victorian manner. That flaw in the marriage, and her death leave him with a deep neurosis.

Emily and Steerforth, though they never marry, fall in this category of unions that can't succeed because of unsuitability of mind and purpose. Despite powerful physical attraction and romantic ideas on both sides, the unsuitability is radical. She desperately wants Steerforth to fulfill her desire to become a lady, and she wants to marry him to justify her rash action. He never intends to marry her, and is snob enough to be annoyed when she tells people that she is a fisherman's daughter. There is a little more to the story than the melodrama of a rich rake and poor fisher girl, although admittedly Dickens lets most of it get submerged in the melodrama. It is not difference of class and intelligence that really make the failure of Steerforth and Emily - it is a clash of motives. While it is credible that Steerforth and Emily fail, Dickens never takes up the obvious question - what would the equal unsuitability of Ham and Emily have led to? He evades it as he evaded the effect on David of his childhood.

In contrast there are the happy marriages where suitability of mind and purpose exists. It is interesting that with the exception of David and Agnes, the happily marrieds

are not among the "serious" characters. In the one attempt to seriously depict a happy marriage between David and Agnes, Dickens so entangles himself with sentiment and mysticism as to become incomprehensible. Among the comic characters who make good marriages, there is a great variety in the suitability of mind and purpose. Pegotty and Barkis embark on a marriage of mutual convenience, tempered by good will. She will provide him with "apple parsties" and comfort, while she, married to Barkis, will have her own home and the cart to go and see Davy every week. The fact that Barkis is "a little near" does not affect her loyalty one bit, for in terms of their original intentions they are a good husband and wife to one another.

Mr. and Mrs. Micawber, too, despite their troubles, are a well-matched pair. They match each other in their mutual love for the pretentious and histrionic. They are equally mercurial and hysterical, and they enjoy the sharing of every fortune and misfortune. Mrs. Micawber's declarations that she never will desert Mr. Micawber are the more ludicrous because the reader knows how deeply satisfying their marriage really is. This absurdly happy marriage is emphasised by Dickens (perhaps at the cost of the Micawbers' credibility,) not just to make them the successful comic monstrosities they are, but as part of the subterranean

schematisation of a major theme, marriage.

Sophy and Traddles too, are very happily married, but unfortunately some Dickensian sanctimoniousness creeps into the comedy of their family life. It is stressed that they are suitable in mind and purpose because both have modest aims, both are self-deprecating, amiable, able to accommodate or even sacrifice themselves to others. They are not quite cardboard figures, but their well-deserved happiness is a little too patent, and patly achieved.

With the David-Agnes marriage, Dickens tries for a different plane of meaning. David's realisation that he loves Agnes, and his wish to marry her is seen as a breakthrough in his self-knowledge and maturity. He starts to give himself proper value, and ceases to see her as an abstract creature far above him. So far this is credible enough, as is Agnes's long secret devotion to David. But Agnes remains an abstract, unreal figure to the reader, and I suspect that this is in part deliberate. Agnes is supposed to be a quasi-symbol of purity and truth, and in loving her, David comes to a sort of religious salvation. She is not just a companion to him, but a semi-divine guide; through her agency, his soul is safe. A passage such as the last paragraph illustrates Dickens's strange vision of Agnes.

whose end Oh Agnes, oh my soul, so may thy face
 be by me when I close my life indeed;
 The attrib so may I, when realities are melting
 from me like the shadows which I now
 incompreh dismiss, still find thee near me,
 pointing upward!

Dickens himself gives for happiness in marriage. David is
 or

supposed to find "the one true friend and helper" that he
 has never Clapsed in my embrace, I held the source
 of every worthy aspiration I ever had; the
 centre of myself, the circle of my life,
 could believe my own, my wife; my love of whom was the above;
 founded on a rock! (p. 872)
 anything more stretches credulity.

While I admit having a 20th-century prejudice, I
 find such passages an extremely repulsive confusion of
 sexual love and religious mysticism. Dickens' purple
 language and exclamation marks hint that he himself was
 not comfortable with this theme. His confusion and hedging
 on good women are too well-known for me to expatiate on
 here, but it is certain that Agnes is an awful failure
 both as a reality and in her abstract status. Dickens is
 evidently relying on the mythology of his time, not on what
 he knows or observes. The vagueness of his physical
 portrayal of her, and the vulgar elevation of his style
 on the subject, are clear evidence of that.

It is a pity too that David's life, which hitherto
 had an almost perfect illusion of natural progress, now
 appears to take on the character of a religious pilgrimage,

whose end and goal, although he has not known it, is Agnes. The attribution of an absolute worth to one person is incomprehensible in itself. It also exceeds the criterion Dickens himself gives for happiness in marriage. David is supposed to find "the one true friend and helper" that he has never found, and a suitability of mind and purpose. We could believe in Agnes as being able to provide the above; anything more stretches credulity.

In tune with its emphasis on the cyclic events of life, the book contains a number of deaths, in particular, youthful deaths. Steerforth, Ham, Clara Copperfield and Dora all die young. Mr. Spenlow and David's father die prematurely. Only Mr. Barkis dies of old age. Such deaths cause far more disruption and violent grief than ordinary deaths. Those nearest the young dead have a terrible struggle to readjust; some never do. Frail and affectionate characters like Dora and Clara have no way of coping. Clara talks thus of her husband:

"We were very happy", said my mother.
 "Mr. Copperfield was only too good to me". "What, he spoilt you, I suppose?"
 returned Miss Betsey. "For being quite alone and dependant on myself in this tough world again, yes, I fear he did indeed", sobbed my mother. (p.25)

1. See

2. Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens. Vol. I p.174.

And Dora has a similar kind of loss when her father dies.

David is a personality who suffers greatly, first from the death of his mother, then the death of Dora, but comes through the ordeal strengthened. He suffers too for the death of Steerforth - for such promise unfulfilled, and for his own betrayed trust in his beloved friend.¹ But Mrs. Steerforth suffers the loss hardest to recover from, the death of an only child, while she is forced to live on. Mr. Pegotty still has Emily. Emily herself passes her life in grief and expiation for the two premature deaths in which she was involved.

Possibly in this concentration on early death, Dickens is subconsciously trying to exorcise the early death of his beloved Mary. She was Kate's younger sister who came to live with them after their marriage. Dickens worshipped her, and twenty five years after her death declared he felt her loss as deeply as in the months after she died. He wore her ring on his finger till his own death, and on learning 5 years after her death that his dearest wish, to be buried beside her, could not be fulfilled, he was deeply upset and shut himself up for days.² She died during the

1. See the beginning of ch.58. p.739.

2. Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens. Vol.I p.174.

simultaneous writing of Oliver Twist and Pickwick Papers, and in his grief he suspended publication of both for a month¹ - a unique action for a writer who was at all other times so punctilious and regular in his output. The intense and (to us) sentimental emotionalism of Little Nell's death is partly explained by Dickens identification of Nell with Mary. He wrote to Forster; "Dear Mary died yesterday when I think of this sad story".² In David Copperfield, thirteen years after Mary's death, Dickens approaches the subject of premature death from many angles, in a more generalising and analytic mood. Perhaps he was trying to exhaust the topic in himself and so be rid of it.

So far I have talked about the cyclic themes in David Copperfield. Such themes have some relation to the themes of Dombey and Son in which as well as the emphasis on the child-parent-relationships, the life-cycle, particularly death, plays a significant role. Dombey and Son can be said to be about the life cycle in that it is the story of life's retribution on those who attempt to control or distort natural processes. Paul is brought up to have a guaranteed

1. Una Pope Hennessy, Charles Dickens 1812-1870 p.8. Chatto & Windus 1945.

2. Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens. Vol.I. p.122.

and perfect future, but Death interferes with that. Mrs. Skewton does her damndest to reverse the natural process of age. She is rewarded by imbecility, paralysis and a horrible fear of death:

It was a tremendous sight to see this old woman in her finery leering and mincing at Death, and playing off her youthful tricks upon him as if he had been the Major" (p.555)

Mrs. Skewton has refused all her life to face that Death is natural and inevitable and something to be lived with. But she dies after all, never understanding what Paul from his earliest years tried to understand - "what the waves were always saying". To him they tried to tell of death, and more obscurely, of immortality and eternal love. When Florence leaves on the sea voyage with Walter, this symbolism becomes more explicit:

And the voices in the waves are always whispering to Florence, in their ceaseless murmuring, of love - of love, eternal and illimitable, not bounded by the confines of this world, or by the end of time, but ranging still beyond the sea, beyond the sky, to the invisible country far away! (p.828)

Mrs. Skewton, though taken down to Brighton, where Paul first heard the waves, hears nothing and dies in fear.

Birth, youth, marriage, death play their part in

Dombey and Son, as obviously they do in most novels, but the treatment is quite different from that in David Copperfield. In Dombey and Son there is concentration on one family, and a subordination of the births, death, etc. to the overriding idea of fate versus human will. In David Copperfield the life cycle itself predominates; it is observed in a great amount of variety for the bounds of one novel, and no obvious thematic conclusions are drawn.

But if there is only a tenuous similarity in the life-cycle theme, and a complete difference in method, there are still many preoccupations or centres of interest common to both books. One such preoccupation of Dickens is the emphasis on people governed by a single idea or passion. Dombey and Son abounded with them; Mr. Dombey's pride, Edith's equal but different pride, Mrs. Skewton's obsession with youth, the Major's obsession with himself. In keeping with its different style, David Copperfield's interest in such people is more general, and makes leisurely comparisons between what is good and bad in singlemindedness. Dickens' case for the destructive effect of blind or selfish singlemindedness is a strong one; he gives us Mrs. Steerforth and Mr. Wickfield as paradigm cases. Mrs. Steerforth's

obsession with her son is so strong that other people only specifically and dramatically in the character of Mrs. Clennam.

have meaning to her through him. She takes to David only because he loves Steerforth too, and she can indulge in her only topic of conversation. It is also intimated that Rosa is treated well in the house only out of his mother's sense of guilt for Steerforth, who threw a hammer at her as a child and disfigured her for life. When Steerforth betrays her, his mother's essential sense of self is wounded; it is no normal hurt. When he dies, in a sense she dies too, for her energies and interests have nothing else on which to expend themselves; her paralysis neatly symbolises this "death".¹

Mr. Wickfield's obsessiveness is similar, but with different psychological roots. He has a neurotic love for Agnes, based on the loss of his wife. He flatters himself that his one motive is her welfare. He becomes suspicious of others, measuring everyone by "one mean yardstick", looking for the motive of self-interest. In this paranoid state he falls to drinking and increasing debility. He comes to rely more and more on Uriah till he is finally trapped by him. He ends by actually endangering Agnes, the supposed object of his life. He makes this drunken analysis of himself:

1. Dickens uses the idea of symbolic paralysis again, more specifically and dramatically in the character of Mrs. Clennam.

"My natural grief for my child's mother turned to disease; my natural love for my child turned to disease. I have infected everything I touched. I have brought misery on what I dearly love, I know - you know! I thought it possible that I could truly love one creature in the world, and not love the rest; I thought it possible that I could truly mourn for one creature gone out of the world, and not have some part in the grief of all who mourned. Thus the lessons of my life have been perverted! I have preyed on my own morbid coward heart, and it has preyed on me." (p.531)

Rosa Dartle's emotional life is possessed by Steerforth. She broods increasingly on their long-dead affair, follows his every move, analyses his every thought. After Steerforth's flight she is torn by jealous rage and dreams of revenge ("I would have her whipped") (p.435) She torments herself for loving someone whom she says "has a false, corrupt heart, and is a traitor". (p.435) Even his death does not liberate her from her obsession.

As in Dombey and Son, Dickens provides a range of characters with a common characteristic. Miss Tox was in the middle of the range, at first sharing in the general self-obsession, then capable of learning. Miss Betsey, like Miss Tox, learns, and like Miss Tox she is a comic character who loses none of her funniness through change. Hatred of donkeys and men are Miss Betsey's preoccupations

over several barren years. David's arrival brings back her natural kindliness, and she reenters the world.

David's character is on the "good" side of this spectrum. He can show a single-minded sense of purpose, but it is not the dominant quality in him, and it is always subservient to some end. This single-mindedness comes out in him in times of pressure; in his absolute determination to get to Dover; his relentless pursuit of money and a career when his aunt is "ruined", or in his single-minded pursuit of Dora. Single-mindedness of this kind can be a positive virtue:

I will only add, to what I have already written of my perseverance at this time of my life, and of a patient and continuous energy which then began to be matured within me, and which I know to be the strong part of my character...., that there, on looking back, I find the source of my success..... I never could have done what I have done without the habits of punctuality, order, and diligence, without the determination to concentrate myself on one object at a time, no matter how quickly its successor should come upon its heels, which I then formed.....My meaning simply is, that whatever I have tried to do in life I have tried with all my heart to do well; that whatever I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely; that in great aims and in small, I have always been thoroughly in earnest....etc. (p.654)

Mr. Dick is a gentle parody of other obsessed

characters. He has an obsession, King Charles's Head, but its very harmlessness shows up the destructive nature of the "sane" obsessions. This is a common Dickens method, portraying an innocent and harmless personality as a comic and poignant contrast to other more worldly characters. The "failing" portrayed happens to be the same, and in demonstrating the extremes of its application - harmless and evil - Dickens isolates and defines the characteristic itself. This is the technique used with Captain Cuttle; his naive efforts to help Florence and Walter only emphasise how far removed his soul is from genuine plotting and conniving. Mr. Dick's obsession may be called madness, but its only imposition is on himself.

His friend Dr. Strong also has a harmless obsession in his Dictionary, but it does not impinge on his values or the tender love he has for his wife. Mr. Peggotty's life is wrapped up in his niece, but the total unselfishness of his love becomes clear. And right at the other end of the spectrum, an example of pure devotion, is Agnes. She has remained single-minded in her love while keeping it secret, and never oppressing David with it. She can even show genuine happiness for him when he marries Dora. Again, it's a bit much to stomach, but becomes more bearable if Dickens is setting up her kind of love as the theoretical

opposite to that of her father or Mrs. Steerforth. stark, in if full of self-pity. Dickens seems to be making a real

I have tried to show that there is more to David Copperfield than the surface narrative, and that the serious themes are explored with variety and some depth. At the same time the book contains many inconsistencies and evasions to do with these themes. Many of these are due to the fact that this was a novel with autobiographical elements, written at a significant time in Dickens's own life. The similarities in the novel to real events, and the differences, indicate that there is a vital relationship between book and life. In this relationship there seem to be many elements of wish-fulfilment and fantasy.

Dickens was only 38 when he finished this novel, married for 14 years with 4 or 5 children. His writer's reputation was high, and his personal life for some years a source of dissatisfaction. Mary had been dead for 13 years; Georgina had come in her stead and taken over the household. He had known for some years already that he had made a very big mistake in marrying Kate. These and other facts of his past life throw an interesting light on David Copperfield.

The closest parallels in the book are between the time at Murdstone and Grimby's and Dickens's own experience at

Warren's Blacking. The writing here is honest and stark, if full of self-pity. Dickens seems to be making a real attempt to evaluate this painful episode in his life, and write it out of himself, once and for all. But ultimately he evades this task. David, unlike Charles, spirits himself off to his fairy-godmother and more or less lives happily ever after. Such a flight of imagination is perfectly acceptable, but it is accompanied by a deeper hypocrisy. Dickens propagates the idea that David emerges unharmed and unchanged. He thereby refuses to analyse the experience of his own life, and its utterly profound effect on his own personality. He fantasizes how it could have happened, and how he could have come out unharmed. It makes delightful reading, but on a deeper level, it won't do.

Dickens admitted that Dora is the replica of the great love of his youth, Maria Beadnell, right down to her dog. In her story Dickens indulges in a more complicated fantasy. David consummates his love, as Dickens never did, but then in keeping with Dickens's realisation that the relationship would never have worked, it comes to an early end. Dora conveniently dies; Maria lived to meet Dickens again and completely disillusion him.

I have already mentioned the role of Mary; it is possible

1. Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph. Vol. II, pp. 679-83. Victor Gollancz, 1953.

that in the concentration on early deaths, Dickens is again reflecting the tragedy her death was to him, while parcelling the role out to many characters, and thus distancing it from himself. It is possible too, as Johnson¹ suggests, that he does a similar thing with the child-parent relationship. Micawber of course is partly his father, but David is given many surrogate parents - the Murdstones, Miss Betsey, Peggotty, the Micawbers; possibly in an attempt to evade coming to terms exactly with his own parents.

His portrayal of male-female relationships must also have been affected by his current state of mind. Kate and he were a disaster, yet he knew Maria Beadnell would not have worked. Mary was an idealized vision in his mind. With Georgina, as far as we know, he kept up a pure brother-sister relationship, perhaps akin to that of David and Agnes at first. So in his examination of marriages in the book, there is a confusion. He can only offer the asexual friendship marriage of the Stronges, or the mystical and unreal union of Agnes and David. It has become almost a platitude to note that Dickens was unable to portray a woman who was both sexually alive and believable; his only half successful attempts were both late in his career - Estella

1. Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens; His Tragedy and Triumph. Vol.II, pp.679-80. Victor Gollancz. 1953. p.48.

and Lizzie Hexham. David Copperfield may mirror his own confusion and his inability to have a completely satisfactory relationship with any of the women around him.

I say "may" because this sort of criticism of David Copperfield, while it throws some light on the relation of the book to Dickens's own life, and gives room for interesting speculation, can only go so far. The novel is definitely not Dickens's own autobiography, even in part. Nor at any stage should we assume that Dickens saw himself as David, and was, through David's character, presenting himself, whitewashed and mellowed, to the world. The novel's tone immediately becomes more complex and subtle if we acknowledge that Dickens kept a novelist's distance from his central character; we are not meant to take David entirely as he presents himself.

When he was planning the novel, Dickens wrote to Forster: "I really think I have done it ingeniously, and with a very complicated interweaving of truth and fiction".¹ Forster too makes a strongly worded point against the assumption that David and Dickens are one personality.

.... it would be the greatest mistake to imagine anything like a complete identity of the fictitious novelist with the real

1. Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens. Vol.2. p.48.

one, beyond the Hungerford scenes.... nor did the youth who then received his first harsh schooling in life come out of it as little harmed or hardened as David did. The language of the fiction reflects only faintly the narrative of the actual fact; and the character of the man it helped to form was expressed not less faintly in the impulsive impressionable youth, incapable of resisting the leading of others, and only disciplined into self-control by the later griefs of his entrance into manhood. ... The character of the hero of the novel finds indeed his right place in the story he is supposed to tell, rather by unlikeness than by likeness to Dickens, even where intentional resemblance might seem to be prominent.¹

To see the fact-fiction relationship of David's life to Dickens's own solely as an escapist fantasy is to under-value the creative complexity of the novel, and to underestimate its range. In the treatment of David, there is usually a quality of stand-off irony, a kind of loving and very gentle detachment. Possibly David is the young man Dickens could have been if his life hadn't happened to him; certainly he is an examination of the ideal young man of his time, full of false assumptions and facile idealisms. For instance, Dickens's handling of the Dora-David courtship, while at the same time a nostalgic recapitulation of all first love affairs and in particular Dickens's own, is also novel. But sometimes the two tones don't jell; they even

1. Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens. Vol.2. p.105.

a satire on the conventions about love of the age, and on the standard, to-pattern reactions of David. The caressing and subtle tone of the satire may mislead the reader into thinking the whole thing is sickeningly sentimental, but amongst the nostalgia there is a condemnation of David for his triviality, conventionality and unnecessary innocence:

All this time I had gone on loving Dora harder than ever. Her idea was my refuge in disappointment and distress, and made some amends to me, even for the loss of my friend. The more I pitied myself, or pitied others, the more I sought for consolation in the image of Dora. The greater the accumulation of deceit and trouble in the world, the brighter and purer shone the star of Dora high above the world. I don't think I had any definite idea of where Dora came from, or in what degree she was related to a higher order of beings; but I am quite sure that I should have scouted the notion of her being simply human, like any other young lady, with indignation and contempt. (p.437)

Here is the characteristic double note of David Copperfield; a humorous indulgent tone, a little sentimental, popular in appeal; together with an undertone, most thoroughly admixed, of satire, of dissent from prevailing convention. So often, the two strands blend perfectly, to make that magical blend of light-and-serious that so characterises the novel. But sometimes the two tones don't jell; they even jar.

David Copperfield is altogether a little schizophrenic. It is on the one hand a straight account of a child's growth to maturity, and on the other it is the most blatant fairy tale of all Dickens's novels. One does not have to go deeply into Dombey and Son before one realises that Florence is the princess in the castle, Carker the wicked villain, Cap'en Cuttle the good monster, and that Walter is her Whittingtonian lover who rescues her from her hard father, and so on. The same sort of elements can be discerned in several other Dickens novels, but nowhere are they so obvious as in David Copperfield: David lives happily with his pretty fairy-tale mother and the ugly but devoted servant. But along come those wicked giants, the Murdstones, and throw Davy out of his little Kingdom and subject him to all kinds of privations and misfortunes. But his fairy god-mother, disguised as an eccentric old lady, comes to his rescue. Living with her in a cottage by the sea is another eccentric but benevolent fairy, Mr. Dick. David is set on the road to prosperity and fame, but there are many obstacles, in particular a new villain, or snake, Uriah Heep. He needs his "good angel" Agnes who is to be his guiding star, but he is also led astray and deluded by his "bad angel" Steerforth. He courts a princess in a castle, is opposed by her father, but he dies. The princess isn't all she's made out to be,

so she dies, leaving the hero free to marry the real heroine, his good angel; with her he lives happily ever after. It is a lovely all-comes-right fairy story, and perhaps this is the book's most essential appeal. Its basic ingredients are the good versus the bad, suspenseful or fanciful incidents, and a happy ending. The reader's delight in the book goes back to childhood, and Dickens enhances this regression by some of the most perfect passages in literature on what it is like to be a child.

And yet, simultaneously, the book is a classic study, and a serious one, of that beloved topic of novelists - the growth to manhood. David has a hard childhood, and suffers terrible disappointment and disillusion before he reaches twenty-one. There is the orphanhood and persecutions of his childhood, but the events of his adolescence and youth affect him very deeply too. His faith in his most beloved friend is ruined, and he sees him die. His old friend Ham is dead too, and he watches his childhood love Emily battered by life. He has gone through anxiety and hardship for money, and has struggled for a career. He suffered very much at the death of his young wife. David at twenty-one feels a sense of waste and a lack of hope. I was ... (p.739) He starts to write, and he falls in love with the idea of Agnes.

The knowledge came upon me, not quickly, but little by little, and grain by grain. The desolate feeling with which I went abroad, deepened and widened hourly. At first it was a heavy sense of loss and sorrow, wherein I could distinguish little else. By imperceptible degrees, it became a hopeless consciousness of all that I had lost - love, friendship, interest; of all that had been shattered - my first trust, my first affection, the whole airy castle of my life; of all that remained - a ruined blank and waste, lying around me, unbroken, to the dark horizon.

If my grief were selfish, I did not know it to be so. I mourned for my child-wife taken from her blooming world, so young. I mourned for him who might have won the love and admiration of thousands, as he had won mine long ago. I mourned for the broken heart that had found rest in the stormy sea; and for the wondering remnants of the simple home, where I had heard the night wind blowing when I was a child.

From the accumulated sadness, into which I fell, I had at length no hope of ever issuing again. I roamed from place to place, carrying my burden with me everywhere. I felt its whole might now; and I drooped beneath it, and I said in my heart it could never be lightened. (p.739)

But of course the load is lightened. Time, and a letter from Agnes are the turning points. She is sure that: "as the endurance of my childish days had done its part to make me what I was, so greater calamities would nerve me on, to be yet better than I was ..." (p.739) He starts to write, and he falls in love with the idea of Agnes.

Kegan Paul. 1959.

there So it is thoroughly established that David has endured much and goes through a real crisis of the soul. As Q.D. Leavis points out, Dickens establishes quite subtly that not only does he have to recover from the double blow of the loss of Dora and Steerforth, he also has to come to the realisation "that the two blows are but one wound with which he has to 'strive': they're inextricably associated not only because they are the loss of first love and first friendship, but that he now faces the fact that he was misguided in both."¹ But unfortunately the rest of this spiritual crisis is confined to one chapter of the most generalised description. There is a complete absence of the felicitous detail of the rest of the book, and never do we see David explaining himself in action. That the character should act himself out, and never be merely explained was one of Dickens's few recorded convictions about novel writing;² but he fails by his own standards here. In that similar chapter in Dombey and Son,

1. F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, p.99.

2. Richard Strong quotes a letter by Dickens to a rejected novelist: ".... the people should tell [the story] and act it for themselves. My notion always is that when I have made the people play out the play, it is, as it were, their business to do it and not mine" See The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870 Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1959.

there is a conscientious if abbreviated attempt at a stage-by-stage analysis of Dombey's breakdown, but here there are only vague statements about grief, recovery and the healing power of nature. When it comes to the emotional crisis of a single character, alone, inactive, Dickens seems unwilling or is possibly emotionally unable to go into the crisis deeply. One suspects it is both; for the analysis of a lonely soul is getting too near himself - it would be a threat to Dickens's self-organisation to identify so closely with a single character, so he opts out for the scenes where he can disperse his creative energies among many characters or among complicated scenes.

