

A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

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This thesis argues that the reflection of society in Dickens's mature novels is not mechanical, passive or superficial but a creative, critical, and generalising reflection of the essential aspects of everyday social relations within Victorian industrial society, though this is mediated through both class values and literary conventions. The development of the mature novels' social vision from the episodic social criticism of specific abuses in the earlier fiction is related to changes in the social/economic climate of Victorian England and especially to the growth of urbanisation. Dickens's novelistic attitude to the mid-Victorian middle classes is explored in its full complexity, for although Dickens was lionised by a predominantly middle-class reading public and always wrote in accordance with middle-class standards of propriety and delicacy, and despite his utilisation of selected middle-class values as moral positives and structural organising agents within his novels, Dickens cannot be satisfactorily labelled as a 'bourgeois' writer or apologist. Indeed he uses the traditional entrepreneurial middle-class values (characteristic of an earlier stage of English capitalist development) to implicitly criticise the contemporary social/economic experience of the mid-Victorian middle-class itself, towards whom his novels are increasingly hostile. Dickens's complex and uneasy stand in mid-Victorian society resulted in many characteristic tensions and inconsistencies in his novels, and these are explored through a detailed analysis of five of the later novels. This reveals a characteristic lack of resolution between a tragic social vision and the demands of a 'happy' closed plot ending, the latter operating in a mutually reinforcing partnership with an organising framework of middle-class values to make novels which are critical and oppositional to Victorian capitalism acceptable to a middle-class reading public.

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## Part One

### SOME PROBLEMS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE NOVEL



## CHAPTER 1

## THE INADEQUACY OF THE DOCUMENTARY APPROACH

Although the sociology of literature is a comparatively new discipline, the social aspects of Dickens's novels have attracted critical attention for at least the last three decades. This is largely because of Dickens's reputation as a reformer, and the belief, dating from contemporary opinion, that the indignant exposure of social abuses in his novels had a direct influence on the process of social change throughout the mid-Victorian period. For example, a Non-conformist preacher, a contemporary of Dickens, could report confidently, "There have been at work among us three great social agencies: the London City Mission; the novels of Mr. Dickens; the cholera." More recently Humphry House's important work The Dickens World (1941) qualified the common belief that Dickens's novels were an important agency for social reform, by arguing that the attitudes reflected in his books were seldom original or ahead of informed contemporary opinion. Instead, the novels most often made artistic capital out of issues which were already established as areas of social concern. Sir James Fitzjames Stephen in an anonymous attack on Dickens, in the *Edinburgh Review* (July, 1857), asserted that "In every new novel he selects one or two of the popular cries of the day, to serve as seasoning to the dish which he sets before his readers." House's final judgment offers a complete revaluation of Dickens's contemporary social influence - "In all practical matters his ideas ran alongside those of people more closely connected with practical things; he did not initiate, and in his major campaigns he did not succeed ... it is clear that the immediate effect of Dickens's work was negligible."<sup>(1)</sup>

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1 H. House, The Dickens World, p. 215. For details of place and date of publication for all works referred to in footnotes see bibliography.

The interesting thing about House's study is that he is approaching Dickens's novels from the traditional standpoint of literary social criticism - the novels are seen as a source of documentary evidence about society, untreated raw material for the social historian. The jacket notes for the 1960 paperback edition of The Dickens World are quite explicit on this point. Developing House's own remark ("This book has deliberately treated him as if he were a journalist more than a creative artist"), it is asserted, "Dickens's works are so filled with actual experience of the world in which he lived that they can be used as documents - perhaps the most vital documents - for the understanding of nineteenth-century social history in Great Britain. This is the use Humphry House has made, not only of the novels, but of the minor works and the journals, Household Words and All the Year Round. He has made Dickens and his period illustrate each other. He has, in fact, treated Dickens more as a journalist than as a creative artist."

From Taine to the present day critics have argued that literature reflects society in providing a mirror to the age, which reveals the surface details of contemporary social life. This is the basic premise of House's work. However, there are important implications for a sociology of literature in treating literature as documentary reportage, and not recognising that there is an essential difference between a novel such as Little Dorrit (a total, coherent, artistic structure) and an article in Household Words (a self-contained part of a haphazard total organisation). It will be argued in this thesis that such an approach is simplistic and inadequate. It ignores the complexity of the way in which social forces and values are transposed on to or reflected within literature. Regarding the novelist as a passive chronicler of existing social facts both explains away literature and ignores the creative and critical aspects of the novelist's role. The relation between the novel and society in Dickens's mature

work is not simple or passive. Certainly it is not mechanical or deterministic, as is implied in many reflection theories of the documentary type. It is complex relationship, involving a mediation through both literary conventions and Dickens's own ambiguous and problematic group and class affiliations.

In ignoring the mediation of literary and class factors in the novel's reflection of social reality, the documentary approach to literature proves particularly unsatisfactory and reductionist. An example of class ideology as a mediating factor is Dickens's artistic treatment of trade unions in Hard Times (1854). In fact Dickens's class loyalties are complex and problematic (and will be considered in detail in Chapter 3). For the moment it is enough to demonstrate that Hard Times reflects a middle-class distrust and antipathy towards trade unions in a manner which distorts the treatment of the social theme from social realism to middle-class propaganda, thus rendering it useless as an accurate sociological/historical document.

The strike in Hard Times was based on the famous Preston cotton stoppage of 1853 which Dickens reported for Household Words, praising the behaviour of the strikers though seeing the fact of the strike as a tragedy for all social parties. Contemporary accounts comment sympathetically on the strikers' behaviour. For example, the Daily News declared, "There is something almost sublime in the spectacle of so many thousands of human beings, actuated more or less by angry feelings, waiting quietly while their cause was being decided." Though there might seem little to be afraid of in this the portrait of Slackbridge, the ranting and despotic union leader in Hard Times reflects nothing so much as a middle-class ignorance and fear of trade unionism.

In fact, as Kitson Clark points out, mid-Victorian trade

union leaders were "often sober, practical men, in no way attracted by Utopian dreams; in politics they were normally Liberal or possibly in Lancashire Conservative, and would not have had any desire for a separate working-class party".<sup>(1)</sup> This latter tendency was reinforced by the fact that throughout the mid-Victorian period trade unionism was virtually confined to the aristocracy of labour, often snobbish and exclusive in their attitude to non-artisan labourers. Most modern historians agree that at least influential union leaders throughout the fifties and sixties were hard-headed, responsible and moderate. "They 'accepted' the capitalist system, and were fully prepared to co-operate in making it work. They were orthodox believers in the political economy taught by John Stuart Mill. They welcomed the support of such middle-class well-wishers as Thomas Hughes ... and Frederic Harrison."<sup>(2)</sup> Leaders such as Robert Applegarth and George Odger saw strikes only as the final sanction - a threat not to be considered lightly or in any way abused. (To Odger "Strikes in the social world are like wars in the political world; both are crimes unless justified by absolute necessity"). Against the increasing responsibility of mid-Victorian trade unionism, Slackbridge appears as a gross caricature, hardly credible as a realistic portrait.

It is true that Dickens might have been influenced by the wide-spread publicity given to reports of cloak and dagger unionism, with its crude intimidation of members to pay their dues. Yet his presence at the Preston cotton strike might have been expected to qualify or put in perspective any general impressions promoted by middle-class propagandists. Instead, the novelistic reflection of trade unionism in Hard

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1 G. Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England, p. 143.

2 E. Royston Pike, Human Documents of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, p. 314.

Times shares, and indeed reinforces, orthodox middle-class attitudes and prejudices. Of Slackbridge Shaw remarks, "All this is pure middle-class ignorance. It is much as if a tramp were to write a description of millionaires smoking large cigars in church, with their wives in low-necked dresses and diamonds."

The characteristic middle-class view of trade unions at this time was that they were tyrannical and seditious organisations. The leaders were little short of criminal conspirators. As in a mob basically honest individuals were swept on by the oratory of their leaders to cruelty and injustice (witness the union's treatment of Stephen Blackpool). To many middle-class spokesmen trade unions conjured up the worst spectres of mob crime - those of the French Revolution. In addition, trade unions were held to be anti-individualistic. Within them the individual will was coerced ruthlessly by the majority (as Stephen Blackpool's personal convictions are squashed by the hostility of the group). A particular example of this middle-class belief is provided by Mr. George Trollope, a London builder, who in 1867 gave evidence to the Trades Union Congress - "Of course in a large establishment ... you cannot know a thousand men, but you may know a great many men who have been in your employment for many years, and you feel an attachment to those men. But when you find that you cannot come to those men and talk to them as friends, that in fact their individuality is lost because they are members of a union, it seems to me a most distressing thing". In the same year a general formulation was given to this belief by Robert Lowe, who argued that trade unions "All contain within them the germs and the elements of crime, they are all founded on the right of the majority to coerce the minority, on the absolute subjugation of the one to the many, and the employment of such means as may be necessary in order to give effect to these false and dangerous principles." It is precisely this middle-class fear of the democratic principle as

encouraging a clumsy tyranny and crime which is directly reflected in Dickens's treatment of trade unionism in Hard Times, and which makes this part of the novel a simple and direct expression of bourgeois ideology - though to speak of Hard Times as a whole, or the mature novels generally, as mere bourgeois apologetics is a fatally false simplification.