Typical too, of the schizophrenic quality of this book, is the ambiguity on class. This is epitomised by David's attitudes to Steerforth and Uriah Heep. Heep is an out and out villain, and is often described in terms of devilry. David disliked him instinctively, yet occasionally suspects himself of having a class bias to Uriah. Certainly Uriah's insinuations that David disliked him because he is so "umble" always have their effect.¹ But with Steerforth, handsome and well-born, David can find no fault despite the many

1. Such passages as on p.243 "Uriah ... reminded me of the promise I had made to take tea with himself and his mother; adding with a mutter, "But I didn't expect you to ... etc.".

demonstrations of Steerforth's irresponsibility and cruelty. It takes the seduction of Emily to open his eyes. David is a bit of a snob, and Dickens seems reluctant to condemn him for it, or rather the satire is very gentle. Half the desolation of his time at Murdstone and Grimby's is that he must work with such common companions. Restored to his station, and a respectable schoolboy at Dr. Strong's, David never tells of the past, and is positively afraid he will be found out:

My mind ran upon what they would think, if they knew of my familiar acquaintance with the King's Bench Prison? Was there anything about me which would reveal my proceedings in connection with the Micawber family - all those pawnings and sellings and suppers - in spite of myself? Suppose some of the boys had seen me coming through Canterbury, wayworn and ragged, and should find me out. What would they say, who made so light of money, if they could know how I had scraped my halfpence together for the purchase of my daily saveloy and beer, or my slices of pudding? All this ran in my head so much, on that first day at Dr. Strong's that I felt distrustful of my slightest look and gesture; shrunk within myself whensoever I was approached by one of my new schoolfellows; and hurried off, the minute school was over, afraid of committing myself in response to any friendly notice or advance. (p.221)

Yet pretty obviously, Dickens means us to condemn Steerforth himself for his attitude to class. Says Miss Dartle of the lower classes:

"Are they really animals and clods and beings of another order? I want to know so much." "Why, there's a pretty wide separation between them and us", said Steerforth, with indifference. "They are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. Their delicacy is not to be shocked, or hurt easily. They are wonderfully virtuous, I dare say . . . But they have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded". (p.278)

The same kind of callous snobbery comes out when Steerforth remarks that Ham "is a rather chuckle-headed fellow for the girl". (p.299) David is shocked, but thinks no more of it. The same assumption of superiority, the arrogance on which this snobbery is based, is emphasised in the interview between Mrs. Steerforth and Mr. Peggotty. Mrs. Steerforth:

"What compensation can you make to me for opening such a pit between me and my son? What is your love to mine? What is your separation to ours?" (pp.433-4)

Dickens must have planned the deaths of Steerforth and Ham very carefully. It is a sort of compromise on the class questions raised in the book. The upper and lower classes could not marry, or be happy together. Yet Emily's two lovers, one of high class, one of low, die together. And they are united by a bond of brotherly love -

Ham had set out to save Steerforth's life. It is a colourful dramatisation of the class problem, but contains no realistic ideas or solutions. Very late in his career, in his second last book, Dickens faces the problem, and has Eugene Wrayburn marry Lizzie, for principle and for love. that it has the most complicated structure

I think it should be clear by now that David Copperfield was no delightful holiday for Dickens. But the book is quite undogmatic, and has plenty of ambiguities and loose ends. Perhaps this is part of its unusual charm. Had Dickens tried to tighten it up, and schematise what is basically meant as an autobiography, (i.e. of his character, David), it might have lost its undoubted freshness and naturalness. David Copperfield's freshness and naturalness survive despite its absolute seriousness. It is that very combination that makes the novel so exceptional and so beloved by its admirers. symbolism in Dickens before, and at least in Dombey and Son the great symbols of sea, river and railway were systematically woven into the texture of the book. It is not enough to acknowledge the more insistent symbolism of Bleak House and give it the same kind of naturalistic explanation, only in more detail, as I have given the other books. I think it must be recognized that Bleak House represents an imaginative leap for Dickens.

CHAPTER 3BLEAK HOUSE

There is much more meat for the eager critic in Bleak House in that it has the most complicated structure of all Dickens's novels and is replete with social significance, symbolism and so on. Much modern criticism has concentrated on pointing out the great central symbols, such as the Fog, Miss Flite's birds and Krook's shop; in fact this has been so well and thoroughly done that there is little left to say on the subject. But this does not mean that there is nothing left to say at all, for I think the novel still escapes fully intelligent criticism if the reader confines himself to picking out the central symbols and pinning down their meaning or relevance. For one, there has been plenty of symbolism in Dickens before, and at least in Dombey and Son the great symbols of sea, river and railway were systematically woven into the texture of the book. It is not enough to acknowledge the more insistent symbolism of Bleak House and give it the same kind of naturalistic explanation, only in more detail, as I have given the other books. I think it must be recognized that Bleak House represents an imaginative leap for Dickens;

there is an attempt at a different sort of novel from the two I have previously discussed, while at the same time Bleak House carries through and develops many of the preoccupations that are recognizably Dickensian.

The kind of imaginative leap I am thinking of I can only describe as an experiment in the consistent use of the allegoric mode. I am not claiming that the allegoric mode is new to Dickens, but it has been only sporadically used, though increasingly in Dombey and Son and David Copperfield. Here the consistency of its use has the effect of transforming it into a new form. Every part of this novel has a meaning beyond its function in the plot; places, institutions, people, scenes of action have not only their intricate place in the story line, but contribute to the total meaning. It is not merely that the plot eventually points to a moral significance or message - that would apply to most of the earlier novels - but that the plot is a vehicle for a vast interplay of symbolic roles and actions. These symbolic roles and actions build towards a vision of Dickens's own society; a vision substantial and solid enough to have an entity equal to the narrative meaning, and even to transcend it. Almost every part of the novel is subordinate to explicating this vision, so that

it is insufficient just to say that the book is symbolically significant. Its allegorical meaning is the book, and plot, characters, scenes, even specific symbols are only the component parts of the overall meaning.

I think a visionary view of the world, symbolically expressed, is what Dickens is striving for in Bleak House; it is his next step, his imaginative leap forward as a novelist. If he had carried out the idea with total success, it could indeed have been an unflawed work of genius.

Instead, to my mind, it is a very flawed and confused book, remarkable as it is. Later in this chapter I will try to explain in some detail what I mean by the allegoric mode and say what I think are its successes and failures. But first I want to trace the major themes of the novel and ask in what ways Bleak House is a continuation of the previous two novels.

Two major ideas, both pervasive in Dombey and Son and David Copperfield, also dominate Bleak House. One is Dickens's idea that people are connected to each other by strong and unbreakable ties, even when they do not know it and the ties are invisible. Therefore to act as if human brotherhood and human connection did not exist brings in Fate as a retributive agent. Fate points out connections

Bleak House is one vast net-work of ties - of people

that are ignored or unknown, and those who have striven to set up rigid barriers of class and caste are shown not only the immorality of the effort but its sheer impossibility. Already expressed in the above is Dickens's second idea, of a universe peopled by the obsessed or the selfish who attempt to push its natural laws out of shape, causing dehumanisation of themselves and destruction to others. But this time Dickens takes up fully what he only hinted at in Dombey and Son and evaded in David Copperfield - an anatomy of people in society. He does not stop at confrontations between the individual and his immediate environment, but attempts a full scale study of the social framework within which the individual moves. Thus his judgements take on a new dimension; really for the first time he takes into full account the influence of the social framework on people, and their reactions to its limitations.

To me, the dominant thing about Bleak House is its demonstration of the inter-relatedness and interdependence of the human world. Dickens demonstrates this point in an astonishing variety of ways, and with a range and imaginativeness unique to Bleak House. In no other novel is the connection of one person to another given such fully allegorical significance.

Bleak House is one vast net-work of ties - of people

connected through blood, violence, intrigue, business, the past, coincidence and so on. Let me first take the connection most dramatically and successfully realised, that between Jo and Lady Dedlock. Jo is at the rock-bottom of Victorian society. He is orphaned, illiterate, uncared for, totally uneducated, and devoid of civilising notions. Dickens describes the beginning of one of Jo's days:

Society makes it absolutely clear to Jo that it does not want him. Jo and the lower animals get on in the unintelligible mess as they can. It is market day. The blinded oxen, over-goaded, established over-driven, never guided, run into wrong places and are beaten out, and plunge humanity. red-eyed and foaming at stone walls, and for its hurt often sorely hurt the innocent, and often hurt themselves. Very like Jo and his order; very, very like! A sheep dog is emotionally also there - a well-trained and intelligent points out sheep dog. He and Jo listen to the music with probably much the same amount of animal satisfaction; likewise as to awakened Dicken association, aspiration or regret, melancholy or joyful references to things beyond the senses, they are probably upon a par. But otherwise how far above the human listener is the brute!" (B.H.I. pp.234-5)¹

Jo is disowned by his society; no one is responsible

1. I have had to use 2 editions of Bleak House.

(1) Signet Classics 1964

(2) McMillan 1933

For the sake of convenience I shall use the abbreviation 'B.H.I' when referring to the Signet edition, and 'B.H.2' where referring to the McMillan edition.

for him, no one is willing to assume responsibility. He lives on the intermittent compassion of a few people, but there is no place for him anywhere. Even the hospitals shrink from him when he is sick. As Alan Woodcourt reflects, it is a strange idea "that in the heart of a civilised world this creature in human form should be more difficult to dispose of than an unowned dog". (B.H.I p.232) Society makes it absolutely clear to Jo that it does not want him and refuses to acknowledge his existence. Yet Jo establishes his presence and asserts his belonging to humanity. He has his revenge, albeit innocently, on Society for its ignorance of him. He is tied, physically, mentally, emotionally to every other being, as Dickens methodically points out, and they are tied to him.

Dickens asks, rather rhetorically;

What connection can there be between the place in Lincolnshire the house in town the Mercury in Powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had the distant ray of light about him when he swept the churchyard step? What connection can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world who from opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless been very curiously brought together! (B.H.I. p.232)

At the other side of this great gulf is Lady Dedlock,

beautiful and admired, and at the top of the social tree. She has a secret, and this secret forces her to seek out Jo, the only person who knew her ex-lover well before his death. Nemo is the link between them. Seemingly Jo and Nemo were fit for each other, both deadly poor, dirty and degraded, Nemo nameless Jo with no second name. Lady Dedlock shrinks from Jo and commands him not to come near her, but all the same she is dependant on him for knowledge of Hawdon, and must henceforth acknowledge that such a thing as Jo loved Hawdon too. From the time of that interview the lives of these two are bound together. Jo is frightened into telling the story of how he obtained a golden guinea, and later identifies Hortense's clothing while pinning the face and figure on Lady Dedlock. Mr. Tulkinghorn's suspicions are confirmed and the destruction of Lady Dedlock begins. Lady Dedlock shrank from Jo, while her daughter Esther did not; in trying to help Jo she catches his smallpox. Esther's illness causes her mother great anguish and precipitates her admission of motherhood. It all leads to the climactic scene of the novel, in which Lady Dedlock, penniless, dirty, sick and hopeless dies in front of the graveyard where Hawdon is buried. She has been reduced to Jo's condition and even then Dickens cannot let well alone and ends up by relating them through birth. The relationship of Jo and Lady think lovingly and repentantly of one person - Esther. Jo

has asked to be buried next to Esther's father, Lady Dedlock asks the same. Dickens seems to say that both have this right equally, and implies that Lady Dedlock, so much chastened by suffering, would now acknowledge what she has in common with Jo.

Jo's role in relation to Lady Dedlock is similar to that of Alice to Edith in Dombey and Son. Edith is Alice's counterpart, though at another social level; their parallel lives highlight the inevitable similarities, the repeating patterns in human action:

Were this miserable mother and this miserable daughter only the reduction to this lowest grade of certain social vices sometimes prevailing higher up? In this round circle of many circles within circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that our journey's end is but our starting place? Allowing for great differences of stuff and texture, was the pattern of this woof repeated among gentle blood at all.? (B.H.I. pp.522-3)

But the technique in Dickens's parallel is very crude. Edith and Alice have the same looks, age, temperament, the same kind of mother. Only social class separates them, and even then Dickens cannot let well alone and ends up by relating them through birth. The relationship of Jo and Lady comes the aristocracy, augustly represented by the Dedlocks.

Dedlock is a great refinement on this. They are totally dissimilar in every respect; age, sex, wealth etc. etc, yet they come to share essentially the same experiences. The "insuperable" differences of class are nothing in the face of the communality of poverty, suffering and death.

Jo may be quite generally thought non-human and therefore goes unacknowledged, yet he comes into contact with most of the people in Bleak House, and sometimes his influence is considerable. The novel is constructed so as to be a microcosm of society, with the various classes represented. There is Jo, Nemo and Guster at the bottom, the society around Cook's Court and Krook himself on the lower rung; just above them are the law clerks Weevle and Guppy, the small dealers and businessmen (Mr. Snagsby, the Smallweeds), and the soldiering class as represented by Mr. George and his friends. The rungs of the legal profession are enumerated; from Mr. Guppy to Mr. Vholes, to the middle-class respectability of Mr. Kenge, to the final rusty eminence of Mr. Tulkinghorn. On the way up the social scale are modest property holders (Mr. Jarndyce and Mr. Boythorn), and the new industrialists like the Ironmaster. The professional classes are represented by Mr. Bayham Badger, the lawyers and Alan Woodcourt. Finally comes the aristocracy, augustly represented by the Dedlocks.

Dickens is almost obsessive in trying to make patent the comprehensive nature of Jo's relationship to the rest of society; he makes sure that Jo comes into contact with every class. Guster, his almost equal takes pity on him and gives him food, Guppy uses him for information, and the kindly Mr. Snagsby gives him half-crowns. The brickmakers' wives are kind to him, and he returns their kindness; (again to emphasise the interlocking pattern, it is also to the brickmakers' wives that Lady Dedlock turns for help in her flight). Jo is vital to Mr. Tulkinghorn's detective work, and therefore Bucket keeps an eye on him. He is hounded out of Bleak House by Mr. Bucket with the help of Mr. Skimpole. Most of the people around Bleak House have dealings with Jo. Esther, in pitying him and caring for him, catches his illness, and so the small point is made that innocents other than Jo suffer because of Society's neglect of him. Mr. Jarndyce and Alan Woodcourt are brought in to help Jo, and he dies at George's Shooting Gallery.

Thus Jo, of no significance and every significance, dies. He dies of a society that has no place for him, and decrees that the only place he can go is out of this world. There is no ambiguity in Dickens's angry indictment;

he echoes the desperate cry of Richard and Gridley that in there must be individual responsibility:

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, right reverends and wrong reverends of every order. Dead, men and women form with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (B.H.I. p.654)

with fine sarcasm by Dickens:

These "coincidences" of contact, only some of which I have sketched above, all have the purpose of emphasising Dickens's conception of the limitless connection and interdependence of human beings. Woodcourt and Jarndyce, when visiting the dying boy, "both think much of how strangely fate had entangled this rough outcast in the web of very different lives". (B.H.I. p.652) But there is more to the theme than that; Dickens also hints broadly at the ambivalent nature of power, and the reversibility of the social scale in terms of influence. The relationship of Jo and Lady Dedlock are at the centre of this theme, but it is also intensified and reinforced by other strands in the plot. For instance a variation is played on the Lady Dedlock - Jo relationship in the story of Lady Dedlock and her two maid-servants. In this story, the emphasis lies not so much in the demonstration that the lower orders have power over their masters and mistresses - that kind of

connection was more dramatically realised with Jo - but in showing the complicatedness and unpredictability of any human relationships, whether voluntarily set up or no. In Lady Dedlock's closed world, she wants her servants to be useable things, not people with whom she has any sort of relationship. The unreality of this attitude is ridiculed with fine sarcasm by Dickens:

.... there is a remarkable circumstance to be noted in everything associated with my Lady Dedlock as one of a class - as one of the leaders and representatives of her little world. She supposes herself to be an inscrutable Being, far out of the reach and ken of ordinary mortals - seeing herself in her glass, where indeed she looks so. Yet every dim little star revolving about her, from her maid to the manager of the Italian Opera, knows her weaknesses, prejudices, follies, haughtinesses and caprices and lives upon as accurate a calculation and as nice a measure of her moral nature as her dressmaker takes of her physical proportions. There are deferential people in a dozen callings whom my Lady Dedlock suspects of nothing but prostration before her, who can tell you how to manage her as if she were a baby, who do nothing but nurse her all their lives, who humbly affecting to follow with profound subservience, lead her and her whole troop after them, who in hooking one, hook all and bear them off.....
(B.H.I. p.27-28)

This passage occurs early in the book, and sounds the theme which is given a particular context as the story of

Hortense and Rosa unfolds. To Lady Dedlock, Hortense is no more than a servant-thing, whose emotions and jealousies are not to be taken into account. She does not consider consequences, either to herself or to Hortense, when she rejects one maid in favour of the other. But to Hortense, who loves and then hates with ferocious intensity, the class dictates against personal relationships have no meaning. Her revenge on her mistress for treating her as an object is to plot a very person-to-person revenge.

Lady Dedlock's treatment of Rosa is very different. Before Rosa comes to Chesney Wold, Lady Dedlock maintains her front of fashionable languor and coolness with an absolute consistency. Her only point of vulnerability is hinted at in the second chapter with a delicacy of touch that does visit Dickens quite often, and that he is given little credit for:

My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at a Keeper's lodge, and seeing the light of a fire upon the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped up man coming through the gate, has been quite out of temper. My Lady Dedlock has been "bored to death" (B.H.I. p.24)

Rosa appears; she is about the same age as the

supposedly dead Esther, and beautiful and fresh. Lady Dedlock behaves to her as to no one else. She is tender to her and solicitous of her welfare. When Rosa falls in love, Lady Dedlock, affecting boredom with the whole business, sends her away to protect her from the coming scandal. But her public display of indifference does not deceive Mr. Tulkinghorn who decides that their agreement has been broken - she was to have behaved as if nothing had happened. Her act of humanity is to Tulkinghorn an act of inconsistency, and cannot be tolerated. He says:

"As to sparing the girl, of what importance or value is she? Spare! Lady Dedlock, here is a family name compromised. One might have supposed that the course was straight on - over everything, neither to the right nor to the left, regardless of all considerations in the way, sparing nothing, treading everything under foot"

She has been looking at the table. She lifts up her eyes and looks at him. There is a stern expression on her face and a part of her lower lip is compressed under her teeth. "This woman understands me", Mr. Tulkinghorn thinks as she lets her glance fall. "She cannot be spared. Why should she spare others?" (B.H.I. p.665)

In her treatment of Rosa, so different from her treatment of Hortense, the reader sees the humanisation of Lady Dedlock, a return to the qualities she must have once had as the loving and reckless mistress of Hawdon. In

protecting Rosa she acts almost in reparation for her unknowing neglect of her own child, and for her past inhumanity to others. She spares Rosa despite the fact that she cannot spare herself. That act gives her flight and death an added dignity. By an act of love she has freed herself from the rigid class customs that bound her for years, and can now proclaim her bond to Hawdon. The episode illustrates the deliberate ambiguity of much of Bleak House. Lady Dedlock's desire to help Rosa is instrumental in her downfall, but in another sense it is her spiritual salvation, for it marks her return to a human world of moral judgement and compassion.

The plotting of Bleak House is consistently purposeful; behind the elaborate detective-story facade, the plot also serves as a thematic instrument, pointing to the symbolic interconnections between people and the subtleties of their influence on each other. In this sense the plot is highly schematised, but this intense schematisation is even more apparent in the imagery. It is in the methodical pervasiveness of its imagery that Bleak House makes a definite departure from the previous novels. In both Dombey and Son and David Copperfield imagery and symbol can be separated from plot and character - they cannot be said to be essential to the meaning of the book, whereas in

Bleak House there is a definite symbolic structure that is so integrated with the other elements as to be inseparable from them. Symbol and plot are symbiotic; they do not exist without each other.

This fusion of plot and symbol is partly what I mean by Dickens's new allegoric mode. But if one claims that the novel employs allegory as a mode, i.e. in the dictionary definition, that it employs a "narrative describing one subject under guise of another",¹ one must ask, how does this operate, what methods does Dickens use to make the allegoric mode function? Part of the answer is in what I have described above - the use of the plot as a vehicle to convey further meanings. But also it is in the special and vigorous ways that Dickens makes use of existing conventions, in particular melodrama and irony, in order to transcend these conventions and give them his own meanings.

Let me first take melodrama. Bleak House is full of it, and taken at face value, it makes sections of the novel quite unappetising. But to take it at face value is to misunderstand Dickens completely. For instance, the story of Lady Dedlock abounds with melodramatic conventions, particularly those of the stage. There is the prophecy of the

1. Pocket Oxford Dictionary.

ghost's walk, and of the light falling on my Lady's picture at Chesney Wold; there is the discovered child and the illicit lover. There are stagey scenes, as when Lady Dedlock sallies forth into the grimy streets disguised as her own maid, but her white hand, bejewelled, gives her away. And she dies in the most pathetic and popular manner, broken-hearted by the grave of her lover. It would all seem to be Dickens the entertainer giving his public what they want - melodrama laid on thick. But the point is that in the most important aspects of the tale Dickens uses these conventions to underline his own allegoric meanings.

We misinterpret Dickens if we think that he only meant us to shed a tear or two at the pathos of Lady Dedlock's death. He meant us to do that, but he also wanted us to understand the fuller significance of that event from first to last. To escape detection Lady Dedlock exchanges clothes with the brickmaker's wife Jenny. Jo too has turned to her for help, and it is the first step in Lady Dedlock's descent to Jo's condition. The change of dress also symbolises her new recognition of her basic equality with these unfortunate women; she is more than ready to take on Jenny's clothes, impregnated as they are with poverty and suffering; they - her mothers or Jenny's. This same talent for compassion

are the badge of her new knowledge. In her letter she stresses that Jenny helped her for Esther's sake, and says "You remember the dead child". (B.H.2. p.749) Implicit in this is human sympathy, acknowledgement of equality in suffering. The next person she turns to for help is Guster, who has once in an outburst of simple compassion helped someone equally unfortunate, Jo. Says Guster..... "she was faint, and lame and miserable and so wretched! that if you had seen her Mr. Snagsby, you'd have given her half a crown, I know!" (B.H.2 p.750) And later the girl tells the story of Lady Dedlock's departure "she said she had nothing to give me, and I said I was poor myself and consequently wanted nothing. And so she said God bless you! and went". (B.H.2 p.751) This scene echoes one much earlier in the novel, of Hawdon saying to Jo "I am as poor as you today, Jo". Lady Dedlock too, near her death, can feel with and for Guster.

When Esther finds her mother dead, till the last second she mistakes her for Jenny. There is more intended here than the melodramatic effect of mistaken identity. Esther's mistake is symbolic of her special kind of purity; her outburst of compassion for the dead mother of the dead child shows her ability to comprehend all suffering equally - her mothers or Jenny's. This same talent for compassion

caused her to take in Jo - a vital link in the chain of events that bring Jo and her mother to a common graveyard. We know that Lady Dedlock who once at the same spot in a passion of repulsion implored Jo to keep away from her, now lies there willingly with him. Even the fortuitous presence of Alan Woodcourt, seemingly a romantic interpolation, can be interpreted as having a broader meaning. He was present at her father's death, now he is present to support her at her mother's. Thus he has eventually more intimate knowledge of her, more claim to her than anyone else. Perhaps this last point is taking it all a bit far, but the general idea remains. This kind of extended reference and symbolic overtone make the scene and everyone in it take on an allegorical character. The allegory exists as much, no, more, as that which also undeniably exists - a scene based on the purest melodramatic conventions. But the melodrama, in this scene at least, becomes part of a new allegoric mode, and thus the scene rises above its own banal conventions. *its appointed distances*". (P.H.J. p.102)

Another way in which the allegoric mode operates is through the common convention of irony. Of course Dickens has always used irony liberally, but here it is used so intensively that the ironic tone becomes a dominant one.

The ironic device is used with such variety and intricacy that it becomes itself a weapon for Dickens's personal vision of the Bleak House world. To be a little more precise, it is through the constant use of irony that Dickens sounds one major theme - that conventional situations can be reversed, supposedly meaningful things are meaningless, while supposedly mad pronouncements are sane. Thus the mad Miss Flite can name her new birds Youth, Hope and Beauty after the Wards in Jarndyce, and these names turn out to have been an ironic prophecy. Or the irony can seep slowly through the plot, as when Jo, rejected as a useless witness by the Coroner's Court, proves himself of great use in giving exact evidence. There are too, many passages of more explicit and conventional ironic comment, mainly directed at the Dedlockian aristocracy. Some of it is among Dickens's finest ironic rhetoric, as is typified by the following sentence: "The fashionable world - tremendous orb, nearly five miles round - is in full swing, and the solar system works respectfully at its appointed distances".¹ (B.H.I p.102)

The irony can have a heavily moralistic message, as when Dickens comments on Jo sitting on the doorstep of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, realise the irony of this little passage much later in the

or it can be light and implied as when Richard gaily double remarks at his first meeting with his cousin Ada, as they try to find their way out of the Chancery district, "We are never to get out of Chancery!" Indeed they never do, and that comment, so lightly made, sets up ironic echoes that last till Richard's death. This kind of ironic echo, a pervasive tone, that helps to gather in the threads of the book and bind them together, is most extensively used. The following example is so subtly employed that it must escape the reader at first reading; it comes early in the book before the importance of Jo is established, and before Mr. Tulkinghorn has come into contact with him.