The other mediating factors ignored by most of the documentary critics are those of literary conventions and tradition. (House acknowledges the importance of these in the closing pages of his book, but their influence on the nature of his analysis is small.) Throughout his career Dickens deferred to the conventions and taboos imposed on him by the tastes of a predominantly middle-class reading public. At a time when reading aloud in the family home was still an extremely popular custom, avoidance of indelicate and unsavoury topics and language (virtually everything connected with sex) was held to be necessary in order to 'protect the Young Person'. Though in his satire on Podsnappery, and less obviously in the Mrs. General passages of Little Dorrit, Dickens attacked this limitation and imposition on the novelist, he always adhered to it - from the moment when he reassures readers, in his Preface to Oliver Twist (added to the third edition, 1841) that he had decided to portray the very dregs of life, with the significant addition "so long as their speech did not offend the ear". Not just in a censorship of language but in selection and treatment of subject matter all was written in accordance with middle-class propriety and delicacy, with the surprising exception of Meagles's apparently explicit accusation that Miss Wade had drawn Tattycoram into a lesbian relationship. That the operation of literary conventions could be a mechanism producing a flawing distortion and emasculation in the novel's reflection of social reality is clear from examination of Dickens's artistic treatment of the theme of prostitution.

Prostitution was an important social fact in mid-Victorian England, regarded as 'The Great Social Evil'. By 1850 there were eight thousand prostitutes known to the police in London alone, though a more accurate figure for mid-Victorian London would appear to be eighty thousand. Though in Sketches of Boz Dickens writes of prostitution as 'a last dreadful resource' of poverty, in his novels prostitution is almost always the result of seduction and abandonment. In fact, not all prostitutes were the abandoned creatures of the orthodox view. In contrast to this romantic genesis of prostitution, it was economic necessity that took many women on to the streets. (The wages of many women at the lowest economic level were not sufficient to avoid extreme poverty, even starvation, without the added income provided by casual prostitution.) There were other social factors involved in the alarming increase of prostitution in the mid-Victorian period. The growth of industrial cities, providing a cover of secrecy, the maintenance of large armed forces, and the social ambition which required the postponement of marriage until a young man could afford to live like a gentleman, all are named by W.E. Houghton<sup>(1)</sup> (and none of these figure in Dickens's novelistic treatment of the theme). In contrast to an honest, unsentimental reflection of the theme, Dickens's prostitutes are romantic studies of the tragic plight of the fallen woman. Nancy (Oliver Twist), Martha and Emily (David Copperfield), and Alice (Dombey and Son) are all self-lacerating and consumed with guilt. For example, here is Martha - "Oh, the river!" she cried passionately. "Oh, the river!" ... "I know it's like me!" she exclaimed. "I know that I belong to it. I know that it's the natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it - and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable - and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that

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1 W.E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, p. 366.

is always troubled - and I feel that I must go with it!" ... "I can't keep away from it. I can't forget it. It haunts me day and night. It's the only thing in all the world that I am fit for and that's fit for me. Oh, the dreadful river!" ... "What shall I ever do!" she said, fighting thus with her despair. "How can I go on as I am, a living disgrace to everyone I come near!" Suddenly she turned to my companion. "Stamp upon me, kill me!"' (David Copperfield, Penguin Edition, 1966, pp. 749-751).<sup>(1)</sup> All this within a few pages, and there is more to follow.

That this is inadequate as a means of describing and understanding prostitution as a social phenomenon was clear to many of Dickens's contemporaries. A leading article in The Times, February 25th 1858, declared, "The great bulk of the London prostitutes are not Magdalens either in esse or posse, nor specimens of humanity in agony, nor Clarissa Harlowes. They are not - the bulk of them - cowering under gateways, nor preparing to throw themselves from Waterloo Bridge, but are comfortably practising their trade, either as the entire or partial means of their subsistence. To attribute to them the sentimental delicacies of a heroine of romance would be equally preposterous. They have no remorse or misgivings about the nature of their pursuit; on the contrary, they consider the calling an advantageous one, and they look upon their success in it with satisfaction." It is not as if Dickens was ignorant of the topic, his charity work with Mrs. Coutts bringing him into direct contact with reclaimed prostitutes. Yet in trying to communicate the prostitute's social situation in a way which would not outrage public morals Dickens only falls into the dual trap of bad art (cf. Martha's speech above), and inaccurate social representation (realism having lapsed into sentimental wishful thinking).

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1 All page references to the novels will be to the Penguin editions.



Of course, he avoids the full sexual implications of the prostitute's role in his novels. Humphry House makes the point of Oliver Twist, "Nancy's job would certainly have been to use her sex as much as possible with the boys like Charley Bates and the Dodger; and the whole atmosphere in which Oliver lived in London would have been drenched in sex; but Dickens does not even obscurely hint at such a thing."<sup>(1)</sup> Dickens's 'treatment' (i.e. censorship) of the language spoken by his novels' prostitutes involves him in impossible characterisation. George Gissing commented pertinently (in 1898) on the unreality of Alice Marlow, the fallen woman in Dombey and Son - "It is doubtful whether one could pick out a single sentence, a single phrase, such as the real Alice Marlow could conceivably have used. Her passion is vehement; no impossible thing. The words in which she utters it would be appropriate to the most stagey of wronged heroines - be that who it may. A figure less life-like will not be found in any novel every written. Yet Dickens doubtless intended it as legitimate idealisation; a sort of type of the doleful multitude of betrayed women. He meant it for imagination exalting common fact. But the fact is not exalted; it has simply vanished." For our purposes 'social fact' could be substituted for Gissing's common fact'. Literary conventions dictated that certain social facts, taken raw and undiluted, were not acceptable literary food for the Victorian middle-class reading public. They had to be treated, exalted, in some way 'cleansed', and made respectable. Yet in the process the social fact itself might vanish. Certainly this is the case with Dickens's treatment of prostitution throughout his novels - of no use whatever to the social historian as a document or analysis of an important mid-Victorian social fact.

In fact, it would be wrong to regard Dickens's artistic

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1 H. House, *ibid*, p. 217.

delicacy as wholly imposed on him against his will, for, in a manner which brings together the mediating factors of class and novelistic conventions, in certain of his private opinions Dickens expressed a sympathy for many aspects of middle-class taste and propriety. Witness his attack on *The Carpenter's Shop*, a painting by Millais, an attempt to paint a religious subject in accordance with the creed of Pre-Raphaelite realism. The unsentimentalised scene, the details of which had not received the conventional artistic 'treatment', revolted Dickens. In Old Lamps for New Ones (1850) he attacked the naked realism of the painting as indecent, not to say irreverent, in a hysterical tone which we recognise as that of outraged bourgeois morality. "You behold the interior of a carpenter's shop. In the foreground of that carpenter's shop is a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-headed boy, in a bed-gown; who appears to have received a poke in the hand, from the stick of another boy with whom he has been playing in an adjacent gutter, and to be holding it up for the contemplation of a kneeling woman, so horrible in her ugliness, that ... she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England ... Wherever it is possible to express ugliness of feature, limb, or attitude, you have it expressed. Such men as the carpenters might be undressed in any hospital where dirty drunkards, in a high state of varicose veins, are received. Their very toes have walked out of Saint Giles's."

This is not to argue that the dominant voice of Dickens's novels is the value stance of middle-class morality. (The importance of middle-class values within the structure of Dickens's novels will be considered in Chapter 3.) However, what is interesting is that, though there were unquestionably times when the tastes of the reading public prevented Dickens from reproducing all the details of a social fact, there were also occasions when Dickens would personally have had no wish

to reveal all, probably sharing the squeamishness of his readers. Related to this discussion is another subject of relevance to a criticism of the documentary method - the question of artistic tact.