[Mr. Tulkinghorn] Keeps no staff; only one middle-aged man, usually a little out at elbows, who sits in a high pew in the hall, and is rarely overburdened with business. Mr. Tulkinghorn is not in a common way. He wants no clerks. He is a great reservoir of confidences, not to be tapped..... The middle-aged man in the Pew, knows scarcely more of the affairs of the peerage, than any crossing-sweeper in Holborn." (B.H.2 p.123)

Of course one crossing sweeper in Holborn, Jo knows far more than Tulkinghorn's clerk, and we only come to realise the irony of this little passage much later in the letter writer), he trusts to hear no more about a subject so far removed from my lady's station". B.H.2 pp.179-80.

book, if at all.¹ It is also an example of Dickens's double use of the ironic device. The first is the conventional use of irony; a character doing and saying something the meaning of which he is unaware. The second involves a situation which the reader, as well as the characters, can take as perfectly straightforward at one level, but is at another level ironic. Here the irony is for the reader to pick up, if he chooses. The above quotation is an example of this second kind of irony, as is Esther's mistaking her mother for Jenny; it is at once a straightforward factual mistake, and a piece of tragic irony. The same kind of dichotomy exists in Miss Flite's pronouncements; they are at one and the same time mad, and ironic prophecies.

Thus both irony and melodrama, just two literary conventions that Dickens makes use of, substantiate the allegoric and visionary aspects of the novel. They are not totally subservient to the allegory - at times they are disturbingly autonomous - but in general, their use, as well as the use of naturalistic and non-naturalistic symbols,

1. A similar example occurs after Tulkinghorn has recounted Nemo's death to Lady Dedlock. Sir Leicester protests at such a sordid tale, "saying that as it is quite clear that no association in my lady's mind can possibly be traceable to this poor wretch (unless he was a begging-letter writer), he trusts to hear no more about a subject so far removed from my lady's station". B.H.I pp.179-80.

indicates that Dickens's intentions are spread over more than one level of meaning. But the process is very difficult to isolate or explain. For instance, the irony is often contained in the plot, which carries out the ironic purposes. But the full meaning of that irony hinges in turn on the book's allegorical nature.

The use of symbolism and imagery is also difficult to isolate or define, so intermeshed is it with plot, so closely related to the (then) more conventional devices of melodrama or irony. Nevertheless, one cannot talk about Bleak House without attempting some discussion of its imagery. I want to concentrate on what I call the structural images of the novel; i.e. those that are so interwoven with the plot that they are inseparable from the structure. The novel as a whole relies on them; they are an essential part of the machinery. The great symbols of the Fog, or Miss Flite's birds or even Krook and his rag-and-bottle shop do not qualify here; they are only the more outstanding specific symbols of the more general language of imagery. In this general language of imagery, I pick out three important strands: the imagery of the closed circle, the imagery of contagion, and the imagery of decay. They are of course closely interwoven. Dickens concept of this imagery can be very crudely summarised like this: England

is a land where the various classes, in particular the upper classes, attempt to create their own closed worlds, eternally circling themselves, letting no other influences in. But this attempt is morally reprehensible and physically impossible. The closed circle is invaded and becomes contaminated, whether through the physical contagion of disease, or the personal contagion of other people who have passions, hatreds and claims. The closed circles, once contaminated, are in disorder; they are forced into contact with the larger world, but the result is confusion, corruption and eventual decay. As Hillis Miller says,¹ in a sense the whole book is an explanation of how the world came to be the decaying, corrupt, meaningless place depicted in the first chapter. In that famous first-page description, everything has been reduced to mud and slime; there is "As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaur, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill". This image of a Megalosaur is a very meaningful one - it suggests a world that has returned to that first fantastic primeval state, reasonless and disordered. In one sense the book

1. J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels. p.169. Harvard U.P. 1958.

chronicles how this comes about.

As the book opens we are given two central images of establishment and order; the Court of Chancery, and the aristocracy as represented by Chesney Wold. There are many parallels drawn between them. Both are self-contained tradition-bound worlds, insensitive to the needs of the real world around them, futile in their operations, self-perpetuating, privileged, headed for disaster or dissolution. Both are dead worlds because of their lack of contact with anything but themselves. Both Chesney Wold and Chancery are symbolic of the decaying institutions of England whose ability to function properly has been atrophied. The similarities between these two locales in the novel is often emphasised and reiterated. Here is the key passage that states the theme.

It is but a glimpse of the world of fashion that we want this same miry afternoon. It is not so unlike the Court of Chancery but that we may pass from one scene to the other, as the crow flies. Both the world of fashion and the Court of Chancery are things of precedent and usage, over-sleeping Rip Van Winkles who have played at strange games through a deal of thundery weather; sleeping beauties, whom the knight will wake one day, when all the stopped spits in the kitchen shall begin to turn prodigiously! It is not a large world. Relatively even to this world of ours, which has its limits too (as your Highness shall find when you have made the tour of it, and come to

the brink of the void beyond), it is a very little speck. There is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place. But the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is somewhat unhealthy for want of air." (B.H.2 p.7)

Here is the imagery of dead circles, closed worlds. Both worlds are doomed to decay, but in different ways. The decay of Chesney Wold is passive; and its ruin lies in its deafness to change - to the other "worlds", which are really parts of the one and only real world. Chancery however is in active decay; Chesney Wold only deadens and stifles the people within its circle, till it becomes contaminated from without. Chancery, while equally self-engrossed, has legal power over everyone forced to apply to it, so that its corruption and decay spread, contaminating those who come into contact with it.

This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintance..... (B.H.2 p.3)

Chesney Wold however is merely static, and Dickens is not quite so savage in his satire of it. In the physical descriptions of Chesney Wold there is a rather elegaic quality; Dickens almost seems to be having a love affair with the physical beauty of the place; its "dignified repose" and impressive traditions. But the images of beauty are never warm ones - almost invariably the great house is empty and cold, and the rain falls around it just as the fog surrounds the Court of Chancery in Town. When the brilliant and distinguished circle comes, it is only for a little while; there is only artificial and temporary life, until the place is again shut up and left to gloom and rain. Even the life and brilliance are illusory, as the company consists of decrepit parasites on the ageing Sir Leicester. Lady Dedlock's disgrace and death only precipitate the inevitable. It is Mrs. Rouncewell herself, symbolic of all the good things about the feudal set-up, who announces its end. "The great old Dedlock family is breaking up", (B.H.2 p.732) she says sadly. The reader is made to realise that the beauty of Chesney Wold is an empty beauty, and its age-old stillness is no longer meaningful. At the beginning of their first interview the Ironmaster says to Sir Leicester:

"In these busy times, when so many great undertakings are in progress, people like

myself have so many workmen, in so many places, that we are always on the flight."

Sir Leicester is content enough that the ironmaster should feel that there is no hurry there; there in that ancient house, rooted in that quiet park, where the ivy and moss have had time to mature, and the gnarled and warted elms, and the umbrageous oaks, stand deep in the ferns and leaves of a hundred years, and where the sun dial on the terrace has dumbly recorded for centuries that time which was so much the property of every Dedlock - while he lasted - as the house and lands. Sir Leicester sits down in an easy chair, opposing his repose and that of Chesney Wold to the restless flights of ironmasters. (B.H.2 p.366)

With that sense of balance or fairness that Cockshut¹ praises as the outstanding quality of Bleak House, Dickens concedes that many of the traditions of the feudal system are still fine ones; he recognizes the sense of honour and uprightness of men like Sir Leicester, their personal kindness and sense of duty to dependants and servants. At the same time his judgement on the fashionable world is implacable. It must go. His satiric didacticism on the subject is repeatedly couched in the imagery of a circling world. the outside world attack it.

1. A.O.J. Cockshut, The Imagination of Charles Dickens, pp.129-30. Methuen, 1965.

.....There is perhaps more Dandyism at Chesney Wold than the brilliant and distinguished circle will find good for itself in the long run. For it is, even with the stillest and politest circles, as with the circle the necromancer draws around him - very strange appearances may be seen in active motion outside. With this difference; that being realities and not phantoms, there is the greater danger of their breaking in," (B.H.2 p.149)

"Strange appearances.....breaking in" is a strong hint of the more specific infection and pollution imagery to come. It is one of Dickens's great feats to imaginatively connect the vastly different spheres with the book by such imagery. The still, contained circle is broken into not only by the infection of germs, but by the clamouring of other classes, whether it is the Ironmaster, destined to supersede the Dedlocks of this world, or the Guppys and Smallweeds, priers into great secrets, or Jo himself. The polite circle is first broken when Lady Dedlock reacts strangely to an obscure law-writer's hand. She takes the first risk in years in seeking out Jo. From then on, the circling world of fashion keeps on circling, but invisible infections from the outside world attack it.

Bleak House is made into a direct contrast to Chesney Wold. It is non-stately, irregular, human, and above all,

exposed, not within a circle. Mr. Jarndyce says, "It is exposed..... Bleak House has an exposed sound". (B.H.2 p.149) This comment becomes more meaningful when he goes on to relate the former history of the house. It once belonged to Tom Jarndyce, who let it become a decaying ruin because of the Chancery Suit, just as Tom-All-Alone's still rots in Chancery. John Jarndyce defiantly restores it to cheerfulness and good purpose. It is a symbolic affirmation of individual good; within his strictly personal sphere Jarndyce has tried to expunge the effects of Chancery, and create a circle of light and warmth.

In trying to create his personal sphere of good, in making Bleak House a refuge and shelter for those less fortunate who come within his ken, Jarndyce escapes contamination. Richard cannot believe it possible. He says to Esther;

"But [the Suit] taints everybody. You know it taints everybody. You have heard him say so fifty times. Then why should he escape?"

"Because, said I, "his is an uncommon character, and he has resolutely kept himself outside the circle¹

1. Underlining mine. B.H.2 p.488.

It is clear however that the effectiveness of a Bleak House is limited. John Jarndyce cannot save Richard, or affect the suit; his donations to Miss Flite's welfare alleviate her condition but cannot change it. He can only be effective on the level of the personal happiness of those around him. Thus his surprise for Esther in creating a miniature Bleak House for her and Woodcourt is not just a piece of coy plotting and cloying sentimentality - it has a symbolic value. In giving Esther another Bleak House, Jarndyce not only gives everything of himself to his beloved, he also gives her a legacy; he hands on to her an emblem of the individual will to good, the willingness and ability to make small oases in the general desert. Woodcourt and Esther carry on, on a smaller scale, what Jarndyce has been trying to do. The symbolic intention in having two Bleak Houses is, I think, undeniable but one can quibble at Dickens's method. He seems to be trying to weave his own larger meanings into Esther's simplistic narrative, but the two Dickens personalities sit most uncomfortably with each other; the sentimental and popular wins by a large margin - the synthesis just doesn't come off.

Bleak House is exposed, open to influence, and open to help others. It is significant that the sick Jo is taken

in at Bleak House, and this, indirectly, makes one more break into the still circle at Chesney Wold. Esther has not tried to take refuge in an enclosed world; and she and Charley and her mother suffer greatly in consequence. But there is no escape; and it is the effective people in the book - Woodcourt, Esther Charley etc. - who do not try to escape. For those who attempt to keep their world closed against the larger life, there is only temporary safety. That the innocent Esther is infected by small-pox is one way of saying that no one, innocent or guilty, can escape the general infection. Infection has become institutionalised, so to speak; if social institutions have become corrupt and obsolete, they will rot and die and so affect the entire body politic. Tom-All-Alone's is the result of an indefensible legal and political system, and it makes its presence felt throughout that system.

.....[Tom-All-Alone's] has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There's not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propogates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house and his grace shall not be able to say nay to the infamous alliance. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives,

and who be not an obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution through every order of society up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. Verily what with tainting, plundering and spoiling, Tom has his revenge. (B.H.I pp. 632-3)

Such is the fate of passive and parasite institutions like Chesney Wold. Even more apocalyptic is the prophesied end of a more actively corrupting and corrupted institution like Chancery:

The Lord Chancellor of that Court, true to his title in his last act, has died the death of all Lord Chancellors in all courts, and of all authorities in all places under all names soever, where false pretences are made, and where injustice is done. Call the death by any name your Highness will attribute it to whom you will, or say it might have been prevented how you will, it is the same death eternally - inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself, and that only - Spontaneous Combustion, and none other of all the deaths that can be died. (B.H.2 p.422)

There are many other closed worlds in Bleak House, although they are not given the specific symbolism attached to Chancery and Chesney Wold. But they are part of Dickens's vision of various social circles which are blind to anything but their own interests and prejudices,

Christopher Hibbert, The Making of Charles Dickens, ch.4
 Chatto & Windus 1967 and Una Pope-Henckley, Charles Dickens, 1812-1870. Longman's, 1945.

and who because of this intense social egotism are destructive to or parasitic on the larger society. Dickens is enlarging on concerns already much dealt with in David Copperfield and Dombey and Son. In those novels the emphasis was on obsessed and selfish individuals who had a destructive effect on others. Here Dickens deals more with institutionalised selfishness - the social organisations that distort or destroy. It is again done through individuals, but the individuals are representative of a wider phenomenon. For instance Mrs. Jellyby is a classic Dickensian obsessive, but in her Dickens is also satirising a whole section of Victorian charity. And Mr. Vholes is a nice grotesque, but he is also part of a larger analysis of the closed world of law.

Of the legal world, which lives off that supreme parasite Chancery, we are given a most detailed inner view;¹ its social structure, its mode of operation. It spawns its own class system. Humble law writers such as Nemo do its copying. Mr. Snagsby makes an innocent living providing its paraphernalia, there are hundreds of small clerks like

1. At 16 Dickens got a job in a solicitor's office at Doctor's Commons, two years that he described as "the usefulest of his life." Certainly they gave him detailed material for the lawyers who occupy most of his books. See particularly; Christopher Hibbert, The Making of Charles Dickens. ch.4 Chatto & Windus 1967 and Una Pope-Hennessy, Charles Dickens, 1812-1870. Longman's, 1945.

Mr. Guppy who immerse themselves in legal terminology and grandiose dreams. Then comes the Vholes class of lawyers, who, in perpetuating the worst aspects of the law, have the excellent motive of perpetuating themselves. Mr. for Vholes's duty is to prolong and complicate legal procedures, and thereby make a living.

The one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself. There is no one principle so distinctly, certainly, and consistently maintained through all its narrow turnings. Viewed by this light and it becomes a coherent scheme, not the monstrous image that the laity are apt to think it. Let them but once perceive that its grand principle is to make business for itself at their expense, and surely they will cease to grumble..... "Repeal this statute, my good Sir? says Mr. Kenge to a snorting client", repeal it my dear sir? Never with my consent. Alter the law, sir, and what will be the effect of your rash proceeding on a class of practitioners very worthily represented, allow me to say to you, by the opposite attorney in the case, Mr. Vholes? Sir that class of practitioners would be swept from the face of the earth. Now you cannot afford - I would say, the social system cannot afford - to lose an order of men like Mr. Vholes. Diligent, persevering, steady, acute in business. I can never raise my voice for the demolition of a class of men like Mr. Vholes." In a word Mr. Vholes, with his three daughters and his father in the Vale of Taunton, is continually doing duty, like a piece of timber, to shore up some decayed foundation that has become a pitfall and a nuisance." (B.H.2 pp. 509-10)

The legal world is basically interested only in perpetuating itself, protecting its own, and staving off outside interference. Its bulwark is a man like Mr. Kenge, the protector of the Vholeses, and drum-beater for the greatness and mystery of the legal profession. He shares the view with Sir Leicester that Chancery in general and Jarndyce and Jarndyce in particular are old and respected British institutions and as such must be maintained. When Jarndyce and Jarndyce finally dissolves in costs he remains a believer; if the public are to benefit from wonderful intricacies of this great case, he says, "it must be paid for, in money, or in money's worth sir". (B.H.2 p.475)

The legal world seems secure and established; through the weapon of law its practitioners can maintain their power over others. Most powerful of all is Mr. Tulkinghorn who hardly needs to practice law, for his speciality is the secrets of the great. Like the others, he works to no constructive purpose; his only aim is to acquire power, and then to "have no sharer or opponent in it"¹ Mr. Tulkinghorn seems invulnerable, but at the very moment that he is about

1. Lady Dedlock's comment, B.H.2 p.475.
Charles Dickens. p.129.

to give a dramatic display of his power, Hortense murders him. Two other people could also have murdered him that night, and had sufficient motive for it - George and Lady Dedlock. This distribution of motive is a routine ploy in detective stories, if we choose take Mr. Tulkinghorn's death at that level. But there is also a deeper significance in the fact that three people had the ability to break down Mr. Tulkinghorn's seeming impeturbability, and to destroy the charmed circle in which he moved.

Another set or circle of people closed to the world, while professing to be the very opposite, is the Official Charity group. What an awful trilogy it is - Mrs. Jellyby as Charity Abroad, Mrs. Pardiggle as Charity at Home, and Mr. Chadband as Religious Charity. The Charity group is important in Dickens's conception of the book; he wants to isolate the sources of power in Victorian society, and having shown us official Equity in Chapter I, and the Governing Classes in Chapter 2, he introduces Charity in Chapter 3.¹ Mrs. Jellyby lives in a very special kind of closed circle - her world stretches as far as Africa but overlooks her own children. She chooses a world that absorbs

1. This is a variation on Cockshut's interpretation of the opening chapters. See Cockshut, The Imagination of Charles Dickens. p.129.

her entirely, and fails, like the Dedlocks, like Chancery, to see the other impinging world colliding with each other outside. Her overwhelming interest in the natives of the West Bank of the Niger is a standing irony to the existence of Jo in England. "When Jo sits down to breakfast on the doorstep of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, he admires the size of the edifice and wonders what it's all about. He has no idea, poor wretch, of the spiritual destitution of a coral reef in the Pacific or what it costs to look up the precious souls among the coco-nuts and bread-fruit". (B.H.2 p.205)

Dickens seems to have it in for Lady Philanthropists in particular. Perhaps he wanted to satirise these formidable Victorian ladies for their presumption, but they are also undeniably a graphic illustration of the neglect-at-home-charity-abroad principle. In case we have not got the point, he adds that terrifying Puseyite Mrs. Pardiggle, surrounded by miserable children and awful dedication. Mrs. Pardiggle concentrates on English charities, but she is as far from understanding the true nature and needs of her victims as if they were indeed African natives. Then there is Mr. Chadband who tries to save Jo's soul; he is evidently a very contemporary satire on a kind of preacher

1. See John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work Ch.7. U.P. 1968.

of the day, and not as exaggerated as it may sound to our ears.¹

These three do-gooders are of course contrasted to Mr. Jarndyce and Esther, whose charity literally begins at home and who always concentrate on individuals. As well as this, there are subtle and unobvious parallels drawn; for instance Mr. Turveydrop and Mrs. Jellyby, superficially so different, are paralleled. She is chock-full of responsibility for Africa, he accepts responsibility for nothing but Deportment. But they share the characteristic of obsession; so totally involved are they by a single idea, whether Africa or Deportment, that they are both incapable of adequate relationships with those nearest to them. Mr. Turveydrop is himself a comment on the quality of Mrs. Jellyby's obsession; the lofty and the petty interest leads to much the same result.

More of a logical parallel to Mrs. Jellyby is Mr. Skimpole - she seeks responsibility, he makes a philosophy of rejecting responsibility. While Dickens does not make Skimpole out to be deliberately vicious, he shows him to have essentially the same blindness as Mrs. Jellyby; blindness to the effect he has on those near him. Both sacrifice

1. See John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work Ch.7. U.P. 1968.

this effect to a larger philosophy, and both impose on their families a life of constant near-bankruptcy, neglect, and general disorder. In Dickens's inner network of parallels and contrasts, Mr. Skimpole is related too to Mr. Boythorn, who also has a mental philosophy which has little to do with how he actually lives. But Boythorn professes thunder and lightning and is the gentlest of men, while Skimpole, all verbal sweetness and light, callously contributes to the further impoverishment of Richard and the death of Jo.

Bleak House then, contains a series of closed worlds, closed social classes, closed social philosophies, which try to exclude all else. This picture is reflected in the separate locales of the novel, which only come together through accident or necessity as the closed circles disintegrate. It is reflected even in such people as Phil or Mr. Snagsby, enclosed in the city, both dreaming of the country, yet never wanting to actually go there. Phil has never known anything of the country, but fears that "he is getting too old to take to novelties". (B.H.2 p.340)

These sad human attempts to create closed and self-sufficient worlds take place in a setting that is

overridingly sordid. A world that is decaying and falling apart itself contradicts the desire to close things off. Numerous scenes in Bleak House are filled with dust, dirt, litter, meaningless paper and decay. The piles of documents and senseless ritual of the Court of Chancery are echoed in the stored muddle of Krook's shop. London itself is invariably muddy, dirty and confused. Mrs. Jellyby's house is also dirty and overflowing with meaningless paper. There are mounds of documents in Gridley's room, and the only things the dead Hawdon had in his grimy hole were papers and documents. At Kenge and Carboy's, there are "shabby dusty tables.....piles of writing.....a bookcase full of the most inexpressive-looking books that ever had anything to say for themselves." (B.H.2 p.119) There is a description of the mountains of paraphernalia at Mr. Snagsby's shop. Mr. Wholes's office is close and dirty; even Mr. Tulkinghorn's is covered in gloom and dust: the soot falling from the chimney "falls like black fat".

Plenty of dust comes in at Mr. Tulkinghorn's windows, and plenty more has generated among his furniture and papers. It lies thick everywhere..... In this lowering magazine of dust, the universal article into which his papers and himself, and all his clients and all things of earth, animate and inanimate are resolving, Mr. Tulkinghorn sits at one of the open windows, enjoying a bottle of old port". (B.H.2 p.284)

Nobody, not even those established in power, can contend against this dust, (or mud, another form of dust); it is the universal symbol of decay and disintegration. Similarly used is the image of the candle guttering in pestiferous air. Dickens underlines the corruption, the polluted atmosphere of society by repeating this one image in different contexts, and so consolidating and enforcing his pictorial vision of the Bleak House world. The main scene of manifest corruption is the churchyard where Hawdon is buried, "pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed"and where there is a "flame of gas, burning so sullenly above the iron gate, on which its poisoned air deposits its witch ointment slimy to the touch". (B.H.2 p.140) At the time of Krook's combustion, the candle in Weevle's room is smouldering in the greasy air, and the soot falling from the chimney "smears like black fat". "A stagnant sickening oil" (B.H.2 p.420-421) heralds Krook's combustion. In describing Tom-All-Alone's, Dickens says: "For a time, there were some dungeon lights burning, as the lamp of life burns in Tom-All-Alone's, heavily, heavily in the nauseous air, and winking - as that lamp winks too - in Tom-All-Alones - at many horrible standing at his shop-door looking up at the clouds, sees

things." (B.H.2 p.581) In the filthy brickmaker's hovel too, "the gross candle warms pale and sickly in the polluted air." (B.H.2 p.290) There is even a bizarre echo of this same imagery in Mr. Chadland whose train oil greasiness bespeaks an inner corruption at odds with his outward piety. When he dabs "his fat head....it smokes to such an extent that he seems to light his pocket handkerchief at it, which smokes to, at every dab". (B.H.2 p.335) And there are small, hardly noticeable additions to this network of imagery, such as the following: "The money Ada brought [Richard] was melting away with the candles I used to see burning after dark in Mr. Vholes's office". (B.H.2 p.758)

Such a network provides a coherence of its own, and serves to cement the various components of the book more strongly. It also seems to point out the less obvious interconnection between people and people, and people and things, which are Dickens's special interest. Consider, as another example, the image of the rook and the crow, and the number of uses to which it is put: "the..the crow is the world of fashion.... is not so unlike the Court of Chancery but that we may pass from one scene to another, as the crow flies". (B.H.2 p.7) Later: "Mr. Snagsby standing at his shop-door looking up at the clouds, sees

a crow who is out late, skim westward over the leaden slice of sky belonging to Cook's Court. The crow flies straight across Chancery Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Here in a large house lives Mr. Tulkinghorn.....Mr.