The documentary critics would assume that the novelist's duty (as a holder of a mirror to his society) is to tell all, to give all the details of a given social phenomenon, withholding nothing in the interests of realism. (To the documentary critic 'realism' means an accurate reflection of surface social detail.) However, there are reasons quite apart from the pressure of literary conventions or personal embarrassment why the novelist may choose in the interests of his art to hold back from giving maximum detail in a description of a social fact. It is wrong to regard literature as having the same character, purpose, and form as a piece of journalism or documentary reportage. Consider the description of Tom-all-Alone's, the urban slum in Bleak House. Dickens does not attempt a carefully documented portrayal based on the evidence of contemporary reports. This is not simply because the details may have proved too shocking and offensive for his readers, though an uncompromising account would have contained some grisly horrors. "The imagination can hardly apprehend the horror in which thousands of families a hundred years ago were born, dragged out their ghastly lives, and died: the drinking water brown with faecal particles, the corpses kept unburied for a fortnight in a festering London August; mortified limbs quivering with maggots; courts where not a weed would grow, and sleeping-dens afloat with sewage." (G.M. Young).<sup>(1)</sup> This presents a problem of method for the realistic novelist. The social propagandist might wish to reveal all to force his readers for a moment to consider the full extent of conditions from which they were usually only too willing to turn. However, there are dangers in this policy.

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1 G.M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age, p. 23.

Grahame Smith remarks, "Artistic reticence should never be confused with moral cowardice. Matters suitable for a work of history or sociology, and acceptable within such a context, may produce a purely visceral reaction if they are obtruded on to the body of a work of art. It is a common experience to find oneself exhausted by the indiscriminate piling-up of horrific details, so that one's moral indignation is no longer capable of functioning."<sup>(1)</sup>

Literature has its own discipline and requirements which make it intrinsically different from a sociological report. Literary tact and understatement do not necessarily imply a failure of realism. In Dickens's novelistic treatment of prostitution suppression of realistic detail led to a vanishing of the social fact, as well as bad art. Yet Dickens's restrained response to the artistic problem set by Tom's avoids both of these pitfalls. Tom's is given enough realistic detail to carry its weight as a moral type of an urban slum. The full horror of life in Tom's is strongly implied by the dehumanised, zomboid existence of Jo (its representative dweller and victim), as well as by the shock of Snagsby, a London dweller all his life, at witnessing social conditions a short distance from his house which in even the farthest flights of his imagination, he would not have believed possible within the boundaries of the city. The reader is left to wonderingly sketch in for himself the sort of conditions that would have made such a horrific impression on Snagsby, a man neither innocent or naive about life. Without piling up explicit detail Dickens is able to communicate the desired effect. Verbal reticence is not incompatible with successful art.

The real issue here, and one which is crucial to the sociology of literature is that the documentary critics deny the literary nature of literature. In developing this point let us consider the difference between Mayhew's London Labour and London Poor and a novel by Dickens. Mayhew's work

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1 G. Smith, Dickens, Money, and Society, p. 32.

contains moving and imaginatively potent descriptions of poverty, and the documentary approach would obscure the difference between it and, for example, Bleak House. But while the former is a journalistic piece of social reportage, Bleak House is an imaginative universe, a total structure in which the meaning of one part can only be elucidated from its relations to the others, and especially to the whole. In Mayhew's report (skilfully written as it is) details are no more than what they purport to be - strikingly observed social facts. However, in Bleak House descriptions and episodes can be realistic recreations of the actual world in which the Victorians lived, and, at the same time, literary symbols or emblems with a generalising suggestiveness for the world of the novel, which enhance the significance of other elements within the novel and help to unify the total structure.

It is particularly important in considering Dickens that the sociologist of literature makes concessions to the literary nature of a work and relaxes the rigour of his desire for a scientific analysis. For the shortest route to the social vision of Dickens's novels (which it will be argued in Chapter 2 is the chief concern of the sociologist of literature) is by means of a study of recurring patterns of imagery, and a discussion of Dickens's artistic use of symbols or emblems - in short, by an examination of how Dickens utilises specifically literary techniques and devices as the chief means of expressing his insights into the social life of his society. "The way to Dickens's insight into the nature of nineteenth century society is by means of the symbolic surface in which it is embodied."<sup>(1)</sup> Dickens's major social insights are not articulated explicitly, by authorial intrusion into the narrative or through a literary spokesman or mouthpiece. The key to understanding his novels

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1 G. Smith, *ibid*, p. 206.

is to recognise the representative or symbolic nature of the details in the world of his novels. "In Dickens's world-in-fiction the characteristic act, action, or activity, although observed so acutely and rendered so vividly as to seem actual to the reader, has weight, importance, significance, beyond this actuality. In varying ways and with varying intensity or insistence, action in Dickens's novels becomes at the least representative, at the most symbolic."<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed, the unique character of Dickens's mature work lies in the very fact that "his method is at the same time realistic and figurative"<sup>(2)</sup>, which enables the novels to transcend the limitations of both the roman social and the naturalistic novel; the one confined to topicality as a result of its didactic purpose, and the other overtly literal in its attempt at complete verisimilitude. The specific case of Dickens underlines how important it is that the sociologist of literature must develop the tools to do justice to both realistic and figurative elements in a work. The tasks of the sociologist and the literary critic cannot be crudely separated. It is necessary to fuse both areas of interest, and combine both approaches, to get at the key, the imaginative motor, of a work of literature. The documentary approach ignores the figurative and symbolic aspects (i.e. the literary characteristics) of a literary work, which can only be approached from a reading of the text as a total imaginative structure. "The sociologist who neglects this dimension of the unique character of literature and of the technicalities of fiction will be unable to perceive exactly how a novel constitutes an analytic and synthetic mode of social reality."<sup>(3)</sup>

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- 1 Lauriat Lane, The Dickens Critics (ed. Ford and Lane), p. 9.
  - 2 Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens. His Tragedy and Triumph, p. 769.
  - 3 M. Zeraffa, 'The Novel as Literary Form and as Social Institution', in Sociology of Literature and Drama, (ed. E. & T. Burns), p. 37.

The special characteristics of Dickens's mature novels - the fact that, according to Walter Allen, though Dickens is a great realist "in the last analysis we respond to the later novels as to great poems for their effect is that of poetry"<sup>(1)</sup> - highlights a crucial problem of theory for the sociology of literature as a developing discipline. A self-imposed taboo on analysis of patterns of imagery, discussions of symbolic literary devices, etc., merely limits the number and type of novels which can be adequately discussed by the sociologist of literature, and erects a barrier to evaluative and comparative discussion of the work of novelists whose realistic method is more complex and sophisticated than simple naturalism. Great literature seldom works and achieves its effects in a manner which leaves it accessible to a crude analysis which demands a scientific order of criticism. Thus such a taboo would result in the sociologist of literature concerning himself only with parts of the text under discussion, which would almost certainly involve a failure to produce an adequate or satisfactory reading of the great novels of the European critical realist tradition (seen by Lukács and Goldmann as the primary critical area of concern for the sociologist of literature). If the full range of literary techniques and analytical tools is denied the sociological critic then the sociology of literature will be unnecessarily delimited to a documentary concern with literature as a mirror of society, and to a study of the processes of literary production (concerned with such topics as the changing relationships between the writer and his public; the historical importance of patronage; the changing nature of the literary market; the role of publishing firms and libraries in literary production; and changes in the sizes and nature of the reading public, etc.). Most of these later concerns are discussed in Robert Escarpit's book Sociology of Literature. They lend themselves to quantifiable, scientific analysis, and yet they represent only one area of concern or direction of approach for the sociologist of

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1 W. Allen, The English Novel, p. 164.

literature. In particular, the complex relationship between literary form (especially changes in the novel form) and social phenomena cannot adequately be explored if a rigorous division of labour between the sociologist and the literary critic is enforced. The critical machinery for discussing literary devices for artistic organisation and expression of material must be integrated into any sociology of the novel.

It is worth considering in greater detail the nature of Dickens's symbolism. To argue that elements in a Dickens novel have a generalised significance or weight of implication for the social world of the novel is not to argue that the novel is a symbolic structure which can only be approached through symbolic analysis, or that the sole justification for an element's existence within the novel is its symbolic function. When we consider symbolism in Dickens's novels we have a different situation from, for example, Lawrence's symbolic use of the horses at the end of The Rainbow. Here it is not certain whether the horses have an objective existence or are merely a project of Ursula's unconsciousness. Dickens's symbols and emblems, on the other hand, are given a concrete reality in the world of the novel. They exist both as sensuously described facts within the novel, and as emblematic elements with a generalized weight of implication. As Monroe Engel claims in The Maturity of Dickens, "When the method, then, is at its most successful, the different materials merge: the symbols that are also natural facts, and the facts that have symbolic overtones, are the same fabric.". Certainly, at their most successful "Dickens's symbols do not make the fundamental mistake of appearing to owe their presence to their symbolic function."<sup>(1)</sup>

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1 C. Ricks, Great Expectations in Dickens and the Twentieth Century (ed. Gross and Pearson), p. 200.