Tulkinghorn goes, as the crow came, not quite so straight but nearly - to Cook's Court, Cursitor St". (B.H.2 p.122-3)

At Chesney Wold the rooks caw and quarrel over the arrival of Sir Leicester and his Lady, while Mr. Tulkinghorn's

"black figure may be seen walking before breakfast like a larger species of rook". (B.H.2 p.144) Mr. Vholes's

black figure is compared to a "bird of ill omen"

Mr. Smallweed is described "as an ugly old bird of the crow species". (B.H.2 p.344)

So the crow image has more than one implication. It acts to connect city and country, and so to underline the actual connection between seemingly disparate places. It is also used to play up the 'bird of prey' aspect of certain characters, in particular lawyers, as well as having the more conventional connotations of the crow image, as a harbinger of disaster. And in general, because the crow is known to feed off dead and decaying things, it is one of the many images of ugliness and decay that can be found throughout Bleak House. All these usages are brought together in this remarkable passage:

From the verdant undulations and the spreading oaks of the Dedlock property, Mr. Tulkinghorn transfers himself to the stale heat and dust of London Like a dingy London bird among the birds at roost in these pleasant fields, where the sheep are all made into parchment, the goats into wigs, and the pasture into chaff, the lawyer, smoke-dried and faded, dwelling among mankind but not consorting with them, aged without experience of genial youth, and so long used to make his nest in holes and corners of human nature that he has forgotten its broader and better range, comes sauntering home. (B.H.2 p.542)

Here in one sentence is the city-country dichotomy, the bird of prey connotation, the implications of gloom and disaster; and as well as combining all these brilliantly, Dickens again reminds his reader of Mr. Tulkinghorn's insularity - his blindness to humanity's "broader and better" range. It is in this kind of language, dense and difficult as it is, that Dickens' grasp of his themes is overwhelmingly sure. Here is the range and comprehensiveness of an artist absolutely in control.

A more subtle study in the gap between language and the world. The central images of Bleak House all point to a world of increasing meaninglessness and confusion. But Dickens has more than one important way of showing up the disorder, the lack of coherence of the supposedly ordered civilization of 19th century England. According to his black or

vision, in this society there is an increasing disassociation of reality from speech. It is striking how many people in Bleak House constantly use forms of speech that have little or nothing to do with their true personalities or with their immediate realities. Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle both use words as a direct flight from reality. A very specific example of this is Mrs. Pardiggle's rhetoric to the brickmakers which ignores their hostility and their outright rejection of her values. In her own eyes, Mrs. Pardiggle's words and pamphlets are her good deeds, but the reader is made to see that they are an absurd replacement for effective action. Similarly the verbiage around Africa has so engulfed Mrs. Jellyby that her only reaction to her daughter's engagement is to feel the loss of her ammanuensis for the great project. The absurd pinnacle of this kind of satire is Mr. Chadband who rolls out a phantasmagoria of meaninglessness to cloak a greedy and avaricious personality.

A more subtle study in the gap between language and the real personality is Mr. Skimpole. He is given some of the cleverest speeches in Dickens. He is constantly weaving an airy word-world that counters or explains away the outside realities, but these explanations are not quite convincing when they apply to his behaviour towards Jo or

Richard. Essentially the same technique is used by Mr. Vholes, whose language of respectability and family responsibility is a cloak for the cynical milking of his clients. There are many other examples; Mr. Turveydrop constantly talks of fatherly love and sacrifice when it is his son who sacrifices all to him and Mr. Boythorn who professes fire and wrath but does the opposite. There is Lady Dedlock too, who fools all the world by her language of languor and elegant boredom, and so hides years of inner struggle.

The most bizarre of all the characters who attempt to use language as a cloak for their real selves, is Mr. Smallweed; when his venom and fury get the best of him, he just can't keep up his adopted tone of affectionate humility, and breaks into the invective he normally uses for his beloved wife. In one scene, George has just badly frustrated him:

Under this provocation, Mr. Smallweed's favourite adjective of disparagement is so close to his tongue, that he begins the words "my dear friend" with the monosyllable "Brim", thus converting the possessive pronoun into Brimny, and appearing to have an impediment in his speech. Once past this difficulty, however, he exhorts his dear friend in the tenderest manner not to be rash.
 (B.H.2 p.353)

All the people just mentioned make pronouncements that are at radical variance with reality or their real selves, but all are generally considered to be sane and reasonable people, and are accepted members of society. Other people however, like Miss Flite or Gridley and Jo, are considered as insane, unreasonable or even sub-human and are therefore society's outcasts. Yet it is into their mouths that Dickens often puts perceptive or accurate statements. Miss Flite has rather the role of the mad prophetess in Greek tragedies. Her names for her birds, or her predictions for the fate of the Wards in Jarndyce are symbolic of her understanding of the deeper realities behind the "polite show" of Chancery. In one scene where Esther is bewildered by the meaningless ritual in the court, she says "there seemed to be no reality in the whole scene, except poor little Miss Flite, the madwoman, standing on a bench and nodding at it". (B.H.2 p.320-21)

Both Gridley and Miss Flite still believe in Justice, which has come to mean nothing to the more 'reasonable' people in the book. Gridley cries:

"The system! I am told, on all hands, its the system. I mustn't look to individuals. Its the system. I mustn't go into Court and say 'My Lord,

Justice, I beg to know this from you - is this right or wrong. Have you the face to tell me I have received justice, and therefore am dismissed?' My Lord knows nothing of it. He sits there, to administer the system. I mustn't go to Mr. Tulkinghorn..... and say to him when he makes me furious by being so cool and satisfied - as they all do, for I know they gain by it while I lose, don't I - I mustn't say to him, I will have something out of someone for my ruin, by fair means or foul. He is not responsible. It is the system. But.....I will accuse the individual workers of that system against me, face to face, before the great eternal bar! (B.H.2 p.200)

It is the common tragedy of Richard, Gridley and Miss Flite that they cannot give up the desire for the world to have a meaning, and in particular for the word "justice" to have significance. Richard makes the desperate assertion that "truth and justice....is-must be somewhere - and must be brought out", (B.H.2 p.489) while Miss Flite speaks of the compulsion to wait for the Judgement that will never come - "you must expect".

Another illustration of the flight of truth and meaning from the officially recognized forms of speech, is the Coroner's Inquest. Jo is rejected as a witness because "he can't exactly say what will be done to him after he's dead if he tells a lie". Says the coroner;" 'Can't exactly say' won't do you know. We can't take that in a Court of

Justice, gentlemen. It's terrible depravity. Put the boy aside". (B.H.I p.138) Yet when Jo is later questioned on two occasions by Tulkinghorn, he gives the most exact evidence. Jo may not be able to speak the language of official justice of official religion, but he can, and always does, speak the truth.

What is left then, in a world where truth and meaning have all but fled from the acceptable forms of behaviour and speech? Dickens answer seems to be - individual responsibility. In the end he sides with the unreasonable demands of a Gridley who asks that individuals be responsible for their actions. This idea too is expressed in the relation of speech to language. Dickens's moral approbation cuts across the class divisions and falls on those who have a direct relation between what they say and what they do. Within the context of language, Dickens reiterates this point rather subtly, by using one phrase - "do it" - as a sort of repetitive litany. The most explicit expression of this theme is put into the mouth of Sir Leicester. In the interview between Sir Leicester and his Lady and Mr. Rouncewell, concerning Rosa, Mr. Rouncewell says:

"If my memory serves me, Lady Dedlock, I said when I had the pleasure of seeing you before, that I should seriously advise my son to conquer that fancy".....
 "And did you?"
 "Oh! of course I did"
 Sir Leicester gives a nod, approving and confirmatory. Very proper. The iron gentleman having said he would do it, was bound to do it. No difference in this respect between the base metals and the precious. Highly proper. (B.H.2 p.607)

The same kind of approval is also expressed by Mr. Jarndyce, of, of all people, Neckett. He hears that Neckett the Follower was conscientious, hard working, and struggled to maintain his children; he would watch for eight or ten hours at a stretch "if he undertook to do it". Mr. Jarndyce muses, "He might have done worse. He might have undertaken to do it, and not done it." (B.H.2 pp.192-3) Neckett's landlady echoes Mr. Jarndyce a few pages later....." he did what he had to do sir", said Mrs. Blimber, unconsciously fixing Mr. Skimpole with her eye, "and its something in this world, even to do that".¹

1. As Cockshut notes, "Neckett represents routine law and order in their most genuine form, just as the Jarndyce case itself shows them at their most pompous and absurd..." etc. Cockshut The Imagination of Charles Dickens.

Note the oblique reference to Mr. Skimpole in this context, and with what marvellous attention to the details of parallel and interconnection Dickens brings the theme back home again to him. When Jo is lying ill at Bleak House, Skimpole lightly recommends getting rid of him:

"And what is he to do then", asked my Guardian. "Upon my life", said Mr. Skimpole, shrugging his shoulders with his engaging smile, "I have not the least idea what he will do then. But I have no doubt he'll do it". (B.H.2 p.402)

Jo too is taken up in this network of ironic parallel. The following passage shows the gap between Jo's use of the words "do it", which still has a meaning, and the words of the law which are meaningless. Jo is recounting the story of Lady Dedlock to the constable who wants him to move on:

"She ses to me she ses 'can you show me all them places?' I ses 'yes I can' I ses. And she ses to me 'do it' and I dun it and she give me a sov'ringak and and looked it...."

When Jo has finished his story, Mr. Snagsby vouches for him:

"Constable, I have no doubt he'll move on. You know you really must do it", says Mr. Snagsby. "I'm everyways

agreeable, sir, says the hapless Jo.
 "Do it then", observes the constable.
 "You know what you have got to do.
 Do it'. And recollect you won't get
 off so easy next time....." With
 this farewell hint and pointing
 generally to the setting sun, as a
 likely place to move on to, the con-
 stable bids his auditors good
 afternoon..... (B.H.2 p.249)

We know - the constable must know - that Jo has
 nowhere to move on to, and so his vigorous injunction to
 "do it" means nothing at all. Not two pages later, Mrs.
 Chadland is describing Esther's childhood. "There was no
 Miss-ing of the girl in my time. It was Esther. 'Esther
 do this, Esther do that!' and she was made to do it".
 (B.H.2 p.251) Both Esther and Jo are forced to act
 according to other people's unreasonable wishes; thus
 their actions are enforced and lose their value.

In contrast to this again is the decision and respon-
 sibility of a woman like Mrs. Bagnet, who has followed her
 husband around the world with nothing but her cloak and
 umbrella. As Mr. Bagnet says "The old girl would do it
 tomorrow. Did it once", and he advises George, "Whatever
 the old girl says do - do it". (B.H.2 p.659) Mrs. Bagnet
 later fulfills her legendary reputation by saying she will
 find George's mother and setting off then and there to do

it. Lady Dedlock too, underneath her social pretence, has the same straightness of purpose - she is responsible to herself to keep to the path she has chosen. "I have but one [course] I can have but one". (B.H.2 p.475) She is true to this decision till her death.

Dickens's judgement in this sphere of consequences is straight - to him it is a moral imperative to follow words by actions. But this point is hardly the moral core of Bleak House; In general the book avoids simplistic moral judgements. It is a little paradoxical that while the tone of the novel is more overtly moralistic than that of either Dombey and Son or David Copperfield, yet the judgements made are more complex, or at least admit of complexity. This is partly because of the more ambitious scope of Bleak House; its attempt to define people within their social context as well as individuals. In Dombey and Son and David Copperfield, for instance, individuals, obsessed in themselves, are seen as clearly morally reprehensible, and more often than not the world pays them back for their attempt to distort it to their own shape. In Bleak House, there is a more sympathetic treatment of such people and an acknowledgement that society, through its malfunction, can be itself the cause of malformed individuals. There are

intimations that there is such a thing as destiny, a fate born into, out of the individual's control.

A Mr. Dombey has no one but himself to blame for his destructive worship of money and power; a Mrs. Steerforth's life is tragic solely because of her egotistic, obsessive love for her son. Bleak House too has its people whose obsessions are solely their own - such as Mrs. Jellyby, Mr. Turveydrop, Mrs. Snagsby etc. - and they are grimly ridiculed. But with Gridley or Miss Flite or Richard Carstone, Dickens shows enormous sympathy. The social evil that Chancery embodies is at least as responsible for their downfall as their own weaknesses. Much of the pathos of that first meeting between the three orphans Ada, Esther and Richard, is that they are all born into a condition over which they have no control; the two cousins into Chancery, Esther into illegitimacy. Ada speaks of the "shadow" under which they were both born. And indeed Richard, given his character which was formed under the consciousness of Chancery, is helpless to fight against its influence. As he says:

"How can I be more settled? If you live in an unfinished house, you can't settle down in it; if you were condemned to leave everything you undertook, unfinished, you would find it hard to apply yourself to anything; and yet that's my unhappy case.

I was born into this unfinished contention with all its dances and changes, and it began to unsettle me before I quite knew the difference between a suit at law and a suit of clothes; and it has gone on unsettling me ever since, and here I am now, conscious sometimes that I am but a worthless fellow to love my confiding cousin Ada." (B.H.2 p.479)

There is also Richard's orphanhood, and the adverse conditioning of his schooling which has trained him for nothing but making Latin verses. Richard has many good qualities, but his vacillating and impulsive personality cannot withstand the blows his destiny has dealt him.

Dickens does not come down on the side of out-and-out determinism; for he also gives us Esther who despite the difficulties of illegitimacy and a blighted childhood has turned her past to account and made an acceptable life for herself. But in Richard's case, Dickens makes clear, the combination of character and circumstance makes for a hopeless struggle.

Edith in Dombey and Son and Lady Dedlock are rather similar characters, and the slight difference in treatment demonstrates the increasing complication of Bleak House. Edith's actions retain a degree of self-responsibility; although weighed down by circumstance, she still has the choice not to marry Dombey, nor does she have to run away

with Carker. Her actions are largely the outcome of her struggles between pride and self-disgust. More importance is attached to Lady Dedlock's entrapment by circumstance. Lady Dedlock, in the circle in which she moves, and threatened by Tulkinghorn, has no real choice but to keep up her pretence. Thus her obsession in life, her secret, and the necessity to behave as if it doesn't exist - is not purely a product of her personality. It is more the result of a society which has no room for the real life she has lived; her pretence is, at least partly, imposed from outside.

Sir Leicester is also conditioned by his environment. The great principle of his life is his superiority over others, even over nature which "he admits to be a good idea (a little low perhaps when not enclosed with a park-fence,) but an idea dependant for its execution on your great country families". (B.H.I. p.25) But Sir Leicester is not one of Dickens's earlier caricatures of decadent nobility, like Sir Mulberry Hawk in Nicholas Nickleby. He is shown to be a fundamentally decent and honourable man, whose unfortunate views are almost in the nature of inherited belief and who is further flattered and cushioned by a society that dotes on a combination of class and wealth. Being stupid as well, Sir Leicester is utterly

incapable of real reform. Yet his class conditioning is not absolute either; when tragedy hits him, his family honour means nothing against his love for his wife. He turns for help not to the Buffeys or Boodles but to that upstart lower class phenomenon Mr. Bucket. Later he comes to rely on one trusted companion, Mr. George. Sir Leicester has come to acknowledge the need of others, whatever their class; Dickens wisely leaves it at that.

Forster, Dickens's friend and biographer, praised Bleak House as being his best novel with regard to construction. There was nothing random, Forster said, each scene was calculated in relation to the whole.¹ Much of this tightness of construction is a result of the incredibly close and varied interconnections between the different people of the book, and the inventive use of plot - in particular of coincidence - to hang them together. The construction of Bleak House perhaps best illustrates Dickens' intensely held belief that the world is full of significant connections, and accidental relationships, which although we may be hardly aware of them, affect us

1. John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, Vol.2 p.114. J.M. Dent & Sons, 1966.

deeply. Forster wrote:

"On the connections, resemblances, and surprises of life, Dickens liked especially to dwell, and few things moved his fancy so pleasantly. The world, he would say, was so much smaller than we thought it; we were all so connected by fate without knowing it; people supposed to be far apart were constantly elbowing each other; and tomorrow bore a close resemblance to nothing half so much as yesterday".¹

In Bleak House, the connectedness of all the book's components, whether by similarity, contrast, parallel, blood-tie, relationships, necessity or coincidence, is central to Dickens's vision. Let me just recapitulate some of these connections, and how they are established. Firstly in institutions and places. I have already talked about the similarities between Chesney Wold and Chancery, and their contrast and connection to Tom-All-Alone's, and through use of all three, an ironic contrast between city and country. Then there is the warmth of Bleak House as opposed to the coldness of Chesney Wold, or the stillness of Chesney Wold as opposed to the bustle and movement of the iron town in the North. There is Krook's shop as parallel to the Court of Chancery, which in turn has its

1. Quoted by; William F. Axton Circle of Fire. Dickens' Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theatre p.7. University of Kentucky 1966.

ironic echo in the Coroner's Court. Wholes's ghoul-like

Even more striking is the network of people. Miss Flite, Gridley and Richard are diverse people brought together through the common experience of chancery. Mrs. Jellyby and Mr. Skimpole are connected in a more abstract fashion, in morality-tale terms of seeming opposites - she as False Responsibility, he as False Irresponsibility, while Mrs. Jellyby has another counterpart, Mr. Turveydrop who also neglects his child in favour of an obsession. Mr. Turveydrop and Mrs. Jellyby are both contrasted to their children, who work with good will at the purely individual level and achieve a modest amount of success. The network of connection continues in Mr. Skimpole too; as well as his connection to Mrs. Jellyby, he is an obvious foil to Mr. Jarndyce, to demonstrate Jarndyce's true goodness. He is also contrasted to Mr. Boythorn whose verbal phantasies about the world, unlike Skimpole's, are quite harmless. There are those characters juxtaposed for pure moral and physical contrast, as in Chapter 21 when Mr. Smallweed and Mr. George are constantly set against each other - one vigorous, straightforward, upright, the other crabbed, devious and sinister. In a similar vein is the contrast of Richard with Mr. Wholes;

Richard's life and vitality against Vholes's ghoul-like deadness. Richard has his moral opposite too; Woodcourt is persevering and dedicated, Richard superficial and wilful. And there are class confrontations; when Mr. Rouncewell is received by Sir Leicester at Chesney Wold, we are treated to a classic confrontation of class opposites, and on the connection between Jo and the upper classes I have already commented at length. One of the less obvious contrasts as Hillis Miller points out, is Mr. Bucket and Mr. Tulkinghorn; Mr. Tulkinghorn deals in past secrets and seeks power from his knowledge of them, while Mr. Bucket's detective work looks into the present and seeks only solutions for present problems.¹

Most of the relationships between people described above are abstract and highly schematised. But there is also an extraordinary amount of coincidental connection. There are all sorts of surprise relationships, and surprise discoveries of these relationships. The discovery of a blood tie between Lady Dedlock and Esther is the most obvious one; there is also Mrs. Chadband who turns out to have been Mrs. Rachael, and Mrs. Smallweed who we discover

1. Miller, Charles Dickens. The World of His Novels. p.175.

is Mr. Krook's sister and so on. W.J. Harvey nicely analyses the coincidence in Bleak House, pointing out how in chapter 24, in just ten pages, numerous chance encounters occur, all of them important to the progress of the novel.¹ Yet most of the coincidences do not arouse the attention of the reader to their being such.² As Harvey says, this is partly because from the beginning there are intimations that the different worlds of Chesney Wold, Tom-All-Alone's, Chancery and Bleak House are all tied together in some way. And on the personal level, there is the mystery of the three young orphans who meet, though unacquainted with each other. As well there are the early hints of something strange about Lady Dedlock - so the stage is well set for mysteries and coincidences. But despite the enormous number of coincidences, Harvey cogently notes that they are inserted so casually and pervasively that

certainly one does not feel that the characters are thereby made puppets or that the elaborate plot creaks with

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1. W.J. Harvey, Chance and Design in Bleak House. From Dickens, A Collection of Critical Essays. pp.143-4 Spectrum, 1969.
 2. Two obvious exceptions are Mrs. Chadband turning out to be Mrs. Rachael, and Sir Leicester's forced visit to Bleak House.

This obvious contrivance; one accepts coincidence as a natural part of the Bleak House world.... by and large coincidence is to the microcosm of the novel what the law of gravity is to the macrocosm of the real world. We accept both as natural laws and are largely unconscious of their operation.

Harvey goes on to say:

....what seems coincidental is often the result of plotting, and Bleak House is full of conspirators. The interesting thing to notice is how often their plots go astray, how often what proposes is thwarted by the bias of chance, of unforeseen circumstances, of the merely random. No one, not even Bucket is infallible. In the author's plot, partly because of this, because plotters, plots, and coincidences often cancel each other out, we accept Dickens's scheme of things..... Finally and paradoxically, it is because coincidence is so extensive in the novel that it becomes so natural. It seems true because it is congruent with the rest of the book. But more important, in the last analysis it expresses a truth about the real world. It expresses our sense that real life blends the casual and the causal, that things are connected and contingent, patterned and random, that we are both full and determined.¹

novel. The world of dirt, infection, disintegration, rocks,

1. Harvey, Chance and Design in 'Bleak House'. From Dickens: a Collection of Critical Essays. pp.143-5.

This 'truth' expressed in Bleak House is perhaps little more than common sense or cliché, but it is expressed with such force and complication that it takes on the character of a revelation and the book itself becomes a world of vision. Not that it is an unflawed or clear vision I think. The two narratives - the author's and Esther's - give a too radically different vision of the world for that. There is too much of a gap between what the author sees and what Esther sees, which accounts for some of the finally unsatisfying quality of the book. In Esther's narrative we still have the ultra-conventional, audience pleasing sentimental, clever Dickens. In the author's narrative there seems to be another Dickens struggling to get out - A Dickens who precedes Joyce in the wildness and savagery of his vision. Even if it is conceded that of course Dickens stood apart from Esther, was even gently critical of her, he still undoubtedly wanted us to believe in her, and to accept her as a pattern of goodness. There is no question of him really 'sending her up'. Yet such a person as Esther, effectively operating in the real world, has no place in the other half of the novel. The world of dirt, infection, disintegration, rooks, crows, graveyards, collapsing houses and the Smallweeds, so

convincingly delineated and made so universal, has nothing to do with a limited but good Esther and the world she portrays. The two worlds sit most uneasily together.

I doubt if Dickens acknowledged either consciously or unconsciously the hiatus between his two narratives. He merely concentrates on the technical feat of welding them together. And generally the interweaving is admirably done. But Dickens's use of language gives him away. Not only does he put images into Esther's mouth of which she is incapable, but the whole direction of the language, the absolute grotesqueness of the imagery contradicts the more conventional novel. This is where a kind of schizophrenia comes in. There seems to be a struggle taking place between two different novels, which Dickens seeks to resolve through the technique of double narrative, but which cannot be so simply solved. The result is that the imagery of Bleak House, while it is one of the most brilliant things about the book, is also a point of discomfort. I think Dickens tries to bridge the gap between Esther's dull prose and his own black grotesqueness by a tone of high righteousness, almost of moral hectoring, which appears at regular intervals in both narratives. It is as if Dickens is reminding the reader that he remembers Lord Chancellor and the pollution of the

the Victorian novelist's role of moral guardian. It is a dominant strain in the book, and a distasteful one, and only underlines the lack of affinity between the two narratives.

Moreover the book has not the pure and relatively uncomplicated allegoric form of Hard Times. I have pointed to Dickens's using more conventional media such as melodrama and irony in order to heighten his allegoric meanings, but often the grander idea is let slip. Then sheer melodrama, mechanical plotting and over-heavy irony endanger the allegory itself. What is meant to be a vehicle for larger meanings itself dominates - it does not remain the servant of the bigger conception. In short, in Bleak House the histrionic Dickens too often emerges, obscuring the totally serious Dickens who is trying to keep the work in control.

One must remember however what an unusual and ambitious novel this is. As A.O.J. Cockshut says, as well as giving us the melodramatic detective story of Lady Dedlock, and so also revealing the interconnections of high and low,

It is attempting in terms of plot and character to give what is conveyed by the key images of the spontaneous combustion of the body of the pseudo Lord Chancellor and the pollution of the

1. Cockshut, *...* p.134.

atmosphere by the filthy dwellings of the poor. It is a strange experience to find these three things together - one a development of an antiquated theatrical tradition, one a naive piece of Victorian pseudo science... and the third air pollution, a grim fact which most novelists would have found utterly intractable for art. Taken together, they might be called a picture in miniature of the strangeness of Dickens's achievement.¹

It is altogether a little too strange, and thus not surprising that it doesn't quite jell. To me Bleak House shows Dickens trying to be his age's (and his own) idea of a good novelist while at the same time bringing into play a new and entirely original creativity. The two don't live well together, and Dickens never again writes a novel quite like Bleak House. Nor does he go back to the naturalistic mode of Dombey and Son. The next two novels are attempts to find a valid and still Dickensian mode of expression that does away with the irreconcilable tensions of Bleak House. The book is perhaps the highest point of Dickens's creative ability, but there is also evident an artistic immaturity, an uncertainty as to what Dickens wants from himself as a novelist.

1. Cockshut, The Imagination of Charles Dickens. p.134.

The missing subtlety, self-knowledge and control comes to Dickens, I think, in Little Dorrit, but also there comes with it a lack of that absolute creative vitality that animates Bleak House.