A good example of Dickens's symbolism is provided by the fog in Bleak House. There is no need to choose between a realistic or figurative interpretation. Both are perfectly compatible. Indeed they have to be. "Only if it is realised in concrete details can a symbol designed to indict a whole society bear its full weight."<sup>(1)</sup> Thus the fog in Bleak House has to have a concrete physical reality (in details such as its cruel pinching of the toes of the shivering little 'prentice boy) if it is to do its work successfully as a suggestive emblem for the whole social world of the novel. Modern critics have remarked on its dual identity. "The fog of the opening chapter is both literal and allegorical"<sup>(2)</sup>, and "The fog is at once the most actual and the most symbolic of all fogs"<sup>(3)</sup>.

Indeed, it is precisely this lack of sensuous detail which accounted for the weakness of the 'what the waves were saying' symbol in Dombey and Son. Thus, in Dickens's mature novels, realism and symbolism are complimentary principles. Indeed, as we shall see, the emblematic or representative images within the novels take us to the heart of the vision of the real or essential nature of everyday relations within his society (which, it will be argued, is the hallmark of Dickens's realism), in an economic and imaginatively powerful fashion.

Of course, the importance of Dickens's descriptions of the social landscape of his novels has long been recognised. Chesterton remarked that it was "characteristic of Dickens that his atmospheres are more important than his stories". Within his novels, descriptions of urban scenes and especially

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1 G. Smith, *ibid*, p. 122.

2 E. Johnson, *ibid*, p. 770.

3 A.O.J. Cockshut, The Imagination of Charles Dickens, p. 128.

individual buildings have a harvest of implication and consistently take on a resonance of meaning above the purely literal. The literary technique whereby the physical appearance of a building or a room reflects the moral or spiritual life of its inhabitants is a favourite of Dickens. Balzac anticipated him in the zest with which he used this technique (cf. the Vauquer boarding house in Old Goriot). Certainly, much of Dickens's imaginative attitude to the general moral life of the community is suggested in his descriptions of the city, and especially its buildings which, in a sense, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, are the most real and evident of its inhabitants. For example, in Our Mutual Friend, the physical appearance of Boffin's Bower suggests the sterile spiritual existence of Old Harmon, its former owner - 'A gloomy house the Bower, with sordid signs on it of having been, through its long existence as Harmony Jail, in miserly holding. Bare of paint, bare of paper on the walls, bare of furniture, bare of experience of human life.' (Penguin, p. 231). The description of the rooms within the building comprehensively reinforces this effect. Related to this technique is the use of an important locale as a social microcosm, a representative miniature model of a whole society (e.g. Chancery in Bleak House and the Circumlocution Office in Little Dorrit), which is another symbolic literary device of crucial importance to Dickens's realistic method.

Though most literary critics would recognise these aspects of Dickens's fiction more recently voices of objection have been raised against the tactical use of symbolism in the analysis of certain Dickens critics. In part this is an argument over terms. Critics who define a symbol as "a sign for the total insights of the novel"<sup>(1)</sup> argue, like John Killham, that the term symbol cannot be satisfactorily applied to Dickens's novels because the insight embodied in

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1 J. Killham, 'Pickwick: Dickens and the Art of Fiction' in Dickens and the Twentieth Century (ed. Gross and Pearson, p. 38.

the 'symbols' don't apply to the whole text (as for example, the symbol of the wings of the dove in James's novel), but only to parts of it. For example, talking of the dust-mounds in Our Mutual Friend, Killham argues that "its meaning (over and above that required in the fiction) is to be taken at some times and not others."<sup>(1)</sup> Its pejorative association of wealth with dirt, filth, and rubbish does not apply, for example, at the conclusion of the novel, when the worthy hero, Rokesmith/Harmon, inherits the dust-mounds and the wealth they represent.

It must be admitted that, in the same novel, at certain times, Dickens's symbols reinforce the meaning and direction of the plot, and at other times oppose it. However, we must not assume that the weakness here lies simply in Dickens's uncertain handling of symbolism. Contradictions within the total imaginative structure may equally well be the result of a weak and inconsistent handling of plot and character, in line with novelistic conventions about a satisfactory closed ending. In fact, it will be argued that Dickens's symbols suggest fundamental contradictions within the system of Victorian capitalism which cannot be satisfactorily resolved by a conventional closed ending. This lack of resolution between symbol and narrative conclusion has important, and flawing, effects on the unity of the novels. At the heart of Killham's criticism of the symbol hunters in Dickens lies a complaint that, especially since Edmund Wilson's celebrated article<sup>(2)</sup> encouraged critics to look for a dark and pessimistic Dickens, precursor of Dostoyevsky - many critics have utilized symbolic interpretations (at the expense of consideration of plot and character) to impose a false unity and consistency on a complex, and sometimes

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1 J. Killham, *ibid*, p. 39.

2 E. Wilson, 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', in The Wind and the Bow.

confused, structure. The symbols of the later novels have been used by many critics to make claims for a coherence and unity which can only be justified if large areas of the novels are ignored.

The question of symbolism is probably the most important issue in recognising the literary nature of Dickens's novels. Certainly it demands a more sophisticated analytical scheme than the documentary method. In concluding this argument let us consider a particular case, that of the Circumlocution Office satire in Little Dorrit.

An approach which regards Little Dorrit as being in essence no different as a social document than a contemporary issue of, for example, Household Words, would select an episode such as the Circumlocution Office satire, divorce it from its imaginative context, and might then compare it with other selected passages from different novels, also divorced from their imaginative context, in much the same way that a self-contained article in one edition of Household Words could be compared with another piece of journalism in a different edition. It would also be assumed that the degree of artistic success achieved in the Circumlocution Office passages would be in some way necessarily related to the historical accuracy of the surface details of the description.

The flaws in such an approach will be apparent from a consideration of the role and function of the Circumlocution Office within the novel's structure as a whole - the only way in which the artistic or novelistic meaning or significance of the Circumlocution Office episodes can be determined. The Circumlocution Office is not merely an indictment of the machinery of mid-Victorian political government but is organically related to the central themes of the novel, and makes a major contribution to the novel's social vision. Dickens would defend the surface accuracy of the details of

his novels to his critics - as when he defended the realistic validity of the incident of Krook's spontaneous combustion against G.H. Lewes's criticism - and there is no doubt that he was concerned about the issue of civil service reform, especially in the aftermath of the inefficient administration which tragically characterised the Crimean War. However, the Circumlocution Office passages do not form a self-contained essay on the need for administrative reform which can be divorced from the rest of the novel without a loss of significance. Such a self-contained essay in social criticism might have been characteristic of the loose, casually unified structures of Dickens's early period, but not of the mature novels of the fifties and sixties where episodes of social criticism are ineluctably wedded into the imaginative whole. The question of whether an episode such as the Circumlocution Office satire can be historically inaccurate in its surface detail and yet be artistically right in its imaginative context (being an accurate reflection of wider social forces) puts the debate on the fairness of Dickens's satire into perspective.

This debate has been vigorously engaged ever since Sir James Fitzjames Stephen's anonymous review of Little Dorrit ('The Licence of Modern Novelists') in the Edinburgh Review (1857) which defended the civil service against Dickens's attack. Of course, Fitzjames Stephen had both a personal and a professional axe to grind. He was the son of Sir James Stephen, a major civil servant (Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office from 1835 to 1847), and he believed that his father was the original of Tite Barnacle. Certainly, most contemporary opinion outside the civil service agreed that the civil service was a bastion of aristocratic privilege. Administrative Reform Associations were set up in Birmingham and Manchester designed "to destroy the aristocratic monopoly of power and place in the Civil Service". More modern historians have seen other factors -

not just the aristocratic principle - as partly responsible for administrative inefficiency. Kitson Clark mentions "the stringency of the rules of accounting imposed by the House of Commons for economics, and the general tendency of any large administrative system to strangle itself."<sup>(1)</sup> C.P. Snow has even denied the general drift of Dickens's criticism (though he admits its relevance as an indictment of bureaucratic red-tape generally) by arguing from the evidence of the autobiographies of Trollope and Henry Taylor, as well as Trollope's fictional The Three Clerks, that the civil service was not, in fact, an appendage of the aristocracy. He argues that the working civil service, organised and staffed department by department, contained (not a homogeneous aristocratic clique) but a representation of a "widish (exactly Trollope's spectrum) of English society". Snow goes on to assert that "It was this comfortable, heterogeneous, predominantly middle-class world ... which felt itself threatened by the Northcote-Trevelyan report."<sup>(2)</sup>

It would need a specialist study to decide all this, but a remark made by Barbara Hardy about the psychological detail of the moral conversions of characters in Dickens's novels is clearly relevant here - "To argue in detail the psychological validity of these conversions might both exaggerate and obscure their literary interest."<sup>(3)</sup> The literary interest of the Circumlocution Office, its imaginative weight in the novel, even in the last analysis, its artistic success, is independent of the reader's interest or agreement with Dickens's position. It lies instead in the Circumlocution Office's function within the total structure

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1 Kitson Clark, *ibid*, p. 220.