Bleak House is a very different novel from its predecessor - and in some ways different from all the others Dickens wrote. Till very recently¹ the eminent Dr. Leavis found it the only Dickens worth noticing because it came up to his criterion of "sustained and complete seriousness" that is required of a great work of art.² In other words it has an obvious and consistent didactic purpose, and its theme is what is wrong with Victorian society, without any divergence from the subject. Serious enough for Dr. Leavis. What is interesting about Hard Times is that the general idea of the book is quite different from the previous ones discussed.

Dombey and Son originates in a single character and a personal attribute - and through the individual there is some analysis of a society. David Copperfield concentrates on a narrative, and while raising social issues,

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1. I am referring to the new book by the Leavises, Dickens the Novelist, published in 1970.
 2. F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, p.29. Peregrine 1962.

CHAPTER 4

HARD TIMES

But Bleak House is a free-hand portrait as on a deeper level, a vision of Victorian society rather than a predecessor - and in some ways different from all the others Dickens wrote. Till very recently¹ the eminent Dr. Leavis found it the only Dickens worth noticing because it came up to his criterion of "sustained and complete seriousness" that is required of a great work of art.² In other words it has an obvious and consistent didactic purpose, and its theme is what is wrong with Victorian society, without any divergence from the subject. Serious enough for Dr. Leavis. What is interesting about Hard Times is that the general idea of the book is quite different from the previous ones discussed. Dombey and Son originates in a single character and a personal attribute - and through the individual there is some analysis of a society. David Copperfield concentrates on a narrative, and while raising social issues,

1. I am referring to the new book by the Leavises, Dickens the Novelist, published in 1970.

2. F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, p.29. Peregrine 1962.

drops them nearly as often. In Bleak House there is a portrayal of society on very broad lines, with one abuse, Chancery, serving as both focus and illustration. But Bleak House is a free-hand portrait or on a deeper level, a vision of Victorian society rather than a studied analysis. A studied analysis of his own times was Dickens's major aim in writing Hard Times. He seems to have felt the need at this time to pinpoint his dissatisfaction with Victorian England - a dissatisfaction that was growing every year. Bleak House, with its attack on Chancery and philanthropy was amazingly topical as Butt and Tillotson¹ reveal, but its extreme topicality also limited its scope as purely social criticism. Dickens now seems to feel a need to write a tract for the times, to commit himself, and join with Carlyle and his reformist friend Layard in Parliament, and give his readers a novel in which the politico-social theme is dominant, not overlaid by other strands. Hard Times crystallises what has become his purpose in writing, and is a conscious exercise in sticking to that purpose. Just before finishing

1. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work. pp. 182-7. U.P. 1968.

1. Quoted by G.W. Hird, Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction, p.167. Longmans 1965.

the novel, he wrote to a publisher in New York.

I think it possible that I may have considered the powers and purposes of fiction a little longer and a little more anxiously and attentively than your lady friend. To interest and affect the general mind on behalf of anything that is clearly wrong - to stimulate and arouse the public soul to a compassionate and indignant feeling that it must not be without obtruding any pet theory of cause or cure, and so throwing off allies as they spring up - I believe to be one of Fiction's highest uses. And this is the end to which I try and turn it.¹

In Hard Times there is no mistaking the purpose of social criticism. With Dickens's books up till now, even including Bleak House, it was possible for a simple reader to take them at their story-value alone, and remain indifferent to or even ignorant of other subtleties. Even the best educated readers mostly preferred to see Dickens in terms of plot and characters with some moralising thrown in. But the normal interpretation was not possible with Hard Times, for Dickens gave his readers few of the usual diversions - the story is meagre, without sub-plots,

1. Quoted by K.J. Fielding, Charles Dickens: a Critical Introduction, p.167. Longmans 1965.

p.346. Chatto & Windus 1945.

eccentrics, regular alternations of light and dark, or of humorous and pathetic. Many contemporaries were dismayed by its relentless pursuit of its themes; others like Macauley saw it as a descent into "sullen socialism".¹

The tone of the book has none of the usual Dickensian variety. It is mainly one of direct attack, varied only by heavy irony. Its form has many elements of the morality tale. Dickens was no 'intellectual' in the modern sense; he had few ideas of economic theory, and had a contempt for politics that precluded a really informed interest in it. Biographers can however bring up innumerable examples of his deep social concern and his active interest in helping the underprivileged. So it is appropriate that if Dickens decided to write his tract for the times it would contain no economic dogmas or political solutions, partly because, as my last quotation shows, he did not believe that solutions were the novelist's job, and partly because his mental equipment was not of that kind. So it is entirely appropriate that he produce a sort of allegorical account of his own times, whose implications for his own society are inescapable. As with the old morality

1. Quoted by Una Pope-Hennessy, Charles Dickens 1812-1870 p.346. Chatto & Windus 1945.

tales, Dickens's purpose is to show up stupidity and evil and contrast it with wisdom and good. Every line of Hard Times is subservient to that aim; every character and incident an intrinsic part of the overall purpose. This systematic and overtly moral aim of the book makes me feel its very strong likeness to a morality tale or fable, while it also has some of the rather different characteristics of a fairy tale. Most of Dickens's books, including Hard Times, have a fairy tale element, but here the element of fable, of allegoric implication, is much stronger and consciously emphasised.

On the surface, Dickens is making a very specific attack on a small section of society, the Utilitarians. He attacks the philosophy that the solution for the great and pressing problems of his time lies in recognizing the dual supremacy of Fact and Self-Interest, and in training others to act accordingly. But the existence of the Utilitarians is only symptomatic of the larger evil - a society based on the principle of the self, and use of others, on money and bargain at all levels. It is a society wishing to stamp out the need for individuality. In a bigger sense, this society subverts Art, or the freedom of artistic expression, by seeking to suppress all the things - spontaneity, imagination, joy, curiosity -

that Art feeds on. Simple as it sounds, the solution, if there was any for Dickens, was to release the individual's capacity for humanity to his fellows, not to crab it in some economic formula. Self-interest enthroned as a credo was anathema to the Dickens vision, and a world standardised on these utilitarian-style principles would mean the end of the precious human attributes of imagination and instinctive goodwill. This, basically, is Dickens's message in Hard Times; odd then that Carlyle should have labelled it, of all books, "sullen socialism".

The allegoric nature of Hard Times is not hidden, or even implied - the very names of the three Books "Sowing", "Reaping", "Garnering", have the ring of religious parable. So the structure too is overtly allegoric; there is no gap between symbol and plot. Dickens's purpose is to fuse the story and its ultimate meaning into one. The unusual economy and brevity of Hard Times is very much a result of this aim. Dickens has used allegory before, most extensively in Bleak House, but this is his only book when he pares down his purposes to producing a work that is wholly and solely allegorical, which can be only understood if its allegorical nature is understood from the start. Thus this is the most emblematic of Dickens's books - in the

sense that not only each character, but each background, and many set scenes are emblematic of, or stand for the struggle of abstract forces. The struggle is that between Good and Bad, between Imagination and Fact, between Coercion and Freedom, between Capitalists and Workers, between Individuality and the Mass; it is about any and all of these things. As in all successful morality tales, the characters play against each other in a specific and restricted sphere - here the Utilitarians against the Circus People, and the Industrialists against the Poor - but the implications of the struggle are far reaching and universal. There may be no utilitarians left, yet in its general message Hard Times is not outdated.

In accordance with its allegoric form, the morality of Hard Times is largely demonstrated through the story rather than preached. The demonstration takes the form of a sort of dialogue between the two sides, or a series of ironic juxtapositions. This dialogue begins on the first page, and Dickens makes immediately clear whose side he's on. His tone towards Thomas Gradgrind, the advocate of a Factual Universe, is one of direct hostility.

Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and

calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir, - peremptorily Thomas - Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. (p.8)¹

The arch representative of the other side is Sissy Jupe. She is a force for life, colour, warmth, imagination. Her juvenile opposite in every point is that model pupil, Bitser. The famous passage which describes the physical difference between Bitser and Sissy and the effect that sunlight has on the appearance of each,² simultaneously establishes them as opposing life forces. Sissy can't define a horse while having lived with the Horse-Riding all her life; Bitser can, but his definition is devoid of all human meaning. Sissy possesses the kind of knowledge that cannot be tabulated or formulated. In addition, she

1. This and all future quotations are taken from Hard Times, Elm Classics (T. Nelson & Sons). Curiously, no date of publication is given.

2. "..... the girl was so dark-eyed and dark-haired that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun when it shone upon her; the boy was so light-eyed and light haired that the self-same rays seemed to draw out of him whatever colour he possessed" etc. Hard Times p.10.

shows herself as a person of imagination. Imagination is an outlaw in the factual world, but it is the very thing that the individual Sissy thrives on, and needs to survive: curiosity and imagination form the human make-up;

rather, suppression of these characteristics results in a sort of stunted life. "So you would carpet your room - or your husband's room, if you were a grown woman and had a husband - with representations of flowers, would you?" said the gentleman. "Why would you?" "If you please sir, I am very fond of flowers", returned the girl. "And that is why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walk over them with heavy boots?" "It wouldn't hurt them, sir. They couldn't crush and wither, if you please, sir. They would be the picture of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy-" "Ay, ay, ay!" But you mustn't fancy', cried the gentleman, quite elated..... [a diatribe follows on a future ideal world scourged of fancy.].... The girl curtsied, and sat down. She was very young, and she looked as if she were frightened by the matter of fact prospect the world afforded. (pp.12-13)

A little later, Dickens demonstrates the result of an active and deliberate suppression of imagination. Gradgrind has of course rigorously applied his principles in bringing up his own children, yet as he approaches the circus, who should he find but "his own metallurgical Louisa, peeping with all her might through a hole in the deal board, and

his own mathematical Thomas abasing himself on the ground to catch but a hoof of the graceful Equestrian Tyrolean flower-act." (p.17) No amount of 'correct training' will eliminate curiosity and imagination from the human make-up; rather, suppression of these characteristics results in a sort of spiritual starvation. The subsequent stories of Tom and Louisa tell of the damage caused by this suppression of their nature.

Sleary's Horse Riding is then introduced, complete with ignorance, doubtful morals and low pursuits, as opposed to the enlightenment and progressive ideas of Gradgrind's school. In the first confrontation between these two worlds, Sleary and his friends come off best on all counts. They show warmth and delicacy to Sissy, they see through Bounderby and treat him with spirit, and they show a generous perception of a world beyond theirs in conceding Sissy's individual right to leave them. Dickens firmly guides our attitude:

....there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an untiring readiness to help and pity one another, deserving often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction as the everyday virtues of any class of people in the world. (p.39)

There are two major locales in the novel, emblematic

of two opposed ways of life - this colourful bedraggled circus ground, and the empty coldness of Gradgrind's house and school which stand at the edge of a smoking Coketown. Their unforeseen interaction and influence on each other is a big theme, while on the level of character, the influence of Sissy on the Gradgrinds is of central importance. Sissy is taken into the Gradgrind household partly out of kindness and partly to be "a living example to Louisa of what the pursuit which has been the subject of [Louisa and Tom's] vulgar curiosity leads to and ends in" (p.17) She is to be saved; but in the end it is Sissy herself who saves Gradgrind and his family and becomes the example to Louisa. Gradgrind's "weak" and unmentioned motive in taking Sissy in - kindness - later has a redemptive effect.

In that household Sissy brings to bear an intelligence and perception which Dickens says is of the most important kind, for it is based not so much on factual knowledge as on sensitivity, compassion and an acute observation of people. Her interpretation of the world is the natural opposite of the statistical one. Sissy is not much described in these terms, but demonstrated, through one of the many brief ironic, almost ritual encounters. They are so characteristic of Dickens's method in this particular

novel that possibly the best way to highlight it is by another quotation. Sissy is telling Louisa about her stupidity in the class room; again and again she gives Mr. M'Choakumchild the wrong answer.

or Louisa, is attributable to Sissy. Only Sissy under-

stands what an immense town, and in it there are a million of inhabitants, and only five-and-twenty are starved to death in the streets in the course of a year. What is your remark on that proposition?

And my remark was - for I couldn't think of a better one - that I thought it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million. And that was wrong too'. 'Of course it was'.

'Then Mr. M'Choakumchild said he would try me once more. And he said there are stutterings - 'Statistics', said Louisa.

However, 'Yes, Miss Louisa - they always remind me of stutterings and that's another of my mistakes - of accidents upon the sea.

And I find (Mr. M'Choakumchild said) that in a given time a hundred thousand persons went to sea on long voyages and only five hundred of them were drowned or burnt to death. What is the percentage? And

I said Miss ', here Sissy fairly sobbed as confessing with extreme contrition to her greatest error, 'I said it was nothing'. 'Nothing, Sissy?'

'Nothing Miss - to the relations and friends of the people who were killed.

His villain I shall never learn", said Sissy. (pp.59-60)

nasty nature, as is shown by their different reaction to

Sissy But Sissy's conception of life has great actual

influence in the Gradgrind household. Her presence in

too well to have a contempt for her.....

the house induces the dying Mrs. Gradgrind to grasp that there is something - "not an Ology at all - that [her husband] had missed or forgotten". (p.192) That Jane is growing up radiant and loving, and so different to Tom or Louisa, is attributable to Sissy. Only Sissy understands what it costs Louisa to marry Bounderby. Louisa shuns her because of this perception, but eventually when she returns home, only Sissy can give comprehending help. Her simplicity and truth have a devastating effect on Harthouse. Too devastating perhaps for credibility, for she routs him in a single interview, and for a few pages the reader is back with an Agnes-style idealisation. However, the basic life and naturalness of Sissy, so beautifully demonstrated by such scenes as the above with Louisa, survive such a slip. Her role in Mr. Gradgrind's conversion is more credible because it is not an instant magic influence. Mr. Gradgrind may be a misguided fanatic, but his kindness to Sissy and his genuine affection for his children establishes that there is no real evil in him. His villainy is not, like Bounderby's, the result of a nasty nature, as is shown by their different reaction to Sissy's plight early in the book and to Louisa's troubles later. From the beginning Gradgrind "really liked Sissy too well to have a contempt for her..... Somehow or other,

he had become possessed by an idea that there was something in this girl which hardly be set forth in a tabular form....." (p.92) When Louisa comes home and his eyes are painfully opened, he generously acknowledges Sissy's influence. And when the revelation of Tom's downfall comes, Gradgrind is forced to depend heavily on Sissy, and through her, on Sleary's circus.

So the book comes full circle, and Hard Times takes on the formal beauty of a poetic drama. Each incident at the beginning of the book receives its ironic echo, and every dogma of Mr. Gradgrind's factual universe is confounded. The last scenes of the book have been extensively discussed by critics, especially Dr. Leavis, so I do not want to dwell overmuch on them here. But I do want to emphasise the control and system with which Dickens works out his themes, and how perfectly he dramatises his moral message. The morality tale nature of the book is best discerned in these passages, for every preceding scene is seen to have its repercussion and is given its moral import. The art of these scenes is in Dickens's dramatic imagination, in his choice of the means to convey his moral vision. They are poignant, funny, and highly symbolic; masterly writing without a single departure from economy and strict stylisation.

What actually happens at the end is deceptively simple. Gradgrind, who has despised the circus people, and rejected both their values and skills, now turns to them for help. The circus people, loyal to Sissy, save his son with an ingenious plan that involves the skill of a horse and a dog. But while this simple little tale of a reversal of fortunes is told, all the themes of the novel are gathered together and given their final expression.

Above all, Gradgrind's factual version of the world is given formal and systematic refutation. Gradgrind has propagated the idea that human relations can be reduced to the principle of self-interest, that gratitude must be abolished and replaced by fair bargain-and-hire, and that the aim of all human effort is to buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest. Each of these ideas is given a final test during the confrontation between Mr. Gradgrind and his model-pupil Bitser. One can again only quote. Mr. Gradgrind, forgetting himself in his anxiety for his son, asks Bitser if he has a heart:

"The circulation, sir", returned Bitser, smiling at the oddity of the question, 'couldn't be carried on without one. No man, sir, acquainted with the facts established by Harvey relating to the circulation of the blood, can doubt that I have a heart.'

'Is it accessible, cried Mr. Gradgrind, 'to any compassionate influence?' 'It is accessible to reason, sir', returned the excellent young man, 'and to nothing else'. (p.273)

questions about marriage.

On the principle of self interest:

'If this is solely a question of self-interest with you', Mr. Gradgrind began. 'I beg your pardon for interrupting you, sir', returned Bitser; 'but I am sure you know that the whole social system is a question of self-interest. What you must always appeal to is a person's self interest. It's your only hold. We are so constituted. I was brought up in that catechism when I was very young, sir, as you are aware. (pp. 274)

Of course it is not just the Utilitarians and their statistics that are repudiated; all these scenes contain a far wider condemnation of trends in England which Dickens

discerned. 'I really wonder sir', rejoined the old pupil in an argumentative manner, 'to find you taking a position so untenable. My schooling was paid for, it was a bargain; and when I came away the bargain ended.....I don't deny that my schooling was cheap. But that comes right sir. I was made in the cheapest market and have to dispose of myself in the dearest'. (pp.274-5)

power. Utilitarianism is seen as only the extreme manifestation. Mr. Gradgrind is thus confronted with his own system, in which, in the final analysis, he himself does not believe. In the pathetic interview between father and son,

Dickens mercilessly comments on the utilitarian worship of statistics - The Bible of the new age; Mr. Gradgrind had even quoted them as a reply to Louisa's impassioned questions about marriage.

'If a thunderbolt had fallen on me', said the father, 'it would have shocked me less than this'.
 'I don't see why', grumbled the son. 'So many people are employed in situations of trust, so many people, out of so many will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times, of its being a law. How can I help laws? You have comforted others with such things, father. Comfort yourself.' (P.271)

Of course it is not just the Utilitarians and their statistics that are repudiated; all these scenes contain a far wider condemnation of trends in England which Dickens discerned, and abhorred. The new industrialists, as represented by Bounderby, and the new Parliamentarian such as Gradgrind, were powerful men who used the catch-words Progress and Reason to dehumanise others, and to make the conditions of life intolerable for those they had in their power. Utilitarianism is seen as only the extreme manifestation of a trend in government to treat people as if indeed they were statistics and could be so manipulated.

The Circus people, in no matter how degenerate a form,

are those who oppose this trend, who still assert the essential importance of People, Art, and Nature against the encroachment of machines and statistics.

The confrontation of opposing forces is often presented, as we have seen, in terms of a simple dialogue between people. The irony of the Bitser-Gradgrind dialogue here is that now Mr. Gradgrind himself is pleading the case for humanity against cold reason. Running parallel to the sad talks between Bitser, Tom and Gradgrind is the more low-key commentary on the behaviour of Mr. Sleary and his circus. Their role in Tom's escape involves motives and concepts that are of no account to the hard facts school of thought. Mr. Sleary's motive in helping Tom has nothing to do with self-interest; it is to do with loyalty to Sissy. "The Thquire thtood by your Thethilia, and I thtand by the Thquire". (p.276) When offered money for his services he ignores economic laws in favour of simple things that are pleasant and fanciful. He wants a little feast for the company, brandy and water for himself, bells for the horse, and a collar for the dog. A nice touch, the provision for the horse and the dog, hinting that this imagination and generosity extends to the whole living world, and does not limit itself to the merely human. In the face of Sleary's

actions Mr. Gradgrind has no option but gratitude.

Most of Dickens's ironies add up to the point that an industrial society based on technical achievement and factual knowledge cannot seek to swallow up human individuality. The vitality of Sissy, the generosity of the circus people, the starved imagination and repressed emotions of Louisa cannot be tabulated or measured, but are of the same absolute importance as facts. Mr. Gradgrind arrives at an absolute dead end until he once again becomes open to the influence of unpredictable humanity. That which cannot be defined, yet survives in people despite all, is exactly the essence, the supremely important thing to grasp about life.

This all-important point is given its final expression in the purest and simplest allegoric terms - in the story of Merrylegs the dog. The asthmatic Mr. Sleary tells the tale. By some miraculous means, Merrylegs, after many years, has found his way back to the circus, and this is taken as a certain indication that his beloved master is finally dead. Mr. Gradgrind suggests that this is due solely to the dog's fine scent. But this is not enough to explain the phenomenon, just as nothing can really explain Sissy's unquestioning and fantastic faith that her father

loved her, and will return. Both these phenomena are part of a mysterious but eternal quality of life which has a strength and truth surpassing that of "fact". Says Sleary:

'.....whether her father bathely detherted her, or whether he broke hith own heart alone, rather than pull her down along with him, never will be known now Thquire, till- no, not till we know how the dogth find uth out!' 'She keeps the bottle that he sent her for to this hour and she will believe in his affection to the last moment of her life', said Mr. Gradgrind. 'It theemth to prethent two thingth to a perthon, don't it Thquire? said Mr. Sleary, musing as he looked down into the depths of his brandy and water: 'one, that there ith a love in the world, not all thelf intereth after all, but thomething very different; t'other that it hath a way of ith own of calculating or not calculating, which thomehow or other ith at leatht ath hard to give a name to ath the wayth of dogth ith!' (pp.278-9)

The moral import of Hard Times is essentially the same as that of Dombey and Son, in that both, roughly, are protests against dehumanisation. But the theme is given a much wider application in Hard Times; it is put into a political and social context, and the approach is distinctly ideological. Dickens is trying to portray political and social trends as he sees them, through the figures of Bounderby, Gradgrind and Harthouse, and to show the effects of these trends through the figures of Tom,

Louisa, Steven, Rachel and the Coketown population. There is a radical difference too, from Dombey and Son in method. The earlier novel uses mostly realistic methods of characterisation, whereas in the later book the characters are clearly allegoric as well as real, which enables Dickens to take Hard Times onto a more impersonal level, and to highlight general issues through his characters, rather than sidetracking from them to preach or expound.

The indubitable power of Hard Times is partly due to its imaginative inter-locking of two important forces in Victorian society - a utilitarian-influenced philosophy and industrialism. Mr. Gradgrind's world of fact and statistics lives side by side with Mr. Bounderby's world of factories, and there is a mutual influence. They complement each other - a world of fact, stripped of imagination, well suits a world of uncontrolled industrialism, where people are used for profit-making purposes and are stripped of their human attributes and desires. The humanity of the Coketown hands is not acknowledged - they live in dreary, identical houses that they had no say in the building of, they are surrounded by churches built for them which they never go to, they have a library full of factual books irrelevant to their needs, and the machines and factories have more strange

life and vitality in them than the people. Coketown itself is a constant background to the emotional context of the book, and its physical presence, the blight of its very existence, is reiterated often.

Coketown not only provides a background; it is also the emblem for the whole concept of industrialism; it represents all the new industrial cities, and records the effect of such cities on those who have to live in them. Industrialism is portrayed in terms of the conformity, misery, ugliness and class-division it produces - and it is all done by means of one brilliant pictorial image. Dickens often uses the word "key-note" in describing Coketown; and I think this means that he wants the town to emphasise, by its sheer physical presence, all the negative aspects of his morality tale. Merely by reiterated description of the feel, look and smell of Coketown, Dickens establishes its significance at every level of the book; imaginatively and technically, it is quite an achievement. Here is one of these descriptions:

Coketown.....was a triumph of fact, it had no greater taint of fancy in it than Mrs. Gradgrind herself. Let us strike the key-note, Coketown, before pursuing the tune. It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the slaves take on, and simultaneously an ironic comment that

these objects smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black, like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many more small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year was the counterpart of the last and the next. (p.26)

The Coketown is seen as more alive than the people in because of their conditions and hours of work, but because they are forced into a way of life which disallows imagination or any subtler form of human expression. The terms used for the factories and machinery - "face of a painted savage", "serpents of smoke", "the piston of the steam engine.....like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness"- while the people and the streets they live in are described in lifeless object terms. On subsequent pages, the factories take on a sinister, fabulous character. This is a brilliant evocation of the independent life that these things which reduce men to slaves take on, and simultaneously an ironic comment that

these objects are the only things in Coketown that have a perverted beauty or fancy in them. The factories are "illuminated like Fairy palaces" (p.66) and "the smoke-serpents, submissive to the curse of all that tribe, trailed themselves upon the earth", (p.71) the factories' "tall chimneys rise up into the air like competing Towers of Babel". (p.81) And Coketown on a hot day "seemed to be frying in oil.... The atmosphere of those Fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoom; and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert". (p.109)

The Coketown hands are deprived people, not only because of their conditions and hours of work, but because they are forced into a way of life which disallows imagination or any subtler form of human expression. The spiritual survival of two people like Steven and Rachel, is a mysterious survival against killing odds; they have the same immeasurable sense of life as Sissy in parallel circumstances. Dickens leaves very little to be guessed at in this tight parable so I can only quote him again when he seeks to make the analogy clear between the Gradgrind household and Coketown.

1. Underlining Is it possible, I wonder, that there was

any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds. Surely none of us in our sober senses, and acquainted with figures, are to be told at this time of day, that one of the foremost elements in the existence of the Coketown working people had been for scores of years deliberately set at naught? That there was any Fancy in them demanding to be brought into healthy existence, instead of struggling on in convulsions? That exactly in the ratio as they worked long and monotonously, the craving grew within them for some physical relief - some relaxation, encouraging good humour and good spirits, giving them a vent - some recognized holiday, though it were but for an honest dance to a stirring band of music - some occasional light pie in which even M'Choakumchild had no finger; which craving must and would be satisfied aright, or must and would inevitably go wrong, until the laws of Creation were repealed? (p.289)

Here is Dickens at his most explicit in stating his view that there is a fundamental natural law of life that must not be contravened. Man cannot repeal Creation; if he attempts to do it, he distorts and stultifies and "inevitably"¹ creates an impossible, potentially revolutionary situation. And it is increasingly Dickens's view that the consequences fall on offenders and the passive alike. The dehumaniser Gradgrind in the end suffers as

1. Underlining mine.

much as his victims; even Bounderby does not entirely escape consequences.

Coketown and the Gradgrind household are repeatedly related to each other as being different aspects of the one theme. There are the obvious links; the mutual usefulness of Gradgrind and Bounderby to each other, Louisa's symbolic marriage to Bounderby, the contacts made between Louisa and Steven, and Sissy's influence in both locales. Even Harthouse is brought in in this context, being a believer neither in Facts nor Industry, but willing to use and combine both sources for his own ends. But most of all Coketown and the Gradgrinds are connected by a brilliant use of language. It is a concentrated, interlocking language, which rarely wastes a line, and each line is charged with significance and implication. An example of this language occurs when Louisa is asking her father whether she should marry Bounderby.

..... she sat so long looking silently towards the town, that he said at length, 'Are you consulting the chimneys of the Coketown works, Louisa?' 'There seems to be nothing there but languid and monotonous smoke. Yet when night comes, Fire bursts out, father!' she answered, turning quickly. 'Of course I know that, Louisa. I do not see the application of the remark!' To do him justice, he did not at all. (p.99)

is his But the reader does. It is a masterly stroke, at multiple levels. It reveals Louisa's own conflicts, it connects the rhythm of her emotional life with the rhythm of Coketown, and it shadows forth the human and industrial troubles soon to erupt in the town. There is also possibly a reference to the pillars of smoke and column of fire of the old Testament¹ - a suitably apocalyptic note. All these implications are contained in a handful of lines - it is brilliantly economic language, and so little recognised as being an authentic Dickensian voice among others.

Dickens's polemic doesn't limit itself to creating emblematic figures that represent the good values and bad values, and placing them in surroundings that also reflect these values. The polemic extends far into each characterisation. Hard Times is notable for the successful double function of all its characters. This point is best illustrated by examples, and Louisa can be discussed here, for to my mind, surprisingly, she is successful both as a character and as a vehicle for the ideas of the book. I say surprisingly because the portrayal a serious young woman has so far been Dickens's greatest downfall. Louisa

1. This last pointed suggested by Dr. Reimer.

is his big break-through in female characterisation, for she is neither over-sentimentalised, simple or saintly. Her characteristics are thoroughly individual and are given a thoughtful rationale. Deprived of the natural outlet of imagination, given no material on which to conjecture or dream, and having no means of self-expression, Louisa grows up emotionally starved. She has enough intelligence to be intensely aware of her deprivation. Dickens is often at pains to show in detail how her starved imagination and starved emotions struggle to assert themselves in spite of pride and despair. In fact, all of Louisa's major actions are motivated by uninformed emotions or an untutored sense of values. She marries Bounderby ostensibly because "it makes no difference", but really out of love for Tom. She gives money to Steven, in defiance of her upbringing, out of compassion. Inexperienced in the nuances of feeling, she can have no idea whether she loves Harthouse or not. Confused, she returns home on the eve of an elopement. Her motives for doing so are complicated and unclear; certainly they cannot be factually determined. She says:

'I do not know that I am sorry; I do not know that I am ashamed; I do not know that I am degraded in my own

esteem. All I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means.' (p.210)

Such utterances may be a little melodramatic, but they do not come from a cardboard figure. Louisa, being introverted, intense, proud and self-controlled, is in the Dickens tradition of dark tormented women (e.g. Edith, Rosa Dartle, Lady Dedlock, Miss Wade). But she is by far the most believable; we know precisely why she is as she is; we understand, and are even shown much more than usual of her inner struggle.

So Louisa is credible in purely psychological terms, and also has some dramatic reality. At the same time she is presented as a paradigm example of the results of Gradgrindian training. Her yearning towards another form of life is both personal and an ideological point in Dickens's argument. We are rarely jarred by a gap between Louisa's two functions, because Dickens has established his multiple-function characterisation in that first comparison of Sissy and Bitser and has maintained it with very little strain. The amazing thing is rather, that given her patently clear symbolic function, Louisa is also given a degree of psychological complexity.

The double function of some other characters is less explicit. Take Mr. Bounderby and Mrs. Sparsit. The foremost way they strike us is as a little comic relief in a book hardly abounding with the usual Dickensian diversions. It also becomes clear that they are a classic satire on inverted snobbery. F.R. Leavis says that together with Harthouse, who pretends not to care for class but is the decadent upper class personified, they "form a trio that suggests the whole system of class snobbery".¹ I think it would be more accurate to say that the threesome are an acute contemporary observation of the changing class structure. Mrs. Sparsit fights for a foothold in the new industrial world and eventually loses the battle, Mr. Bounderby worships the old values but that does not stop him exerting his power over those who still represent them, and James Harthouse cynically sells his class value to the new men.

As well as all this, Bounderby and Mrs. Sparsit have another more subtle dimension. They are upholders of the hard facts school, and discourage any sentiment or fancy, especially in the poor. Mr. Bounderby leads a most matter-

1. F.R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (Chapter on Hard Times) Peregrine 1962.

of-fact life of making money. But even in this unlikely household, Fancy, of a most peculiar kind, flourishes. Mr. Bounderby and Mrs. Sparsit each reinforce their own social position by playing on the social position of the other. Through Mrs. Sparsit, Mr. Bounderby can express his own snobbery; he rounds on Sissy when she forgets to curtsy to a "highly connected lady", and when his marriage breaks up he reminds Gradgrind that Louisa is not a born lady after all. All this would not be an unusual piece of Dickens satire on social pretensions but for the added subtlety of the point that each base their pretensions on lies. Mr. Bounderby's origins are poor but highly respectable, and Mrs. Sparsit's family connections prove doubtful at best. We last see her with the much touted Lady Scadger "in a mean little airless lodging, a mere closet for one, a mere hovel for two". (p.282) As Butt and Tillotson put it, "Here at the very centre of the dominion of Fact are people indulging in Fancy, a peculiarly repulsive Fancy maybe, but Fancy still."¹

Nor is there in Mr. Bounderby an ideal consistency in his devotion to Fact. He tells Steven that the hard fact

House and hard Times he has abandoned doing out money

rewards for virtue to the weak and poor. There is no
1. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, Dickens at Work, p.208.
U.P. 1968.

is that he is married forever, for better or for worse, and it is presumption of his part to try to do anything about it. But he himself repudiates this 'fact of existence' by smartly getting rid of Louisa when she no longer suits him. Even among those who believe Fancy quite banished from their lives, it comes out, if in distorted forms. Mr. Gradgrind indulges in the greatest 'fancy' of all - that his system is a success and contributes to the happiness and welfare of his children. Yet he has plenty of available evidence to the contrary long before Louisa's breakdown. James Harthouse is devoted to meaninglessness of everything, which Dickens sees as not far removed from being devoted to the relative meaninglessness of facts. But he too is inconsistent in that interview with Sissy; he takes her seriously and leaves at her request, thus acting for once out of imaginative sympathy with someone else.

The survival of the essential human values despite the most adverse circumstances, is increasingly Dickens's one ground for optimism. By the time of writing Bleak House and Hard Times he has abandoned doling out modest rewards for virtue to the weak and poor. There is a more

Critics have taken this to show Dickens's idealism

hard-headed realism in his depiction of the poor as perpetual victims, with no hope of mercy from their employers, and no relief from the daily monotony of their lives. The only hope lies in the occasional survival of a spiritual life. Steven and Rachel are miracles of such survival. Louisa, in her different but related sphere, just salvages her spiritual life. But Dickens also emphasises what cost and deprivation these people endure, and how limited and minor are their victories. Steven's is a Phyrrie victory, and while Louisa regains herself, it is through choosing a very modest and sacrificing life. *Tale of Two Cities* he veers between an empathy

For It has been often noted that there is a deep ambiguity in Dickens's sympathy for the oppressed worker, and this ambiguity is most explicit in Hard Times. His deepest sympathy goes out to the factory workers of Coketown, and he undoubtedly uses his powers to awaken the reader's sympathy as well. Yet while conceding that the life they are forced to lead must not be borne in silence, he seems at the same time to be denying them a legitimate revolt. It seems hard to draw any other conclusion because of the introduction of Slackbridge the union organiser as a nasty villain, a Uriah Heep industrialised.

Critics have taken this to show up Dickens's indecision;

at the last minute he opts out of taking sides, by making Slackbridge as much a villain as Bounderby. Certainly there is a lot of evidence to show that Dickens was very ambivalent about social revolution. He felt strongly that Britain was threatened by Revolution, and that the Government and upper classes were courting it through stupidity and indifference to the masses. And he seemed to think that a revolution in England was increasingly justified. Yet he also had a deep fear of the violence involved and was obsessed by a horrible vision of what the uncontrolled mass could do. In books like Barnaby Rudge and a Tale of Two Cities he veers between an empathy for the oppressed and a vivid imagination for the horrors they could commit. He alternates between attraction and repulsion. Hard Times can be seen as another uneasy Dickensian compromise. Steven's complaints against the system are more than justified, and Dickens sees his patience and doggedness as not altogether a virtue. Yet by a transparent plot device, (his swearing to Rachel that he will not get into trouble), he is saved from the revolutionary role of a striker, and given a more acceptable martyr's death instead.

This does seem the intention to our socially-aware

20th century eyes. But I think Dickens's evasion of the issue was a more complicated one than it appears. For one, it is quite possible that Dickens did not intend his characterisation of Slackbridge to have the general application that we give it with a century of union history and polemics behind us. Unions were then still in an infant stage, their strength largely untried, and Dickens could merely have been offering a correct piece of social observation on the opportunists who were entering labour agitation, and giving warning of such a development. Secondly the episode can also be seen as grappling with a problem as important now as it was then; how to reconcile the aims of social justice and individual freedom. The two are together the books' major moral imperatives; Dickens cries out against the social injustice of Coketown industrialism, and he also repeatedly asserts the individuals' right of self-expression. He was too intelligent not to see a potential clash between the two ideals, and too honest to ignore it. He shows us that Steven's personal freedom, the most private expression of himself, is at stake; why should he sacrifice it, even in the cause of furthering social justice? Steven has it in himself to resist the concerted pressure of the workers not to break a promise.

just as he resists the pressure of Bounderby. Limited and bound as he is, he still asserts the supremacy of the individual. Dickens's portrayal of this dilemma shows just how far he has come from the 'goodies and baddies', black-and-white morality of his earlier books. It is part of that fairness and sense of balance that Cockshut sees emerging in Bleak House. Dickens was in the best sense apolitical; he was convinced it was not his job to offer political solutions to problems, only to pinpoint them. If he saw the Slackbridges of the time for what they were - crafty and dubiously-motivated men - he probably felt he had the right to portray them as such, and not politicise the issue.

As for Steven, I think it obvious that Dickens uses him for his overall moral design rather for the political issue of the strike. In a sense Steven is Louisa's parallel. He has led a life of deprivation, disappointment and monotony, but somehow or other, as has Louisa, he has preserved a fine untutored moral sense - almost a capability, an imaginative capability for moral vision. To him the first importance is the trust between himself and Rachel. He has full sympathy for the strikers, and it is clear that he would otherwise join them but his first moral absolute is not to break a promise.

Having said all this, one must still concede that the story of Steven is not a success. There is too deep an ambiguity about the confrontation of Slackbridge the striker, mean and nasty, and Steven the non-striker, honourable and decent. Even if we allow that Steven's role in the strike is just part of the entire moral scheme of the novel, and therefore allowable, we must still ask, why did Dickens choose a strike for Steven to balk at? To choose the controversial strike, and even seem to come down on the side of obedience and passivity from the workers, is a stupidity in a book that is otherwise so radical in its treatment of industrial England. Whatever Dickens's conscious intentions, there seems a subconscious need to evade the question of revolutionary action. He cannot bring himself to come down on the side of the strikers, yet everything else in the book indicates that he should. The confusion that Steven expresses is probably very much Dickens's own:

'Deed we are in a muddle, sir. Look round town - so such as 'tis - and see the numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein heer, fur to weave, an' to card, an' to piece out a livin', aw the same one way, somehows twixt their cradles and their graves. Look how we live, an' wheer we live, an' in

somehow what numbers, an' by what chances, an'
 wi' what sameness an' look how the
 so popula mills is awlus a-going, and how they
 in husen never works us no nigher to ony dis'ant
 in his ab object - ceptin awlus, Death. Look how
 you considers of us, and writes of us,
 and talks of us, and goes up wi' yor
 deputations to secretaries o' state
 expression bout us, and how yo are awlus right,
 and how we are awlus wrong, and never
 years of had'n no reason in us sin ever we were
 born. Look how, this ha growen, sir,
 bigger an bigger, broader an broader,
 harder an harder fro generation unto
 generation. Who can look on't sir,
 and fairly tell a man 'tis not a muddle?'
 (p.145)

Dickens's primary concern as a novelist, even in this
 his most political book, is with the moral universe. He
 is a brilliant moralist on the obvious, and the way he
 demonstrates well-known truth, even cliches, invests them
 with new meaning. The appeal of Hard Times is something
 akin to the appeal of the New Testament; like Christ,
 Dickens has a great gift for moral parables and for
 illuminating them through story, yet the parable itself
 may not break any astonishing new ground. The universal
 and embracing quality of Dickensian morality is, I think,
 the reason he has always been loved both by ordinary
 people and by intellectuals, and the reason he does not
 date in any important way. His enormous popularity cannot
 be explained away, as some critics have tried to do, by
 saying he was a crude non-intellectual entertainer who

somehow happened to be a genius as well. He remains so popular because of his grasp of what is universal in human aspirations and emotions. His genius appears in his ability to give these universals such effective expression.

The last novel to be considered is Little Dorrit, which was completed in 1857 when Dickens was forty-five years of age. In some ways I find it the most interesting. It contains many elements of the four previous novels and continues familiar themes. But it also offers the most mature vision of Victorian society that Dickens ever produced; at the least Our Mutual Friend is its only rival in that sphere. It has extraordinary range. There is a return to an interest in individual character virtually abandoned since Dombey and Son, and a re-asking of some of the unanswered questions of David Copperfield. It has the sweep and grand conception of Bleak House, while retaining the more particular and precise social anatomy of Hard Times. And it breaks some new ground.

In Little Dorrit Dickens seems to be going back to first principles, re-asking the questions that fundamentally interest him, but in a new way. He asks: how is a personality formed; how does a group of people interact to eventually form the entity Society. In how far is the individual responsible for what Society does, or how far is it responsible

CHAPTER 5

LITTLE DORRIT

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to him? These are questions of interest in every Dickens novel, but the interest is usually implicit, or part of more specific concerns. Here the questions are tackled by making the entire novel one metaphorical analysis, (the metaphor being the prison), of how Society functions. The book's first title, "Nobody's Fault", gives a further clue to its basic concerns. How is the social structure created; how does it perpetuate itself, who, if anybody, is responsible for it? Another, possibly simpler way of putting this is to say that the basic theme of the novel is the relation between the individual and society, or the relation of the individual will to external circumstances.

This theme leads Dickens back to the most detailed and serious look at the individual personality since Dombey and Son. But the aim of individual analysis is much broader than in the first novel, because the perspective is always that of the individual's social relations. From the individual Dickens wants to build Society to reflect its own image; he will tell us about one specific prisoner in one prison, the Marlsalsea, and from that point, about all human prisoners in Society's prison.

It has become only too obvious to point out the prison

symbol in Little Dorrit. I have no wish to repeat what other critics have said well, but I see no way of discussing the novel adequately without bringing it up, for it is the central idea of the book. But I will try to discuss it as an idea rather than in its actual symbolic manifestations. The prison as image is more forceful and more persuasive than anything even in Bleak House. The fog in Bleak House, for instance, as well as being its physical self, can also be seen as representing Chancery and the general mess England is in. But the fog is just one of quite a few symbolically significant objects, whereas in Little Dorrit the prison is central to the narrative and the absolutely dominant image. As Lionel Trilling has pointed out, the prison image is so powerful in Little Dorrit, partly because it is strongly established as a reality before it actually emerges as a symbol.¹ The concrete feel of the Marlalsea prison is essential to our involvement in the novel long before it makes itself known to us as symbolically significant. And because Dickens makes the Marslalsea so real and important, and so much the story,

1. Lionel Trilling, The Opposing Self in Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays (ed. Martin Price), p.149. Spectrum Books 1967.

its range as symbol is more deeply and intuitively felt by the reader than the mud and fog of Bleak House, or even the dust heaps in Our Mutual Friend.

The way that the idea of prison pervades plot, character and atmosphere makes for new levels of awareness. People are constantly described in prison terms, whether it is self-imprisonment (especially through self deceit), or enforced imprisonment. The physical locales of the book are usually prisons of one sort or another. Behind this exhaustive categorisation of imprisonment, physical, mental, atmospheric, imagined or real, is a constant evaluation of the intellectual concept of freedom and its opposite. Little Dorrit is, in idea, simpler than Bleak House, but there is an extraordinary power and flexibility in the exploration of one concept.

The importance of the prison concept to the book can be discerned in the gradual, methodical way Dickens brings it to light. Every one of the first five chapters introduces something relevant to the prison-as-theme, but it is not until Chapter 6, after a most subtle development, that the reader realises the central importance the prison will have in the plot. The larger implications are left till later still. In the famous first chapter we are shown, seemingly

at random, Cavaletto and Blandois rotting in a hot Marseilles cell. An introductory point is made about the animalisation of men in confinement. In the second chapter, another form of imprisonment, quarantine, is sketched in, and it is hinted that men in confinement begin to act like "jailbirds" in a remarkably short time, chafe to get out, yet begin to relent towards their prison the minute they are let out. The third chapter introduces Arthur Clennam's home where he was "jailed" for twenty years, and "morally handcuffed as a child" (p.34)¹ to fanatic religion. Mrs. Clennam's house is a place of gloomy confinement, and she talks of herself as "in prison and in bonds here" (p.59) although it is already hinted that the nature of the bonds is ambiguous. In chapters four and five we are given the background to Arthur's will-lessness, and introduced to another prisoner Affery, bound by her double jailers Flintwinch and Mrs. Clennam.

Such is the preparation for the grand setting of Part I - in chapter 6 the Marsalsea is introduced. And without delay, the characteristic paradox of the book is announced.

1. This and all future quotations are taken from Little Dorrit, Collins 1958.

The drunken doctor who brings Little Dorrit into the world tells us that there is no absolute state of imprisonment, just as being in the outside world does not necessarily entail freedom. The doctor extols the prison:

....."A little more elbow room is all we want here. We are quiet here; we don't get badgered here; there's no knocker here, sir, to be hammered at by the creditors and bring a man's heart into his mouth. Nobody comes here to ask if a man's at home, and to say he'll stand on the doormat till he is. Nobody writes threatening letters about money to this place. Its freedom, sir, its freedom! I have had today's practice at home and abroad, on a march and aboard ship, and I tell you this; I don't know that I have ever pursued it under such quiet circumstances as here this day. Elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here, sir. We have done all that - we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace. That's the word for it. Peace." (p.71)

It is soon the same with Mr. Dorrit. "Crushed at first by his imprisonment, he soon found a dull relief in it. He was under lock and key, but the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out." (p.71)

Neither imprisonment or freedom are absolute states, Dickens implies, and the individual's mode of dealing with ones like the Marshalsea jail and the Marshalseas. All

either circumstance is of fundamental importance. Mr. Dorrit finds a relief in his imprisonment, and within the set limits, takes on a role which he can enjoy. Free and rich, as Dickens later amply shows, he is more limited and enslaved to his new role than he was when a prisoner in the conventional sense. Little Dorrit's personality is entirely different, but parallel things happen to her. She is a 'prison child' and has known no other environment. Yet through her selfless care for her family she achieves a kind of spiritual freedom - almost a religious-style freedom from the self and surroundings. Once the family is free and she loses her self-denying role, she suffers a real deprivation, almost a loss of identity. She is in a prison with far more power to trouble her than the walls of the Marshalsea. She is walled in by her family's pretensions and Society's demands, she is burdened by gold, the enforced idleness of the rich. Her very maid oppresses her - she is Little Dorrit's "mistress, and a very hard one". (p.439) Her family humiliates her for retaining the prison taint, i.e. for continuing to be herself.

leave her alone:

There are many variations of this theme, as I will later show, and they become part of Dickens's emerging thesis that there are many types of prison besides real ones like the Marshalsea jail and the Marshalsea. All

Society is one self-created prison; from the highest to the low people enslave themselves to the mysterious gods of money, power and prestige. Among the best examples of the Janus-nature of imprisonment are the Merdles. Mrs. Merdle, seemingly the all-powerful social arbiter, is but a machine, a jewel-stand, a product brought by Mr. Merdle for the consumption of Society. At most she is a mere mouthpiece for Society's rules. In the scene where she and Fanny discuss her only son's future, Dickens prepares our attitude towards it, by first describing the parrot as; "on the outside of a golden cage, holding on by its beak, with its scaly legs in the air and putting itself into many strange upside-down postures". He adds, "This peculiarity has been observed in birds of quite another feather, climbing upon golden wires." (p.230) The bird is outside its cage, and its cage is made of gold, but it contorts and distorts itself like the imprisoned creature it is. It is used throughout this scene as a commentary on Mrs. Merdle and her society cage. She is putting a case to Fanny the dancer, as to why Fanny should leave her son alone:

"He is a little gay, a thing Society is accustomed to in young men, and he is very impressible. Perhaps he inherits that misfortune. I am very impressible

myself, by nature. The weakest of creatures-my feelings are touched in a moment!"

She said all this, and everything else, coldly as a woman of snow; quite forgetting the sisters except at odd times, and apparently addressing some abstraction of Society; for whose behoof, too, she occasionally arranged her dress, or the composition of her figure upon the ottoman.

'So he is very impressible. Not a misfortune in our natural state, I dare say, but we are not in a natural state. Much to be lamented, no doubt, particularly by myself, who am a child of nature if I could but show it; but so it is. Society supresses us and dominates us - Bird, be quiet!" The parrot had broken into violent fits of laughter, after twisting divers bars of his cage with his crooked bill, and licking them with his black tongue. (p.232)

Mr. Merdle sacrifices everything for Society, and he

feels Then there is Mr. Merdle, who is indubitably a swindler of society and a disgrace to Society, but paradoxically, he is also sacrificial victim of both.

There are numerous ways this double role is acted out. Society abases itself before him for his money, and uses him up too. His dinners and entertainments are all propitiatory gifts to an insatiable Society, and he creeps around unwanted and drinks "his eighteenpence worth of tea". When Mrs. Merdle is away, Society decides to have dinners at his place when it wants, and informs him of the date. His chief Butler is his ever-present

accuser and jailer. Mr. Merdle lives in fear of him, but does not dare sack him for "unappeasable Society would have him - and got him". (p.241) Mr. Merdle has no human relatives or connections in the ordinary sense; he owes nothing because he needs it or it gives him personal comfort. His wife's bosom for instance "was not a bosom to repose upon, but it was a capital bosom to hang jewels upon. Mr. Merdle wanted something to hang jewels upon, and he brought it for the purpose". (p.238) Mr. Sparkler might be an idiot to his father-in-law, but no matter - he was a proper young man-about-town and "Society was satisfied with its son-in-law". (p.240) Mr. Merdle sacrifices everything for Society, and he feels the burden of the sacrifice very much. When Mrs. Merdle accuses him of not behaving correctly in Society, he bursts out:

'Why in the name of all infernal powers, Mrs. Merdle, who does more for Society than I do? Do you see these premises, Mrs. Merdle? Do you see this furniture, Mrs. Merdle? Do you look in the glass and see yourself, Mrs. Merdle? Do you know the cost of all this, and who its all provided for? And yet you will tell me that I oughtn't to go into Society? I who shower money upon it in this way? I, who might almost be said to - harness myself to a watering-cart full of money and go about saturating Society every day of my life". (p.375)

Mr. Merdle has swindled thousands of people, but it seems as if his original motive - no doubt to get rich - has been swallowed up by the present compulsion to keep on satisfying Society's demands on him as a rich man. He is particularly wounded by his wife's judgement that he has no place in Society "after all - all!" he has done for it.