2 C.P. Snow, 'Dickens and the Public Service' in Dickens 1970 (ed. M. Slater), p. 144.

3 B. Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens, p. 53.

as both the novel's chief representative social institution, and a microcosmic model of a total society (which connects it to the other literary means of expressing the general social condition in the novel - the prison motif, and the market imagery, etc.). It is only in relation to the Marshalsea, Mrs. General's surfaces of High Society, Panck's mechanical official life etc., that the full significance of the Circumlocution Office for the social world of Little Dorrit can be understood.

The Circumlocution Office, as a model for mid-Victorian society is a good example of Walter Allen's remark that Dickens's novels are concerned "more with symbolic institutions than actual ones."<sup>(1)</sup> The relations of the individual suitor with the Circumlocution Office are representative of the essential relations between the individual and the indifferent machinery of the Victorian social system - and it is in this that the weight of the Circumlocution Office passages lies. We are told that 'the Circumlocution Office went on mechanically every day' and within this hostile mechanism ('numbers of people were lost in the Circumlocution Office'), the individual suitor (Meagles, Doyce, Clennam) journey in a confused movement between indifferent and impersonal officials until his will is exhausted, and he resigns himself to his lot. The Circumlocution Office, like Chancery in Bleak House, is an alien force in itself, a thing with its own life, external to the individuals who have created it - hence, a successful symbol for the essential condition of mid-Victorian England, presented in Little Dorrit as a hostile and alienating social environment. Thus, in treating the Circumlocution Office as a social document, critics are at best asking only one of the relevant questions and at worst asking the wrong one.

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1 W. Allen, The English Novel, p. 159.

Similarly the documentary method could be applied to Chancery in Bleak House (for example, "In fact, I am sure that it would be possible to produce an edition of Bleak House, in which all Dickens's statements could be verified by the statements of the witnesses who gave evidence before the Chancery Commission, which reported in 1826"),<sup>(1)</sup> without elucidating the meaning or significance of Chancery within the novel's structure. Within their respective novels both Chancery and the Circumlocution Office are "the starting point capable of becoming the central point"<sup>(2)</sup>, and it is this specifically literary nature of the presentation of social facts in Dickens's novels which prevents the documentary method from being the most satisfactory analytical approach for the sociologist of literature.

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1 Sir W.S. Holdsworth, Charles Dickens as a Legal Historian, p. 81.

2 E. Muir, Essays on Literature and Society, p. 210.



## CHAPTER 2

## THE NATURE OF DICKENS'S REALISM

Though this thesis will not utilise a documentary approach to the novels, (the crudest and most reductionist reflection theory), it does argue that Dickens's mature novels - the novels of the 1850's and 60's from Dombey and Son (1846-8) to Our Mutual Friend (1864-5) - reflect the essential nature of his society (indeed of industrial society as a social type) but that this reflection is not passive or mechanical, but creative and critical. In this chapter the nature of Dickens's realistic method, and the manner in which Victorian society is reflected in his novels, will be discussed.

Dickens's mature novels reflect not selected aspects of the surface of social life, but the essential condition of social relations within a whole society, seen as a social organism, a system of interrelated parts. The concern to depict society in its essential aspects has been seen by many critics (e.g. Georg Lukács) as characteristic of 'true realism' as against the superficial and often illusory realism of the naturalist school. "The hallmark of the great realist masterpiece is precisely that its intensive totality of essential social factors does not require a meticulously accurate or pedantically encyclopaedic inclusion of all the treads making up the social tangle."<sup>(1)</sup> Dickens, himself, was consciously opposed to the indiscriminate piling up of surface detail about the social world in creative literature. In a letter of 1859 he protested, "It does not seem to me to be enough to say of any description that it is the exact

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1 G. Lukács, 'Tolstoy and the Development of Realism' in Marxists on Literature (ed. D. Craig), p. 291.

truth. The exact truth must be there; but the merit of art in the narrator, is the manner of stating the truth. As to which thing in literature, it always seems to me that there is a world to be done. And in these times, when the tendency is to be frightfully literal and catalogue-like - to make the thing, in short, a sort of sum in reduction that any miserable creature can do in that way - I have an idea ... that the very holding of popular literature through a kind of popular dark age, may depend on such fanciful treatment." In the Preface to Bleak House (1853) he declared that he had "purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things". Dickens's reflection of social reality is a poetic one, not a documentary or photographic realism. It is concerned with "piercing through to the underlying meaning of the industrial scene rather than describing it in minute detail".<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed, it cannot be demonstrated too strongly that Dickens's mature realistic method gives the lie to H.V. Routh's assertion that Dickens's novels are "concerned with special and departmental abuses, for instance workhouses, debtor's prisons, and law's delays - and do not penetrate to the subsoil in which such growths can survive".<sup>(2)</sup>

The reflection of society in Dickens's novels is not only concerned with an essential but with a generalising level of insight. Raymond Williams makes some useful points about the nature of Dickens's realism. The novels dramatise "the experience of a society, not its isolable facts."<sup>(3)</sup> Dickens's social criticism cannot be reduced to a collection of separable attitudes to money, speculation, prisons, urban slums, the Poor Law, etc., or a series of journalistic/propagandist pleas for reform of this institution or that social evil - but is embodied in an historically specific vision of social experience in its generality - the general

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1 E. Johnson, *ibid*, p. 803.

2 H.V. Routh, Money, Morals and Manners, p. 54.

3 R. Williams, 'Social Criticism in Dickens. Some Problems of Method and Approach' in Critical Quarterly, VI.

quality of everyday social relations, and the general possibilities for a fulfilling social life throughout the system. And to the sociologist of literature this baring of the general and essential condition (relevant to domestic, social, and cultural life) is, in the last instance, more important than a detailed documentation of the surface features of the age. Indeed, Raymond Williams asserts that this type of general, total vision of society "is the kind of social criticism that belongs to literature and especially, in our civilisation, to the novel".<sup>(1)</sup>

This puts into perspective criticism that Dickens's novels don't offer details of those forces now seen as working to ameliorate social conditions (for example, parliamentary, educational, and local government reform and collective labour movements). Raymond Williams pertinently remarks, "If the general condition and the forces operating on it were as he (i.e. Dickens) felt them to be, then, what others may see as the 'real forces' can indeed seem incidental".<sup>2</sup> It could certainly be argued that the overriding tendencies towards isolation, alienation, the division of life into private and official spheres etc., which the later novels identify as essential characteristics of the general condition within the new urbanised, industrial society, are, despite over a century of reforms, still characteristic of our society today. Certainly, many modern writers have described the essential condition of modern life in terms strikingly similar to Dickens - Kafka, Camus, etc.. Indeed, (and this point will be developed), Dickens's social vision seems relevant for our own times in a way which isn't true of the social world of his contemporaries, Trollope, Thackeray, and George Eliot, the latter arguably a more varied and consummate literary artist.

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1 R. Williams, The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence, p. 49.

2 R. Williams, *ibid*, p. 41.

In addition to being embodied in a generalising insight, the reflection of society in Dickens's later novels is both critical and creative. Most critics connect the development of the novel form to the historical experience and values of the middle class, though this relation is less simple than that posited by Ian Watt in The Rise of the Novel. Certainly, though middle-class values and ideals are part of the fabric of Dickens's novels, the novels as a whole transcend Dickens's social situation as a middle-class writer aiming his works at a middle-class public. In the words of Lucien Goldmann, Dickens's novels offer "a form of critical opposition to the ongoing development of bourgeois society".<sup>(1)</sup> The complex relation between Dickens and the experience and values of the middle class will be explored in the discussion of Dickens as a 'bourgeois novelist' in Chapter 3, and in the individual studies of selected novels. However, it should be emphasised at this point that the critical and oppositional nature of Dickens's realism is embodied imaginatively in the vision of society which constitutes the main stuff of his novels, and is thus revealed through literary analysis of the text, rather than made explicit or articulated in a political fashion. "The great artists of the bourgeois period are all highly critical, in some way or other, of bourgeois society and its values. This criticism is not always consciously formulated and seldom has an explicit political slant."<sup>(2)</sup> In addition, the oppositional character of Dickens's fiction is not embodied in the words of a literary spokesman. There is no Vautrin in Dickens's novels. Orlick is anti-social but inarticulate. A character such as Gowan in Little Dorrit may utter words which have a greater significance within the world of the novel than he is

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1 L. Goldmann, Towards a Sociology of the Novel, p. 13.

2 A. Kettle, 'The Progressive Tradition in Bourgeois Culture' in Radical Perspectives in the Arts (ed. L. Baxandall), p. 166.

aware, but his easy recognition of the market nature of social life is accepted with no personal consciousness of loss. Indeed, those characters in a Dickens novel who are consciously used by Dickens as a moral touchstone and mouth-piece (e.g. Jarndyce in Bleak House, or Boffin in Our Mutual Friend) are inadequate to articulate the social insights of the imaginative core of the novel - the logic of the novel's social vision transcends their platitudes, (couched mainly in middle-class values). Similarly, most of Dickens's authorial intrusions into the narrative reflect a value stance of middle-class orthodoxy.

--In defining Dickens's realistic method it is important to recognise that though Dickens's criticism of mid-Victorian capitalism is from a moral/humanistic stance it exists alongside the clear insight that the general quality of moral life and everyday social relations is largely the product of social and economic institutions. Dickens's novelistic attitude to environment is not simple, and its emphasis changes throughout his fiction. He never accepted that Victorian capitalism formed a completely deterministic environment, but in his mature work evil, greed, selfishness, materialism, crime are not abstract moral qualities but presented as the product of an historically specific environment, the inevitable individual response to the crucial influence of a set of social conditions operating in nineteenth century England. The relations between Dickens's morally based criticism of his society, and his recognition of the importance of the social/economic environment on the general character of everyday life accounts for the special flavour of Dickens's social criticism. Thus within a few paragraphs of her critical work on Dickens, Barbara Hardy can call Dickens 'a moral novelist', and then assert that his novels reveal 'a sociological imagination'.<sup>(1)</sup>

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1 B. Hardy, *ibid*, p. 4.

In view of expressed critical opinion, such as A.O.J. Cockshut's statement that human nature in Dickens "has only an accidental connection with the nineteenth century and with social questions"<sup>(1)</sup>, it is worth developing this point. In Oliver Twist (1838), Oliver in the thieves' den retained his innocence (and his standard English grammar) against all social probability. Furthermore, the novel suggests that Oliver's gentlemanly birth is in some way responsible, making Oliver's moral survival a triumph of blood over environment. By Dombey and Son (1846-48) the novelistic attitude towards environment has changed. Dickens repudiates the abstract principle which corresponds exactly to Oliver's experience. Talking of the London slums he declares, "Vainly attempt to think of any simple plant, or flower, or wholesome weed, that, set in this foetid bed, could have its natural growth, or put its little leaves off to the sun as GOD designed it." (Penguin, p. 737).

By the time he created Magwitch and Bradley Headstone Dickens had come a long way from the view of environment which presented Bill Sikes's passion as moral evil independent of his environment and socialisation. The real villains of the latter novels are not individual criminals who Iago-like embody satanic evil, but social institutions like Chancery and the Circumlocution Office. "Society in its institutionalised aspect has replaced the individual male-factors of the early novels as the true villain."<sup>(2)</sup> The sort of moral opposition (e.g. between Woodcourt and Smallweed, Doyce and Merdle) which had categorised literature since the Mediaeval Morality Plays is given a precise social and historical basis in Dickens's novels (and put within the wider context of a critical vision of industrial society as a social type).

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1 A.O.J. Cockshut, *ibid*, p. 56.

2 E.D.H. Johnson, Charles Dickens: an Introduction to his Novels, p. 39.

Thus the moral debate in Dickens's mature novels is socially based.

The critical nature of Dickens's novelistic reflection of society implies not merely an imaginative observation of society (consistent with the documentary approach), but an imaginative judgement. This judgement is preceded by and necessarily bound up with an imaginative attempt to understand the nature of the new social reality, child of industrial change. Dickens's mature novels embody an honest and ambitious attempt to analyse the nature of industrial society through the medium of fiction. Thus Dickens's literary reflection of society is also creative. Dickens used his novels "as a means of coming to know society".<sup>(1)</sup> His later novels define this new society, not merely reflect it. They embody a creative discovery and an evaluative judgement of a social system seen as significantly new and different, both complex and confusing. Edgar Johnson's title for his chapter on Bleak House is his book Charles Dickens - His Tragedy and Triumph is, 'The Anatomy of Society', and this could serve as an inclusive thematic label for the whole sequence of novels from Bleak House to Our Mutual Friend. Similarly, F.R. Leavis's comments on Little Dorrit have a general relevance for the whole body of Dickens's later work. "Little Dorrit ... offers something like a comprehensive report on Victorian England - what is life, what are the possibilities of life, in this society and civilisation, and what could life, in a better society, be?"<sup>(2)</sup>

The main concern of Dickens's realistic method then is a critical evaluation of the general social condition within the industrial system. Society, seen whole, is the main stuff of Dickens's later fiction, and if a novel appears to

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1 B. Hardy, *ibid*, p. 9.

2 F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, p. 301.

concentrate on a particular institution - e.g. Chancery in Bleak House - then this is because that institution is seen as representative of the essential condition within the system as a whole. "Dickens may not have been as sophisticated a political thinker as some Marxists have made out, but he was sophisticated enough to see all these institutions (i.e. Law, prisons, etc.) as characteristic of capitalist society."<sup>(1)</sup>

Even in Hard Times (1854), where his area of concern seems narrower, a satire on the hard-headed Benthamite economists and Blue-Book statisticians, Dickens's criticism directs the reader to the general social condition. As Barnard points out, "The book is aimed, in fact, at all the tendencies of the age to repress the free creative imagination of men, to stifle their individuality, to make them cogs in a machine - mere numbers in a classroom, or 'hands' without bodies or minds."<sup>(2)</sup> The logic of the Benthamite disciples, Gradgrind and McChoakumchild, and the experience of the Coketown hands, is, like the operation of Chancery, the Circumlocution Office, and Shares in Our Mutual Friend, symptomatic of the general effects of the system on the individual. The core of Dickens's criticism ("My satire (in Hard Times) is against those who see figures and averages and nothing else" - from a letter to Charles Knight in January 1855), that human beings are being degraded into mere mathematical units or numbers in a sum, is organically related to the general tendency in mid-Victorian capitalism to regard people, in everyday social relations, quantitatively as objects, which is embodied in the fabric of the later novels through the extended and central analogy between society and the market-place.

That society, seen whole, is Dickens's subject leads to

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1 B. Hardy, Charles Dickens: The Later Novels, p. 14.

2 R. Barnard, Imagery and Theme in the Novels of Dickens, p. 81.



a deeper awareness of the nature of Dickens's realism, and prevents the mistake of regarding as faults aspects of his realistic method which follow directly and functionally from the centre of his imaginative and artistic concern with society as a whole. For example, consider Dickens's method of characterisation. A general criticism is that his central characters are not psychologically interesting, and his peripheral figures too exaggerated and grotesque. However, if Dickens's chief artistic subject is society then it is also true that in a sense his chief characters are social institutions - Chancery, the Circumlocution Office, Expectations, Shares. "For Bleak House to have its Lydgate, its Madame Bovary, its Raskolnikov would be a denial of its own existence. The novel's ultimate protagonist is the Court of Chancery."<sup>(1)</sup> Though both Arthur Clennam and Pip can be approached through Lukács's concept of the problematic hero, and Dickens's most successful characters (e.g. William Dorrit and Miss Wade) offer interesting studies in individual psychology, throughout the later novels Dickens's attitude to characterisation is consistent - characters are utilised to illustrate some truths about society, not human psychology. (As we shall see, this is true even in Dickens's most interesting psychological studies - e.g. Miss Wade and Bradley Headstone, whose neuroses grow out of aspects of their social environment.) Barbara Hardy testifies to the primacy of the social vision over individual psychology. The mature novels are "primarily concerned with the nature of society, and his individual characters are pretty plainly illustrations, created by needs and roles, seen as agents and victims, within a critical analysis of contemporary England."<sup>(2)</sup>

It is not difficult to see how Dickens's method of

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1 G. Smith, Charles Dickens: Bleak House, p. 47.

2 B. Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens, p. 4.

characterisation has been criticised as exaggerated. As illustrations of social forces his characters are presented, that the essence of society may be seen more clearly, in extreme terms. The typical Dickens characters embody essential aspects of their society, in their most highly developed and concentrated forms. "Dickens's characters such as Boundersby and Tulkinghorn impinge uniquely on the reader because they represent an essence, citing the essential truths about some aspect of their society without being diluted by all the inessentials that make the characters of other novelists more acceptably 'lifelike'."<sup>(1)</sup> Lukács's theory of the type is directly relevant to a discussion of Dickens's characterisation. To Lukács the creation of 'types' which reveal the essential nature of a social/historical situation or experience is one of the touchstones of literary greatness. What constitutes a type is "not its average quality, not its mere individual being however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in extreme presentation of their extremes."<sup>(2)</sup> Good examples of 'types' would be Mrs. Glennam, Pancks, Wemmick, Podsnap. Thus the extremely-defined, highly-concentrated presentation of character is not a failing in Dickens's realism (as compared to the careful, intricate revelation of internal character of George Eliot) but is a consequence of the social basis of his realistic method. Dickens's chief artistic concern differs from that of George Eliot and his realistic method accordingly differs, but it is an artistically valid alternative method, not an inferior one.