Dickens underlines Mr. Merdle's double role of power and imprisonment with brilliant imagery. Mr. Merdle is always handcuffing himself, taking himself into custody and so on. This hints both at Mr. Merdle's own sense of guilt, and his sense of entrapment in his surroundings. The passive-active duality is also brought out in Mr. Merdle's sickness - he suffers passively from an undiagnosable illness, yet it turns out to be a self-created one, his own conscience no less. In the end the millionaire has no way out but to kill himself, but the trap he has fallen into is not entirely of his own making. The whole of England has been, if not quite an accomplice, the most willing of dupes in the swindle. Bent on full-blown capitalism and in the grip of money-making fever, England creates an image of Mr. Merdle for itself, creates a common pipe-dream. The ordinary people have taken possession of the Merdle-myth and use it as much as high society has. So

Merdle kills himself as much from a sense of being oppressed and no longer in control, as from a guilty conscience or fear.

Even the Barnacles, men of great power or hangers-on to men of power, do not escape imprisonment. To keep up their prestige, they have to live at the "centre of the habitable globe" and so willingly incarcerate themselves in "little temples of inconvenience". (p.113) Mr. Tite Barnacle himself lives almost on Grosvenor Square in "one of those fearful little coops" which smells "like a sort of bottle filled with a strong distillation of mews". (p.114)¹ Mr. Tite Barnacle affords Dickens a delightful opportunity for his double-edged imagery of captivity:

He wound and wound folds of white cravat round his neck, as he wound and wound folds of tape and paper round the neck of the country. His wrist bands and collar were oppressive; his voice and manner were oppressive. He had a large watch chain and a bunch of seals, a waistcoat buttoned up to inconvenience, an unwrinkled pair of trousers, a stiff pair of boots. He was altogether splendid, massive, overpowering and impracticable. He seemed to have been sitting for his portrait to Sir Thomas Lawrence all the days of his life. (p.114)

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1. Similarly, the Merdles live, not really by free choice, in Harley St. Cavendish Square, full of gloomy and cavernous houses, where people of their standing have to live.

So the circle goes round. Whatever it is that binds each person - money, social status, power, self-delusion, physical or mental chains - each individual, bound and separate, adds to the vast social prison. A real jail is only the physical manifestation of the collective psyche. Each person's self-prison tends to deaden his individual will, and makes for maimed, ritualised human contacts. This ritualised contact has no liberating effect as spontaneous human contact would; rather it causes people to withdraw from each other to further fortify their personal prisons. One could draw on many examples, because as in Bleak House, Dickens makes many of his characters go through essentially the same maze; - the variety of situation and character only emphasises the sameness of the dilemma. But I want to discuss this question from a more specific angle: how is the theme of imprisonment expressed through characterisation? In what way do Dickens characters act out their imprisonment?

I think Dickens concentrates on two important aspects of self-imprisonment - social pretension and self deception. Familiar themes for him, as the other books discussed show, but in Little Dorrit he perfects an impressive method for discussing them afresh. Firstly there is a subordination

Footnote on p. 25 and Strachey's chapter on Dickens' Attitude to His Readers.

of these themes to that of the Prison, as actuality, symbol, imagery. Secondly, Dickens enlarges on his themes mainly through his now highly developed method of character groupings.

I have already said that in this novel there is a renewed interest in the individual character and a new depth in the characterisation. But by this I do not mean that Dickens has improved on his obvious lacks in characterisation. He still has no concept of the rounded character who becomes increasingly known to the reader as every facet of him is explored: there is still very little 'seeing from the inside', and little access to the introverted and secret part of the personality.¹ How then is an advance in characterisation made?

It has already discernibly been Dickens's method to

1. It is too easy to interpret this lack as just a blind spot in Dickens's perceptiveness. He doesn't give his characters too much inner life, not necessarily because he is unable to do so, and certainly not because he is unaware of the existence or importance of an inner consciousness. It is part of his theoretical conception of a character not to reveal too much of his inner workings so as to retain that certain amount of mystery and uncertainty which he felt gave a character integrity, and made him continuously interesting. He hated what he called a "dissective" tendency in writers i.e. a tendency to over-analyse, rather than letting the characters act themselves out and thus explain themselves. See also footnote on p. 85 and Strong's chapter on Dickens' Attitude to His Readers.

take up one aspect of the human personality for examination and portion out this attribute to various characters in the novel. This gives him the opportunity to point out similarities, variations and parallels within the one general characteristic. Typical of this method too is the setting up of a contrasting group, with an opposite attribute parcelled out between them, affording the author opportunity for plenty of contrast, irony and moral comment. There have been many such groupings; random examples are the 'investment in others' group in Dombey and Son, the 'obsessive parent' group in David Copperfield, the 'possessed by a single idea' group in Bleak House, and so on. But these examples, easily noticeable as they are, have not the high organisation discernible in Little Dorrit. Till Little Dorrit, the most meaningful character groupings are in Dombey and Son; they are a crude version of the more complicated methods of the later book. In Little Dorrit the method of character grouping is perfected, and it controls the book's mechanisms; the scope of characterisation has widened, and the judgements made are more subtle.

These are the vague statements, but I will try to show what I mean. Take Mr. Dorrit, who one of the few Dickens characters who retain elements of the 'humour' character,

but are also meant to be taken fully and seriously. But in what sense are we to take him seriously? He is certainly not shown from all angles; his secrets, past, and inner life are not fully delineated. We see him mainly in two aspects, in his aspirations to gentility and in his astounding ability to deceive himself. If this were all, we would have a cardboard picture of him. But Dickens uses Mr. Dorrit as the outstanding, highlighted embodiment of these traits, while other more minor characters reflect and magnify them, and show the different aspects one trait can assume. Thus the search-light is trained not just on the individual, but on that broader thing, the human personality. What we miss in Dickens, the detailed knowledge of one entity, is made up for by a broader vision of the nature of people. Mr. Dorrit by himself may not be totally satisfactory as a character, but taken together with all the other portraits of false gentility or self-deception, there emerges a profound and detailed view of how the human personality can function.

Mr. Dorrit in prison claims a gentility that no longer has any relevance, if it ever had any. He clings to the idea of himself as a gentleman, the more as it is his one remaining cause for self-respect. But this enshrinement of his gentility corrupts and burdens his children, and

weakens his own will. In proportion as he can believe in his standing and prestige within the Marlsalsea, his will to leave it is atrophied. His self-made myth is a source of absurd contradiction and inner corruption:

The more fatherly he grew to the Marlsalsea, and the more dependant he became on the contributions of his changing family, the greater stand he made by his forlorn gentility. With the same hand that pocketed a collegian's half-crown half an hour ago, he would wipe away the tears that streamed over the cheeks if any reference was made to his daughters earning their bread. So over and above other daily cares, the child of the Marlsalsea had always the care upon her of preserving the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars together. (p.80)

Mr. Dorrit's pretensions to gentility may have been harmless in their origin, but during the long years in prison they become his 'raison d'être'. His value-world is centred around it, his relations to others ruled by it. For example, there is the tantrum Mr. Dorrit throws when Little Dorrit comes into the prison on the arm of Old Nandy the pauper. The difference between Mr. Dorrit and Nandy as to poverty and decrepitude are slight, and if anything to Dorrit's own disadvantage on the point of actual liberty. All the same Mr. Dorrit waxes hysterical, and after recovering from his first shock, he says:

the pauper a shilling for tobacco, which old Nandy receives

"I will forget it as soon as I can. I', out in with hysterical cheerfulness, 'I - shall soon be able to discuss it. It is perfectly true, my dear, that I am always glad to see my old pensioner - as such, as such - and that I do - ha - extend as much protection and kindness to the - hum the bruised reed - I trust I may call him without impropriety - as in my circumstances, I can. It is quite true that this is the case, my dear child. At the same time, I presume in doing this, if I may - ha - if I may use the expression - Spirit - Becoming Spirit. And there are some things which are', he stopped to sob, 'irreconcilable with that, and wound that - wound it deeply. It is not that I have seen my good Amy attentive, and - ha - condescending to my old pensioner - it is not that that hurts me. It is, if I am to close the painful subject by being explicit, that I have seen my child, my own daughter, coming into this College out of the public streets - smiling! smiling! - arm in arm with - O my God, a livery!' (p.352)

In the scene that follows, Dorrit proceeds to reinstate his social superiority, so recently threatened by kindness and simplicity. He is benevolent and patronising to Nandy, and generously lets him partake of the meal provided by Clennam's bank-note - but standing, with his food spread out on a newspaper on the window-ledge; just a couple of feet away to establish the correct social distance. He keeps up a running commentary on Nandy's failing powers and senility which all applies more correctly to himself. And as a final gesture, the bankrupt gives the pauper a shilling for tobacco, which old Nandy receives

with true gratitude. Similar ironies are pointed out in Dorrit's relationship to his brother Frederick; the bound man patronises the free, and plays his superior, for he has maintained his 'gentility' while Frederick has given himself up to poverty and dirt.

Mr. Dorrit's pretensions can also be found in his children, Tip and Fanny, who inherit the family myth. But it is not as easy for them to maintain it with panache, because they are forced to survive in the outside world as well. Fanny veers between being an aggressive fighter for survival, and having impossible ambitions to be recognized as a lady. Her release from the prison existence makes very little difference to her motivations. She is like her father in that she aids and abets him in the vaunting of their gentility, and in that her occasional fits of guilt, like his, are covered up by hysterical self-justification and self-pity. But she is no replica of him; in her, social pretension blends with a domineering and self-willed character. But Dickens wants us to see Fanny as not innately dislikeable, only a prisoner of her circumstances at all times. As she says of herself, when Amy asks her about her future life with Mr. Sparkler;

'It wouldn't be an unhappy life, Amy.
It would be the life I am fitted for.

Whether by disposition, or by circumstances, is no matter; I am better fitted for such a life than for almost any other'. (p.553)

For Tip's weak character, the contrast between prison life and the world of gentility has been too much. He tries to buffer himself against the sordid reality of his condition with the family pride, as when ^{he} makes a beggar's appeal to Clennam for money. When rejected, he cuts Clennam on the grounds "that he doesn't treat me like a gentleman". (p.357) Father and son, in the scene of high comedy that follows, compete as to who is more gentlemanly and has more spirit in begging for money.

Mrs. General is an outstanding character in this grouping. Respectability is her profession. She is a parasite on the illusions of the Dorrits, as well as being accepted by society as a standard-setter for these illusions. She trades in the myths of class and correct behaviour; her speciality is the deadening and varnishing of all natural impulses. In her world true values are reversed - she deems that Fanny has "force of character, and self-reliance, Amy, none". (p.444) There is some very funny and harsh satire on Mrs. General and I cannot resist quoting a little of it:

ironies. Mrs. General was the daughter of a clerical dignitary in a cathedral town, where she led the fashion until she was as near forty-five as a single lady can be. A stiff commissariat officer of sixty, famous as a martinet, had become enamoured of the gravity with which she drove the proprieties four-in-hand through the cathedral town society, and had solicited to be taken beside her on the box of the cool coach of ceremony to which the team was harnessed. His proposal of marriage being accepted by the lady, the Commissary took his seat behind the proprieties with great decorum, and Mrs. General drove until the Commissary died. In the course of their united journey, they ran over several people who came in the way of the proprieties, but always in high style, and with composure....' In this state of affairs it occurred to Mrs. General that.... she might harness the proprieties to the carriage of some young lady of distinction..... and become at once driver and guard of such a vehicle through the social mazes. (pp.421-2)

with Mrs. General is hired to guarantee the Dorrit's acceptance into high society. In turn, the Merdles are accomplices to the Dorrit's pretence. In their behaviour to each other, they exhibit a sort of mutual complicity; both families have a secret, both have to maintain a face to the world. As the subsequent events show, the mutual esteem of Mr. Merdle and Mr. Dorrit at their first meeting is one of the book's most macabre

ironies. changing, but the social pretences are as strong

Little Dorrit is remarkable for its acute dissection of the new-style alliance between money and class in English society. The fact that the Dorrits are now very rich gives them quite enough surface respectability for society people. They are certainly good enough for the Merdles although the highest society is wary of them, while the Merdles are accepted by everybody because they are very rich indeed. In the England of the fifties, the Barnacle aristocracy was rapidly breaking down in the face of the great wealth of the big businessmen and industrialists. The growing power of the big businessmen was first shown in Dombey and Son, but a distance was still kept between the cousin Phoenixes of the aristocracy and the commercial Dombey. By the time of Little Dorrit, the businessmen have surmounted most social barriers, but they conspire with the aristocracy to maintain the myth that good birth is all that matters. Mrs. Merdle commiserates with Mrs. Gowan over her son's 'low' marriage, both playing an elaborate game to mask the reality that financially Henry has married very adequately, which is all that really matters. The middle class is still despised because it has not enough money to make up for its deficiencies in breeding. The realities of the relationship of class to

money are changing, but the social pretences are as strong as ever.

Even the decent honest middle class, on a moderate income and not yearning for more, up till now so loved and idealised by Dickens, are here shown as not exempt from blame. Mr. Meagles is a good man, but his goodness does not preclude the vice of social pretension and his snobbery is not just harmless eccentricity. He would have been more active in his opposition to Pet's marriage had it not been for the consolation of the Barnacles as relations. He is solemn in tracing their family tree, is delighted with their patronage, and ceases to be his natural and simple self in their company.

Even at the lowest rungs, belief in the social myth is very evident. The Dorrits, in prison and in disgrace with normal society, are still part of an elaborate pecking order. The prison recreates outside society in miniature. The prisoners are more than ready to concede Mr. Dorrit's place at the top of their social tree. The Plornishes admire Mr. Dorrit for his refusal to know that his daughters earn their living. John Chivery, while loving little Dorrit for herself, is also humbly aware of her station compared to his, and seriously respects her "high souled brother" and "spirited sister". (p.212) When John and Flora

both pay a call on the now rich Mr. Dorrit during his visit to London, they are shocked by the treatment they receive but not really angered by it; they both assume that Mr. Dorrit, being rich, now has a right to behave quite differently towards them.

Thus the evil so remorselessly dissected in Mr. Dorrit cuts through the whole social framework and imprisons everyone who accepts it. And there seems no end to the evil of social pretense and pretension, for the only desire of those in power is to stick to the status quo, and therefore to ceaselessly perpetuate their false beliefs. Accordingly, Mr. Dorrit's exposure of his past just before his death causes hardly a ripple, because the people present cannot allow it to reflect on their past acceptance of him. When the Merdle crash comes, Society, to save its own face, decides that Mrs. Merdle was also duped, and allows her and Fanny to continue to war it out at the very centre of the fashionable globe. Similarly the public will learn nothing from the Merdle affair, but will recreate the Midas myth for themselves as soon as the next candidate comes along.

Self-deceit is at the centre of the whole business of actions and their effects. In the end he is in prison,

social pretence, and in dissecting one, Dickens also dissects the other. His social climbers all go through elaborate mechanisms of self-deception, and in showing this aspect of their characters in detail, Dickens gives them a new dimension. It is typical of the inclusive, comprehensive nature of this novel that Dickens expands the sub-theme of self-deception in his social climbers into quite a separate although related strand of the book. Not all the self-deceivers are also social climbers, and thus a new character grouping emerges, of which Mr. Dorrit is still the head. Although the two groups are not identical, they overlap and comment on each other. Both groups are essential components in the larger concern of the novel as facets of the self-imprisonment theme. Dr. Dorrit, self-deceiver and snob, is the natural head of both character groups. His relationship to the two sets of characters straddles the wide scope of the book because his character, which at first seems so eccentric and unique, expands to find its echo in almost every other character.

Mr. Dorrit is the arch self-deceiver. His whole history is one of a man incapable of coming to terms with himself and incapable of having any real picture of his actions and their effects. In the time he is in prison,

he elaborates his sad illusions of himself into a terrible fantasy. He starts by harmlessly believing he will soon get out; it is not long before he is soliciting testimonials while believing in his own dignity. When rich, he believes he can obliterate the twenty-three years of prison existence entirely - it is a gigantic attempt to lie to himself, and he cannot make the lie work as it did in prison. The break-down finally comes at Mrs. Merdle's party in Rome. The only genuine reality of his life - the Marlsalsea - returns. The implication is that Mr. Dorrit simply cannot live with the truth; there can be no recovery from this return to the sordid facts of his existence, and he must die.

The breakdown scene would have to be quoted in full to do justice to its power and complete psychological accuracy. It is hard to find another scene in Dickens to equal such restraint combined with innate drama. It is totally unsentimental and very moving; all the more exasperating then that Dickens follows it up with one of his frequent slips of judgement. Nothing could be more crudely melodramatic than Frederick's death on the heels of his brother. If we are, however, moved by this double death (and I confess I am), it is a strange tribute to Dickens's abilities. He provides two emotional climaxes,

at completely different levels, very close to each other; one is profound, the other trite, yet the first climax carries the second too, on the sheer power of its emotional evocation. It would have been a fatal slip for most writers; Dickens somehow pulls it off without completely alienating his reader.

Mrs. Clennam, seemingly so different, has one thing in common with Mr. Dorrit - a stupendous power of self-deception. She has deceived herself all her life about her motives in punishing her husband and his mistress. Even when driven to acknowledge the possibility of her guilt, her need to maintain her false self-image prevails:

"I have done", said Mrs. Clennam, "what it was given to me to do. I have set myself against evil; not against good. I have been an instrument of severity against sin. Have not mere sinners like myself been commissioned to lay it low for all time?"

"In all time?" repeated Little Dorrit.
"Even if my own wrong had prevailed with me, and my own vengeance had moved me, could I have found no justification? None in the old days when the innocent perished with the guilty a thousand to one? When the wrath of the hater of the unrighteous was not slaked even in blood, and yet found favour?"

When Blandois and Flintwinch between them confront Mrs. Clennam, the novel proceeds, Dickens's judgment is on quite a new ambiguity; it is certainly not suggested,

Clennam with the truth about herself, she reacts by throwing off her subconscious self-punishment - she stands and walks.

Subtle and inexplicit parallels are made between Mr. Dorrit and Mrs. Clennam who are seemingly worlds apart: both have a profound interest in deluding their offspring as well as themselves, both die within a short time of the final painful self-exposure. Dickens has used this interesting technique before. The idea is to draw unobvious parallels between utterly different people, thus restating themes where least expected, and unifying the diverse materials of the novel. Similar effects were gained with the comparison of Mrs. Steerforth to Mrs. Heep, or the formal relation of Lady Dedlock to Jo, and even in the more tenuous parallels between Louisa and Steven Blackpool.

Using a similar method to that in Dombey and Son, Dickens provides a range of self-deceivers, from the relatively harmless to the pathological. Right over on the innocent side of the spectrum is Mr. Meagles, who seems at first to be a stock Dickens character, rosy-faced, jolly, good-natured and contented with his lot. But as the novel proceeds, Dickens's judgement on Mr. Meagles takes on quite a new ambiguity; it is certainly not suggested,

(as it would have been in earlier novels), that if there were more Mr. Meagles the world would come right. Meagles is not only a snob but also a self-deceiver, and not only on the question of Gowan. He supports Daniel Doyce passionately against the Circumlocution Office, yet adores the Barnacles who run the self-same office. He continues to think, despite Tattycoram's flight, that counting to ^{five} and-twenty is a pretty good formula in times of trouble. In short, while not entirely subscribing to the status quo, he is very willing to dally with it. And to Dickens, increasingly radical and dissatisfied with his society, this compromise is not enough.

Another of Dickens's favourite types, the artless and virtuous young girl, is also given her role in the schematisation of the book. Pet, innocent and loving, deceives herself too. Dickens concedes that it is natural that she should believe in Gowan. But when she begs Clennam to reconcile Gowan and Meagles to each other, Dickens comments:

Poor Pet! Self-deceived, mistaken child' when were such changes ever made in men's natural relation to each other; when was such reconciliation of ingrain differences ever effected! (p.321)

Even Arthur Clennam, gentle and honourable as he is, deceives himself twice over. He tries to tell himself that he is not in love with Pet, and by convincing himself he is too old, he avoids the real issue i.e. whether to pursue her and thus risk the humiliation of defeat. Later he refuses to take up the implications of the relationship between himself and Little Dorrit, thus causing himself and her great pain.

The self-deceit of Mr. Meagles, Pet and Arthur Clennam is generally innocent and unconscious. The type of self-deceit the Gowans indulge in is more pernicious, since they actively extend their self-deceit into the deceiving of others. Mrs. Gowan is not able to thoroughly convince herself of her own version of Henry's marriage, so she sets out all the more energetically to perpetuate the lie. To make the lie workable she must alienate the Meagles, and so get rid of that embarrassment; then she must set her own version of the story circulating via Mrs. Merdle. Dickens provides Hampton Court as the perfect setting for Mrs. Gowan; it is one of the many substitute prisons where essentially the same sort of life is lived as in the Marshalsea. The genteel poor, the "gypsies of gentility" always have a temporary air about

which I thought a new one, so fit into surroundings the main story, as to make the book circulate through both. Quoted by J. E. Hall, *Charles Dickens: Little Dorrit*, p. 37. Edward Arnold, 1967.

them, as if they are going to leave at any time, and like the Collegians, they have an infinite capacity to tolerate each others' pretences, as it helps maintain their own.

Henry Gowan's self-deceit is neurotic and vicious. He pretends careless indifference to the class that disowned him, but in fact he wants to revenge himself on others for his impecunious state. He punishes Pet in particular, because she has money and is good.

Miss Wade is on the black side of the spectrum, a pathological advance on Mr. Dorrit and Mrs. Clennam, because her self delusion is systematic and thorough, and her way of life dictated by it. She is not only tormented, but feels compelled to torment others. Miss Wade is a good example of Dickens's renewed interest in individual psychology; she is a detailed and intelligent study of what in the twentieth century would be called a full-blown paranoid, but was in nineteenth century language, a "self-tormentor". He devotes a whole chapter to her in which he tries a new technique of injecting a self-contained story into the "lifeblood" of the general novel.¹ There is considerable credibility in Miss Wade's

1. Dickens's comment to Forster: "In Miss Wade, I had an idea, which I thought a new one, of making the introduced story so fit into surroundings impossible of separation from the main story, as to make the life-blood of the book circulate through both". Quoted by J.C. Reid, Charles Dickens: Little Dorrit. p.17. Edward Arnold, 1967.

cold wrath against the world, and thus an ambiguity in Dickens's attitude to her. As a moralist he seems to condemn her, as an observer-novelist, he concedes that she has suffered injustices and patronage. He does not condemn outright the charitable self-righteousness of the Victorians' treatment of orphans and illegitimates, but he shows convincingly that such treatment can be damaging. There is a similar ambiguity in the characterisation of Tattycoram. Certainly a modern reader sees that Tattycoram is justified in most of her resentments; she is patronised and ignored, and indulged with clumsy kindness, and her feeling of being disadvantaged and inferior is a natural result. She and Miss Wade make a most interesting pair; Tattycoram struggling with a tempting self-delusion and eventually regaining a balanced view of the situation, Miss Wade, her self-delusion perfected, living by its destructive dictates.

The relationship between Miss Wade and Tattycoram is a complex one, and Dickens dramatises it perfectly, without need of over-explanation. The homosexual overtones are unmistakeable, but most delicately touched on. It is clear that in 'liberating' Tatty from the Meagles, Miss Wade seeks to enslave the girl to herself, and that Tattycoram has now to fight just another kind of imprisonment.

Some of the exchanges between them have perfect pitch and resonance psychologically. There is the scene, for instance, when Miss Wade taunts Tattycoram for weakening towards the Meagles:

"You prefer their plenty to your less fat living here..... You exalt them, and slight me. What else should I have expected? I ought to have known it".

"Its not so", said the girl, flushing high, "and you don't say what you mean. I know what you mean. You are reproaching me, underhanded, with having nobody but you to look to. You think you are to make me do, or not do, everything you please, and are to put any affront upon me. You are as bad as they were, every bit. But I will not be quite tamed and made submissive....."

When Clennam says that the Meagles would be happy to have her back;

"never!" said the girl passionately. I shall never do that. Nobody knows that better than Miss Wade though she taunts me because she has made me her dependant. And I know I am so; and I know she is overjoyed when she can bring it to my mind."

"A good pretence!" said Miss Wade, with no less anger, haughtiness and bitterness; "but too threadbare to cover what I plainly see in this. My poverty will not bear competition with their money. Better go back at once, better go back at once, and have done with it!" (pp.616-27)

At the end of this scene Dickens describes them as "each proudly cherishing her own anger; each with a fixed determination, torturing her own breast and torturing the other's." (p.617) Such scenes ring so true that the solution to Tattycoram's story rings all the more false. She flies back to the Meagles, the mysterious box in her arms. It seems an easy-way-out plot device for Dickens; both problems - Tattycoram and the box - are solved in two pages flat and sentimentality abounds. Yet everything in Dickens's account of Tattycoram till that moment denies that she could be happy again as the Meagles's servant.

Back among the more harmless self-deceivers, is, perhaps surprisingly, Flora. Flora can be taken as a Dickens eccentric and no more, but I don't think this takes into account the generalising tendency of the book, or the way it schematises nearly all the characters in accordance with its themes. Flora's comic flights always result from self-delusion struggling with a real honesty. In her occasional bursts of clear-headedness, she shows that she has known from the start what the real situation between herself and Clennam is, yet she needs the emotional indulgence of believing in her fantasy. Finally, when she

is forced to acknowledge that Clennam loves little Dorrit, she is capable of great generosity, while never altogether giving up her illusions. Her self-deceit is completely harmless and comic, and Dickens uses its harmlessness as a contrast to the more sinister delusions of people like Miss Wade or Mrs. Clennam.