At this point the nature of Dickens's social vision

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1 F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, p. 219.

2 G. Lukács, Studies in European Realism, p. 6.

must be described in greater detail. The creative process in the later novels begins with an all-embracing, comprehensive, and artistically controlling view of society, seen whole - a portrayal which contains all that is important in its essential features. The novels' representation of society imposes an imaginative or poetic unity on a confusing world in disarray. Though on occasions Dickens attempts, with varying degrees of artistic conviction, through his representative good characters, to suggest how things could be improved, the mature novels generally portray society as it is, not as Dickens wished it to be. These elements of future hope (which owe a lot to novelistic conventions, especially the required closed ending) might suggest that Dickens is a social realist but a moral optimist. While there is this tension in, for example, Bleak House, such a view simplifies Dickens's realistic method, which in the mature fiction presents morality itself as a product of environment. Thus there is a problem here for the nature of Dickens's realism. Indeed it will be argued that the social vision of the later novels is essentially a tragic vision, it implies that things aren't going to change. The pessimism of Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend (in the latter case, despite the conventionally happy ending) is not relieved by any hope that there will be a general cure or redemption for the corrupt system of mid-Victorian society. Indeed the key thematic problem in the later novels is how to live a good life in a morally corrupt system. The novels examine whether it is possible to retreat from the system into a private, enclosed world, and though Dickens's novelistic position changes in emphasis we can say that such a strategy is basically rejected.

The relations between the individual and the system are so central to the later fiction that Hobsbaum defines the chief perspective of Dickens's novels in these terms. "The voice of Dickens is that which speaks for the individual

caught in the mechanism of system."<sup>(1)</sup> This crucial concept of an individual caught within a system beyond his control is given a plot analogue in the many central characters who live out their lives influenced by mysteries and muddles directly concerning them, which they only dimly comprehend. Esther in Bleak House, lives oblivious to the mystery of her parentage; Arthur Clennam in Little Dorrit tries unsuccessfully to comprehend the mystery of his father's dying world; and, of course, Pip in Great Expectations lives in the grip of a completely false interpretation of the central mystery of the identity of his benefactor. For virtually all the working-class characters in the novels their helplessness within the social machine is encompassed in Stephen Blackpool's "aw a muddle! Fro' first to last, a muddle!" The image of the crowd in Chapter 1 of Bleak House, each man groping in a confused manner to find his own individual way through the enveloping fog, is an emblem for this general condition.

Though the novels reflect a despair for society, hope for the individual life is never completely abandoned. The system is not completely deterministic. As we shall see, Dickens's artistic attitude to environment cannot be reduced to simple equations. "His (i.e. Dickens) novels show a division between the society he rejects and the humanity he believes in, and that humanity, in different ways, is somehow preserved, frozen, shut off, and saved from the social pressure",<sup>(2)</sup> but only a vulnerable few escape the blighting effects of environment to attain fulfilment and happiness. Mid-Victorian capitalism is presented in the later novels as producing "a universal process of degradation ... to be escaped from only by a man or a woman here and there, through unusual courage or abnegation or grace."<sup>(3)</sup>

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1 P. Hobsbaum, A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens, p. 19.

2 B. Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens, p. 4.

3 E. Muir, Essays on Literature and Society, p. 214.

In exploring Dickens's artistic representation of the characteristic relations between the individual and the system (a crucial focus in the novels' social vision) the Marxist concepts of alienation and reification are particularly useful. For Marx, capitalism was a system in which, chiefly by virtue of its extended division of labour, man's sense of wholeness was destroyed (or at any rate reduced to a mere fragment). Man's labour, his work, becomes an external, oppressive activity, which, far from fulfilling him, denies him. Thus through his labour man becomes a mere economic object, a thing - his labour is a commodity to be brought and used by others - and he is alienated from his work, from himself, and from his fellow workers. Through this process of alienation the world increasingly becomes an external, hostile, and alien environment. Reification refers to this process by which the human world is seen as a world of objects, and society is portrayed as an external 'thing' constraining man, something fundamentally non-human and hostile. In The German Ideology, Marx talks about the "crystallisation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produced into an objective power over us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations."<sup>(1)</sup> Chancery, the Circumlocution Office and Shares (in Our Mutual Friend) are all examples of this phenomenon.

Use of these concepts does not mean that the study as a whole is characterised by a Marxist perspective. However, it will be argued that in the later novels industrial society is seen as an oppressive and alienating system, external and hostile to the individuals within it, who function in themselves and through their relations with others as objects, machines, or things.

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1 Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy (ed. Bottomore and Rubel), p. 111.

The concepts of alienation and reification have been used by sociologists of literature to describe the imaginative worlds contained in the fiction of various modern writers, but they have not been seen as relevant analytical tools for a study of novels within the 19th century critical realist tradition. For Lucien Goldmann (who virtually ignored the English novelistic tradition) the fact that this was so was a problem. "Although it is obvious that the absurd worlds of Kafka or Camus's L'Etranger, or Robbe-Grillet's world composed of relatively autonomous objects, correspond to the analysis of reification as developed by Marx and later Marxists, the problem arises as to why, when this analysis was elaborated in the second half of the 19th century and concerned a phenomenon that appeared in a still earlier period, this same phenomenon was expressed in the novels only at the end of World War I."<sup>(1)</sup> In fact the mature novels of Dickens provide arguably the first literary illustration of a reified social world, tending to dehumanisation and mechanical, 'thing-like' existence.

Everywhere in the later novels we see the tendency for people in the grip of the mechanism of industrial society to become as objects, controlled or manipulated, or bought and sold. This will be emphasised on the readings of individual novels. However, it is worth pointing out now that in Hard Times the whole factory population of Coketown is seen as living an objectified, mechanical life. For the factory workers life is a duplicated, automatic, clockwork existence. We are told that Coketown "contained several large streets all very like one another, and many 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 on the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the

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1 L. Goldmann, Towards a Sociology of the Novel, p. 6.

last and the next." (Penguin, p. 65). It is this mechanical existence that Stephen Blackpool complains of to Bounderby, asserting the essential humanity of the workers, crushed and threatened as it is, against the employers "rating 'em (i.e. the factory workers) as so much Power, and reg'lating 'em as if they was figures in a soom, or machines: wi'out loves and likens, wi'out memories and inclinations, wi'out souls." (Penguin, p. 182). In the later novels it is not an occasional fate for people to be dehumanised into machines. Here it is the lot of a whole class, and in the mature novels it is increasingly seen as the common lot of industrial society.

It is important to recognise that one of Dickens's characteristic literary devices is directly related to this way of seeing society. This technique is Dickens's characteristic reversal of the relation between humans and things. This common literary device is utilised as a stylistic expression of an essential aspect of Dickens's general social vision, representing an artistically successful marriage of form and content.

Dorothy Van Ghent, in her essay, On Great Expectations in The English Novel: Form and Fiction (1953), has written revealingly on this. She asserts that Dickens imaginatively grasped the process by which the human being was being exploited as a "'thing' or an engine capable of being used for profit", and argues that "Dickens's intuition alarmingly saw this process in motion ... and he sought an extraordinary explanation for it. People were becoming things, and things (the things that money can buy or that are the means for making money or for exalting prestige in the abstract) were becoming more important than people. People were becoming de-animated, robbed of their souls, and things were usurping the prerogatives of animal creatures - governing the lives

of their owners in the most literal sense."<sup>(1)</sup> Thus in Dickens's novels there is a reversal of the qualities of people and things. On the one hand we see a fairly constant use of the pathetic fallacy - the projection of human impulses and feelings upon the non-human, as upon houses, and furniture, and even clothes - while on the other hand "people are described by non-human attributes, or by such an exaggeration of or emphasis on one part of their appearance that they seem to be reduced wholly to that part, with an effect of having become "thinged" into one of their own bodily members or into an article of their clothing or into some inanimate object of which they have made a fetish ... Many of what we shall call 'signatures' of Dickens's people - that special exaggerated feature or gesture or mannerism which comes to stand for the whole person - are such dissociated parts of the body, like Jagger's huge forefinger which he bites and then plunges menacingly at the accused, or Wemmick's post-office mouth, or the clock-work apparatus in Magwitch's throat that clicks as if it were going to strike. The device is not used arbitrarily or capriciously."<sup>(2)</sup>

It could be argued that this literary device is present throughout Dickens's fiction, a trademark of his style in the early popular period as well as in the more pessimistic mature work. However, in the later novels the technique is used in imaginative contexts which are more sinister and ominous. In the early novels the reversal of the properties of humans and things is most often amusingly bizarre or conventionally comic or incongruous. In the later novels the human properties of objects are less a source of comedy and increasingly more dangerous and malevolent towards the human world. Young Jerry Cruncher's impression that he is

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1 D. Van Ghent, 'On Great Expectations', also in Charles Dickens (ed. S. Wall), p. 376.