In ranging so widely over his characters and relating them through their common possession of one trait, Dickens gives himself much scope for comparison and comment. He sets up a sort of standard of judgement by including one character, Little Dorrit, whose self-delusion is not only harmless, but positively something good. Little Dorrit has illusions about her father, but her self-deception is part of a conscious act of love. Her motivation consists only of unselfish pity and a will to do good. In justifying him to Clennam, she says:

"He is very much respected. Everybody who comes in [to the prison] is glad to know him. He is more courted than anyone else. He is far more thought of than the Marshal is".
 If ever pride were innocent it was innocent when Little Dorrit grew boastful of her father.
 "It is often said that his manners are a true gentleman's and quite a study. I see none like them in that place, but he is admitted to be superior to all the rest. This is quite as much why they make him presents, as because they know him to be

needy. He is not to be blamed for being in need, poor love. Who could be in prison a quarter of a century and be prosperous!"

What affection in her words, what compassion in her suppressed tears, what a great soul of fidelity within her, how true the light that shed false brightness around him! (p.102)

The last line indicates how Dickens wants us to interpret Little Dorrit's glorification of her father, i.e. her motivation is pure enough to nullify even that most pervasive moral failing - self-deception.

Little Dorrit herself is a vehicle for Dickens's ideas on the individual will in relation to society. She is conceived in terms of poetic paradox. A prison child, reared with common or corrupt companions, with no childhood in the usual sense of the word, small and weak in physical proportions, she yet has all the qualities most revered by men. She is gentle, self-sacrificing, thoughtful and generous in her judgement of others - almost saint-like, but not idealised out of existence like Agnes. Dickens gives so much careful detail to the characterisation that she is never unreal; her mothering of Maggy, her retiring love for Clennam, her shyness, her indulgence of her father and so on, help to individualise her much more than the equally good Agnes. If, as

1. Fielding talks of Little Dorrit as "an allegorical representation of divine grace" K.J. Fielding, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction*, from p.176 on. Longmans. 1965.

Fielding¹ suggests, she is supposed to represent the Christian ideal of sainthood and purity, the intention is, mercifully, much better hidden. Apart from having a little too much sanctimoniousness about her for the taste of modern readers, Little Dorrit can be accepted on the plane of reality.

Through the character of Little Dorrit, Dickens, I think, makes a general point about the function of the will. Little Dorrit can exercise her will, even in prison, while people like her father are bound and will-less, in prison or out of it. Her existence represents a sort of affirmation - that the individual will can function effectively in the most adverse circumstances, but only when it is selfless and directed towards an idea of good. This view is not as naively or boldly presented as I have stated it here. The 'good' people do not, by an effort of will, triumph and carry the day. But they do, in a sporadic and limited way, have an effect.

Little Dorrit is the only character whose will is turned continuously and effectively to the helping of others and towards a general idea of good. Others, even Arthur Clennam, can only occasionally summon up her constant sense of purpose. Dickens shows that a passive

1. Fielding talks of Little Dorrit as "an allegorical representation of divine grace" K.J. Fielding, Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction, from p.176 on. Longmans. 1965.

goodness is not enough; for anyone who wants to fight evil, the fight must be active and passionate, and above all will-full. The outstanding characteristic of Little Dorrit in prison is her untiring activity in sustaining her family. In other 'good' characters, the strength of will, the active desire for good is there more intermittently, since social conventions and restraints all combine to suppress this trait in people. At the beginning of the book, Arthur Clennam feels he has no will; his rigid that upbringing has militated against its development.

"I have no will. That is to say" -
 he coloured a little - "next to none
 that I can put into action now.
 Trained by main force; broken, not
 bent; heavily ironed with an object
 on which I was never consulted and
 which was never mine.....always
 grinding in a mill I always hated,
 what is to be expected from me in
 middle life? Will, purpose, hope?
 All these lights were extinguished
 before I could sound the words."
 (p.33)

However Arthur's will has not been broken in one sense, though he attaches no importance to it. Despite a discouraging life, he has remained a dreamer and an idealist, and almost without realising it, he is still looking for an opportunity to put this part of himself into action. Experimentally and hesitatingly, he starts

to exercise his will to good. He has already started by defying his mother in relinquishing the business, and he becomes persistent in trying to find out what he senses to be an evil connected with his mother and father. In trying to help Little Dorrit, he is also aroused from his passivity. When he ends up bankrupt in prison, his hesitant will is almost extinguished, so frightened is he that his new-found activism has ruined Doyce as well as himself. But like Little Dorrit, it is in prison that he really finds his own strength. He comes to it through the agency of two people - Little Dorrit the absolutely good, and Blandois the absolutely evil. After a period of complete lethargy, he is roused to action by the re-appearance of Blandois. The innate good in him responds to Blandois' innate evil. He is compelled to fight, imprisoned or not. His mother's power over him has always confused his will, and her claim to righteousness has confounded his own judgement. But with Blandois there is no ambiguity, and Arthur is resolved to combat him.

John Little Dorrit is Arthur's other aid in the recovery of his personality and will. She brings him a stronger will to good than his own, as well as her "undying love". With her help Arthur does not become a prodigal of courage or a hero, but he does realise a modest potential for

happiness, and can put into action his capacity for good. Dickens pronounces on the future of Arthur and Amy in the most restrained and realistic happy ending of all his works. In a disordered and corrupt world, they can achieve personal happiness and a limited usefulness - that is all.

They....went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness.... They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar. (p.766)

Of all the novel's characters, only Little Dorrit is consistently and spectacularly virtuous. Dickens still postulates a black and a white, i.e. Blandois and Little Dorrit, but in his characterisation of the other 'good' people in the novel, he consistently shows that the demarcation of good and evil are thoroughly blurred. The weaknesses of people like the Plornishes, John Chivery, Pancks, Flora and the Meagles are unsentimentally shown up. For instance the Plornishes are innocent snobs, and utterly muddled in their social views. Mr. Pancks is cantankerously anti-social and for most of his life has been willing to earn his bread by playing a

nasty role. All of them live in poverty, and in circumstances not conducive to idealism. Yet there exists in all of them a will to good that from time to time can make a push against circumstances. At the same time, what they achieve is limited, its effect short-lived, and the personal gain doubtful, to say the least. Mr. Pancks does get some money for his efforts to help the Dorrits but is later ruined. Mr. & Mrs. Plornish get a shop, but the business is soon in debt. There is not much reward for Flora's generosity in her behaviour to Little Dorrit; she is still left to drink, girlishness and Mr. F's aunt.¹ Even the efforts of Little Dorrit and Clennam have no spectacular effect. All Little Dorrit's work cannot reform her family; none of them have the sudden change of heart of Mr. Dombey or Mr. Gradgrind. Arthur's influence can never really soften his mother's rigidities. When we come to the end of Little Dorrit, there is not even a hint of a better world to come.

Yet Dickens makes plain that he believes in the existence

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1. Dickens does renege on this severity by making Pancks a partner in Doyce and Clennam, and we presume that fortune will smile on the Plornishes through the offices of Mr. & Mrs. Clennam, but this is more in the way of the traditional summing-up, and not essential to the story.

of an absolute good, and that its very existence is a cause for hope. I think Affery is the best example of how this point is made. She can be easily overlooked as having no purpose beyond being an addition to Dickens's gallery of eccentrics, but to my mind she is deliberately characterised as one of the few who can exercise a will to good and thus have an effect on circumstance. She does it only once, and her action comes out of a near-vacuum of fear, stupidity and confusion, but it does emerge. She has been terrified out of her wits by "the two clever ones" and by the decaying house, and is in such confusion that she refuses to talk even to Arthur. Yet from somewhere in her half-dark brain she takes the courage to defy Mrs. Clennam and Flintwinch, and so helps bring the mystery out in the open. She acts out of affection for Arthur, and an intuitive revulsion for Blandois which she shares with other good characters (Little Dorrit, Pet, Arthur, Cavaletto). She will help Arthur "who has nothing left, is ill, and in prison, so can't up for himself".¹ This single act reasserts her

1. Little Dorrit, p.713. (This passage should be read in full to appreciate Dickens's emphasis on the reassertion of Affery's will. He brings this out strongly despite the scene's predominantly comic tone).

the question of gentility. His picture of himself as a

effectiveness and redeems her as a personality. Dickens chooses a scene of bizarre comedy to make one of the most serious moral points of the novel. He did a similar thing in Hard Times by giving Sleary the moral punch-line. If the reader takes Dickens's comedy as only and entirely funny, he will very often radically misunderstand the author's purpose. Dickens is not prepared to limit himself to serious morality, knowing possibly his own weakness for sermonising; instead he brilliantly exploits the moral implications of comic situations. In this particular case the establishment of a double level is invisible and perfect.

Absolute good does exist - consistently only in Little Dorrit, fitfully in others. And in the Dickens world of parallels and opposites, where everything is connected and interacting, there exists absolute evil too. There are only a few really bad people in Little Dorrit, and absolute evil is represented by only one character, Blandois. Blandois has a curious function. He is portrayed as purely evil, without any admixture of conscience or self-doubt; a prototype of what Dickens believes does exist, if rarely. As well, he is a sort of touchstone, or standard of comparison. On the comic level, he acts as a touchstone on the question of gentility. His picture of himself as a

gentleman, both evil and absurd in him, brings out the true absurdity of all the others' claims to gentility. On a more serious level, his presence seems to bring out the hidden evil in others. It is he who shows up Mrs. Clennam because he can understand her darker motives; he gives a vicious and accurate analysis of them. It is he who carries out Miss Wade's darker intrigues. His evil underlines the latent evil in both women, though both hold him in contempt. He is companion to Henry Gowan, and his companionship brings out Gowan's own sadism and misanthropy. As Little Dorrit draws out the good from others by a sort of sympathy, so Blandois attracts and promotes evil. But Blandois is no freak; his evil is of the most exaggerated kind, but society contains the same evils, diluted and hidden, in its lifeblood. Blandois himself makes this point in answer to Clennam's question as to whether he sells his friends.

"I sell anything that commands a price. How do your lawyers live, your politicians, your intriguers, your men of the Exchange! How do you live? How do you come here? Have you sold no friend? Lady of mine! I rather think, yes! ... Effectively sir", said Rigaud, "Society sells itself and sells me: and I sell Society". (p.697)

The two absolute opposites of the book then are Blandois and Little Dorrit, the black and white shades on

the spectrum. So it is a highly symbolic moment when Little Dorrit has it in her power to defeat Blandois. Once she knows Mrs. Clennam's secret, its power to harm is lost. She leaves the prison to confront Blandois, but the interview is prevented by the collapse of the house. It is interesting that Dickens passed up the opportunity for a dramatic scene between moral opposites such as he used to delight in (e.g. A Christmas Carol, the confrontation of Sissy and Harthouse in Hard Times), but chooses a quite different set of symbolic overtones instead. The collapse of the house is in itself highly dramatic, but its very drama, and its usefulness to the plot in getting rid of Blandois, perhaps obscures the complication and maturity of the thought behind it. The house, symbolic of what is diseased and outdated in the social system, is eaten up by its own decay, and takes with it the evil person who preyed on the weaknesses of the system. Its disintegration is presented as natural and inevitable, and again reiterates Dickens's idea that certain institutions must be demolished, but most will die naturally of their own innate corruption. It is reminiscent of the decaying mansion in Dombey and Son, of Krook's spontaneous combustion, and the disintegration of the system. Little Dorrit is quite unlike the

of Tom-All-Alone's. Inner decay and meaninglessness cannot be hidden for ever, even by those with money and power; the edifice will eventually fall, corruption will be made manifest, and room will be created for new beginnings.

The symbolic and moral overtones of the house falling with Blandois in it are largely implied, and the 'great effect' that Dickens might before have gleefully grabbed at in the meeting of Little Dorrit and Blandois is avoided. Such restraint indicates that Dickens is less concerned than in any previous book with overt moralism. The specific moral messages, (they are always there in Dickens), are integrated into the larger design, and do not obtrude on the characterisation. Dickens gives the impression that he is more continuously and intimately concerned with his characters than in any of the previous four books, while at the same time providing a dense and consistent symbolic structure. To put it slightly differently; the morality is wholly contained within the action of the book, and this gives Dickens a wider range of moral sensibility, and enables the reader to respond fully at several levels. And because the sweep and psychological depth of the characterisation precludes crude moralising, there is a calm and unity about Little Dorrit quite unlike the

restlessness of Bleak House or the often embarrassing earnestness of Hard Times.

Dickens does of course still use his characters as vehicles for moralising, but his technique becomes more subtle and varied. Take the Barnacles; they are real and to an extent individualised. They are also rather abstracted objects of satire, and vehicles for moralising on the condition-of-England question. But they are also purely allegorical figures in quite a new way. In Bleak House characters like Krook and Miss Flite have a clear double function, and all the main characters in Hard Times have their allegoric roles in the battle between Fact and Fancy. But the Barnacles go a step further. They are real people, interacting with undoubtedly real people like Meagles and Clennam, yet their names are symbolic and we know that their Circumlocution Office is imaginary, a representative office that satirises all real Government institutions.

I think the explicit and simultaneous reality and non-reality of the Barnacles, apart from being a brilliant feat by Dickens, does indicate how we are to take the other characters as well. Meagles, completely real, gets the semi-real Barnacles for relatives. Clennam, completely real, gets entangled in their semi-real red tape. So these

real characters must be given credit for living at least a semi-allegorical life. They do not exist as fully-fledged symbols but they are symbolically significant. Thus the real Little Dorrit is also symbolic of moral purity, Mr. Meagles represents good-will and mediocrity, Blandois is both a real crook and the Devil Incarnate, and so on.

Within their role as symbols, Dickens uses the Barnacles in more than one way. They are there partly for straight political satire and topical comment on Government practices. But also they are the ultimate metaphor of imprisonment. The Barnacles are the Establishment, the Rulers of Society, and therefore its principle jailers and stultifiers. In portraying them, Dickens is working out one of the themes presaged in the original title of the book, Nobody's Fault. The Barnacles just cling to the Ship of State, and their main interest is in perpetuating their kind and maintaining the status quo. Thus the major activity of Government becomes the avoiding of responsibility - i.e. passing the buck. Most Barnacles believe in their own pretence of governing seriously, but a few, like the dashing young Barnacle "fully understand the Department to be a political-diplomatic hocus-pocus of machinery for the assistance of

paper of the Circumlocution Office....

In short, all the business of the country

the nobs in keeping of the snobs. This dashing young Barnacle, in a word, was likely to become a statesman, and to make a figure." (p.119)

But, like all the jailers in the novel, the Barnacles are themselves imprisoned; they live uncomfortably where their prestige demands they live, they tie their lives and language up in their own red tape. Dickens shows them as quite uncriminal in intention, and he does not simply lay blame at their door, yet he is quite unequivocal about the effect of what they do, or rather^{of} what they do not do.

Because the Circumlocution Office went on mechanically, every day, keeping this wonderful all sufficient wheel of statesmanship, How not to do it, in motion. Because the Circumlocution Office was down upon any ill-advised public servant who was going to do it, or who appeared to be by any surprising accident in remote danger of doing it; with a minute, and a memorandum, and letter of instruction that extinguished him. It was this spirit of national efficiency in the Circumlocution Office that had gradually led it to have something to do with everything. Mechanics, natural philosophers, soldiers, sailors, petitioners, memorialists, people with grievances, people who wanted to prevent grievances, people who wanted to redress grievances, jobbing people, jobbed people, people who couldn't get rewarded for merit, and people who couldn't get punished for demerit, were all indiscriminately tucked up under the foolscap paper of the Circumlocution Office....

1. This is where Dickens demands that responsibility be accepted; here he dwells more on the very real difficulty of pinning it on any individual.

went through the Circumlocution Office, except the business that never came out of it; and its name was legion. (p.109)

But if the Barnacles imprison and limit those below them, their prisoners are not purely passive and helpless. Dickens plays on this motif again and again. The rich make open alliances with the Government, as when Mr. Sparkler gets a sinecure with the Circumlocution Office through a private chat between Mr. Merdle and Mr. Tite Barnacle. The lower nobility and upper-middle class hang on to the coat-tails of the Barnacles in hopes of bettering themselves. The middle class are totally ineffectual, wavering as they do between resentment and servility; Mr. Meagles is indignant over the Barnacles' treatment of his friend Doyce, yet cannot understand Doyce's "crotchety" refusal to sit at the same table with the people who have worn his soul out. And the poor, like Plornish, are mostly too muddled to put up an opposition. The people in government are not entirely to blame, the governed are not entirely to blame - nobody is the prisoner or jailer in the strict sense of the terms. It is "nobody's fault"; Dickens fairly admits the dilemma, but gives a warning that that the failure to pin responsibility will not do.¹

1. This attitude is a slight change from Bleak House, where Dickens demands that responsibility be accepted; here he dwells more on the very real difficulty of pinning it on any individual.

reader. As they went along, certainly one of the party and probably more than one, thought that Bleeding Heart Yard was no inappropriate destination for a man who had been in official correspondence with my lords and the Barnacles - and perhaps had a misgiving also that Britannia herself might come to look for lodgings in Bleeding Heart Yard some ugly day or other, if she over-did the Circumlocution Office. (p.656)

There is a great deal more that could be said about the human dilemma; he expounds on them most intelligently. Little Dorrit. For instance, one could talk at length about the parallelism of the two parts of the book; the way the prison and "that superior sort of Marslalsea-Society" are compared. Scenes of confinement in the first Book are echoed by different but parallel scenes of confinement in the 'free' society of the second Book - especially such settings as the convent in the Swiss Alps and the foreign colony at Rome. One could also spend time analysing the persistent language of confinement and how most scenes take place in a confined atmosphere of one sort or another; otherwise they are scenes of unreality or escape. One could analyse the place of plot in Little Dorrit, and comment on how its unravelling, while as technically accomplished as usual, is unimportant almost to the point of irrelevance, whereas the symbolic structure is tight, comprehensive and its importance well communicated to the

reader. But I think these questions are outside the scope of the present thesis, which has tried to concentrate on the Dickensian morality and 'world view', especially as expressed through characterisation. I think what I have said goes far to show that by the time of writing Little Dorrit, Dickens has achieved a moral maturity. He more than acknowledges ambiguities and uncertainties in the human dilemma; he expounds on them most intelligently. For all that, he takes a moral stance, but one that is integrated entirely with his story. The result is a book that is, of all Dickens's novels, most at one with itself.

are expressed. In particular I have concentrated on Dickens's characters insofar as they express his moral viewpoint.

Two or three points emerge consistently and can perhaps be reiterated. Dickens had a very deep conviction about natural laws and the natural order of the world. These natural laws have to do with his conception of the basic nature of people, in which spontaneity, freedom of expression, imagination and a love of others play important parts. The villains, in Dickens's eyes, are those who knowingly or unknowingly express such characteristics in themselves or others; they are the dehumanisers, the perpetrators of a soulless society. More often than not,

Concluding Note

I feel I can do little more in conclusion than briefly re-emphasise the more important things that have been emerging from this thesis. I will not say much because I have tended to draw conclusions en route, and within the individual chapters, and what I have to say should by now be fairly clear.

I have been looking at Dickens primarily as a moralist, trying to gauge his more fundamental attitudes and priorities, and discussing the ways in which they are expressed. In particular I have concentrated on Dickens's characters insofar as they express his moral viewpoint.

Two or three points emerge consistently and can perhaps be reiterated. Dickens had a very deep conviction about natural laws and the natural order of the world. These natural laws have to do with his conception of the basic nature of people, in which spontaneity, freedom of expression, imagination and a love of others play important parts. The villains, in Dickens's eyes, are those who knowingly or unknowingly suppress such characteristics in themselves or others; they are the dehumanisers, the perpetrators of a soulless society. More often than not,

such people are characterised in terms of their obsessions, usually a single conviction or emotion which blinds them to the needs of others.

Over the ten year period I have covered, Dickens's perspective becomes increasingly grim. Not only do the dehumanisers suffer more themselves, but he comes to see that those with the power to deprive others of their humanity are themselves largely determined in what they do. The problem is to pin responsibility. How far can those people imprisoned by society's claims and impositions be held responsible? In Bleak House, Dickens for the first time examines with his full intelligence the binding power of institutions and tradition, and admits that even people of good-will can be trapped by circumstance. At the same time there is an angry stand made for individual responsibility, a stand that is transmuted in Hard Times into a direct attack on the prevailing thinking of Dickens's time. ^{Here} Dickens tried, with his small cast of emblematic characters, to place and condemn that blend of materialism, utilitarianism, hypocrisy and innocence, that made up the Victorian establishment mind. As was appropriate for a novelist of Dickens's imaginative powers, his only 'theoretical' book was an allegory, and

his approach was emblematic rather than analytic. Much more measured and realistic is Little Dorrit where Dickens combines a sense of vision with his most quiet and intelligent attempt to analyse the complexity of the social structure and the nature of the bonds that tie people. Society as Prison, people as both jailers and jail-birds, is what now preoccupies him - and the failure to pin responsibility, the fact that it is "Nobody's Fault", saddens him more than it angers him.

Dickens's 'philosophy of life' as it emerges in Little Dorrit is a dark one, although the black hysteria of Bleak House is gone. But it is not totally pessimistic either; the fundamental Dickensian beliefs are still held out for the reader to grasp at. In all his books, Dickens asserts a few constants. He believes in the existence of absolute goodness, and in its occasional efficacy. Despite a growing determinism, he also believes that the imperfectly good can occasionally triumph over circumstances, and assert their will. He sees hope in the fact that people still exist who match their words to action, and ^{who} are capable of assuming a very personal and limited responsibility for themselves and others. In all his books too, there are the simple fools, the innocents, for

whom he reserves his tenderest caricatures. They are the people in whom the basic virtues that Dickens reveres remain intact, virtues that the more sophisticated survivors in our society have somewhere had to lose. For the others, the limited and the limitedly good, Dickens shows that it is an unrewarding struggle. But always opposing this pessimism is his irrepressible fascination with the variety of life and his vigour in portraying it, which of themselves set up their own kind of affirmation.

In the Dickensian universe, a sense of basic order and coherence is always competing with a sense of imminent and total chaos. The conflict appears in several contexts. There are the alternating images of disorder and progress as the Staggs Gardens railway is built,¹ and the disease and ruination impinging on the ordered worlds of Bleak House. David's path to order and coherence is constantly blocked by unexpected and unknowable obstacles, and Mr. Gradgrind's perfect Factual Universe becomes a depressingly sordid and personal one by the end of the book. In Little Dorrit, every class of society seems to be trapped in its own

1. In Dombey and Son, while the attempt to distort the natural laws of behaviour usually rebounds on itself.

internal contradictions, and those who rule the country are as much bound as those who inhabit the country's jails are free.

Dickens sets up a world full of absurdities and contradictions on which he imposes his own very personal sense of order. He had a deep belief in the interconnectedness of life; how things paralleled and echoed each other, how people were riveted to each other in spite of the strongest social barriers; almost as if there were an inner coherence in the network of social relations that defied the efforts of Governments and institutions to separate and divide. Thus at its best, Dickens's use of coincidence is not random or merely convenient - it expresses his belief in the essential smallness of the world, its understandability and repetitiveness.

Dickens was no revolutionary in the ordinary political sense, mostly because he had a too strongly romantic sense of destiny. He liked to think that Fate could act as a retributive agent against those who ignored the laws of connection and communality. In most of his books, those who dehumanise others become depleted themselves, and eventually suffer too, while the attempt to distort the natural laws of behaviour usually rebounds on itself.

More often than not, the magic in people, the indelible that fascinates Dickens, emerges in the end, as does the will to good. Dickens places less and less emphasis on the sentimental triumph of the good over the bad; who wins is no longer the point. He only reaffirms, within an increasingly complicated and sombre context, his belief in the survival of his cherished virtues, and he celebrates only the fact that they do survive.

As I have said before, there is nothing very unusual or eccentric in the Dickensian morality. Everything lies in the quality of the moral passions, and the real interest is in the means chosen to express these passions. I have read all of Dickens's major works, but some before I had definitely decided on this thesis; therefore It is not Dickens's overt moralism that needs praising here; some of the editions have slipped my mind. I apologise that is too often merely didactic and conventional; rather for this omission. it is the finer moral distinctions and the constant pre-occupation with moral issues that lie at the very centre of his language. There is a greatness of judgement and an intense concern that characterise Dickens through all the faults and variety of his work, without which it would not be as easy or right as it is to call him genius.

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A Tell I am dividing my bibliography into three sections: works by Dickens, primary sources used in the text, and other reading. Where paperbacks printed by parent firms have been used, I have only given the name of the paperback edition. James Carroll (1964)

Other Christmas Stories

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I have read all of Dickens's major works, but some before I had definitely decided on this thesis; therefore some of the editions have slipped my mind. I apologise for this omission.

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