2 D. Van Ghent, *ibid*, p. 377.



being chased down the street by live coffins is more frightening than comic. On the other hand, the thing-like properties of human beings are also less unambiguously comic in the later novels. The mode of characterisation that in the early novels produced comic/grotesque eccentrics, in the later novels produces alienated men (e.g. Pancks and Wemmick). Frederick Dorrit and Mrs. Havisham are more painfully disturbing than grotesquely amusing. As Humphry House remarks, "the eccentrics and monsters in the earlier books walk through a crowd without exciting particular attention: in the later they are likely to be pointed at in the streets, and are forced into bitter seclusion ... Silas Wegg and Mr. Venus are at odds and ends with their world as Daniel Quilp was not."<sup>(1)</sup> In the early novels this stylistic device appears structurally accidental, though an important contributory element in Dickens's comic technique, whereas in the later novels it functions as an integral part of a coherent imaginative vision of society (a successful modification and adaptation of an old technique to the device of a newly conceived social vision.)

Organically related to the novels' exploration of alienation is the theme of the split-man. The increasing bureaucratisation of official life throughout the 19th century encouraged the separation of life into private and official spheres, destroying man's wholeness, rendering personality incomplete, and inducing a crisis of identity. The later novels contain a whole series of split or partial men, Morfin (Dombey and Son), Bucket (Bleak House), Pancks (Little Dorrit), Jarvis Lorry (A Tale of Two Cities), Wemmick (Great Expectations), and Riah (Our Mutual Friend). In taking up this issue in a manner which explored the human loss involved, Dickens's novels satisfy another of Lukács's conditions of great realism. To Lukács, great

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1 H. House, The Dickens World, p. 134-5.

realism "opposes ... the destruction of the completeness of the human personality"<sup>(1)</sup>, and the great realists recognised that "this division of the complete human personality into a public and a private sector was a mutilation of the essence of man."<sup>(2)</sup>

Of crucial importance for both the social vision of the mature novels and the nature of Dickens's realism is the almost obsessively recurring metaphor of society as one huge market-place. This is the most consistently voiced and strongly felt social theme of the later fiction. All social relations, including marriage, and friendship, are mediated through an economic frame of reference. Social behaviour in all areas of mid-Victorian society is imaginatively presented in the novels as being conditioned by a degraded market-place logic. In The German Ideology (1845/6) Marx had said of industrial society, "In modern civil society all relations are in practice subordinated to the single abstract relation of money and speculation."<sup>(3)</sup> It is precisely this insight into mid-Victorian capitalism which is at the centre of the social vision of Dickens's mature fiction. His novels reflect the conditioning importance for the general relations of everyday social life of the relations of the economic sphere. The mature fiction is concerned with a general social condition, represented in its essential aspects, and this general condition is unambiguously presented as a function of the new realities and the new relations of the economic environment. In all areas of social life, so the later novels assert, social behaviour is in essence taking on the character of the market relations of the economic sector.

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1 G. Lukács, Studies in European Realism, p. 6.

2 G. Lukács, Ibid, p. 9.

3 K. Marx, Karl Marx Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy (ed. Bottomore and Rubel), p. 169.

Some theoretical principles of Lucien Goldmann's sociology of the novel are highly relevant here; thus I quote at length.

"The novel form seems to me, in effect, to be the transposition on the literary plane of everyday life in the individualistic society created by market production. There is a rigorous homology between the literary form of the novel, as I have defined it with the help of Lukács and Girard, and the everyday relation between man and commodities in general, and by extension between men and other men, in a market society.

The natural, healthy relation between men and commodities is that in which production is consciously governed by future consumption, by the concrete qualities of objects, by their use value.

Now what characterises market production is, on the contrary, the elimination of this relation with men's consciousness, its reduction to the implicit through the mediation of the new economic reality created by this form of production: exchange value.

.....

If one wishes to obtain an article of clothing or a house today, one has to find the money needed to buy them. The producer of clothes or homes is indifferent to the use values of the objects he produces. For him, these objects are no more than a necessary evil to obtain what alone interests him, an exchange value sufficient to ensure the viability of this enterprise. In the economic life, which constitutes the most important part of modern social life, every authentic relation with the qualitative aspect of objects and persons tends to disappear - interhuman relations as well as those between men and things - and be replaced by

a mediated and degraded relation: the relation with purely quantitative exchange values.

.....

On the conscious, manifest plane, the economic life is composed of people orientated exclusively towards exchange values, degraded values, to which are added in production a number of individuals - the creators in every sphere - who remain essentially orientated towards use values and who by virtue of that fact are situated on the fringes of society and become problematic individuals; and, of course, even these individuals ... cannot be deluded as to the degradations that their creative activity undergoes in a market society, when this activity is manifested externally, when it becomes a book, a painting, teaching, a musical composition, etc., enjoying a certain prestige, and having therefore a certain price ...

In view of this, there is nothing surprising about the creation of the novel as a literary genre. Its apparently extremely complex form is the one in which men live every day, when they are obliged to seek all quality, all use values in a mode degraded by the mediation of quantity, of exchange value - and this in a society in which any effort to orientate oneself directly towards use value can only produce individuals who are themselves degraded, but in a different mode, that of the problematic individual.

Thus the two structures, that of an important fictional genre and that of exchange proved to be strictly homologous, to the point at which one might speak of one and the same structure manifesting itself on two different planes."<sup>(1)</sup>

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1 L. Goldmann, Towards a Sociology of the Novel, pp. 7-8.

Exchange-value is not just a technical economic description of market transactions, but is a value judgement about social relations. Hence relations of exchange value apply not only to the relations of men and goods, but to the relations of men with each other. It is precisely the quantitative, and mediated nature of social relations throughout the mid-Victorian system which the later novels repudiate. Of course, Dickens would not have been able to consciously articulate his imaginative insights into a systematic economic theory, but the social vision of his mature work is imaginatively structured around a consciousness that the essential nature of everyday social relations in mid-Victorian England is that of relations of quantitative exchange-value. If exchange-value does not totally dominate mid-Victorian England the exceptions are a few lucky or innocent individuals who successfully orientate themselves to qualitative relations with other people, in a struggle for happiness and authentic values. Certainly those collective movements aimed at improving the general quality of life (trade unionism, socialism, etc.) are ignored by Dickens. The struggle against exchange-values and alienation is individualistic, the work of a few, here and there, not organised together for any social purpose, and certainly not politically united. And this struggle is fought in the face of overwhelming odds. In all social areas ways of thinking and feeling, morality itself, is lapsing into economic rationale; marriage is a form of speculation; friends are treated as business assets, and people generally as pieces of merchandise, mere economic objects.

Some examples from Dombey and Son (1846-8) will demonstrate the manner in which relations of exchange-value have come to dominate mid-Victorian England. The loss of his first wife affected Dombey merely as the loss of a piece of valuable merchandise. Dombey "had a sense within him, that if his wife should sicken and decay, he would be

very sorry, and that he would find a something gone from among his plate and furniture, and other household possessions, which was well worth the having, and could not be lost without sincere regret." (Penguin, p. 54). His second wife was bought, like an object labelled 'good blood', in what was an unemotional marriage speculation. ("He sees me at the auction, and he thinks it well to buy me", remarks Edith.) Both Edith and Alice Marlow, the prostitute, Mrs. Brown's daughter, were appropriated and utilised by their own mothers as economic objects - (She ... thought to make a sort of property of me", complains Alice.) All Dombey's relationships are mediated through an economic reference. "Money ... can do anything", he tells his son. And he selfishly regards his children solely as potential assets which can be invested, to boost his family pride and the status of his firm. Thus Florence - "But what was a girl to Dombey and Son! In the capital of the House's name and dignity, such a child was a merely a piece of base coin that couldn't be invested - a bad Boy - nothing more." (p. 51). Thus Dombey too makes "a sort of property" of his children.

The mature novels repeatedly identify the spread of an inhuman and degrading business or money ethos into all areas of social life, a pervasive spread of moral corruption located in the new economic realities of mid-Victorian England. At this point it is important to be clear about what is meant by the term 'business ethos'. We can't say simply that Dickens is anti-business: many of his heroes are either active or retired businessmen. Indeed, it will be argued in Chapter 3 that entrepreneurial middle-class values and ideals are used to structure the novels. However, there is no doubt that a contextual study of the use of the word 'business' in the later novels would reveal that it seldom escapes pejorative connotations.

What Dickens is against in business is not merely a

rigorous attitude to business and an eye for the main chance, as expressed, for example, by Jonas Chuzzlewit, "Here's the rule for bargains, 'Do other men, for they would do you.' That's the true business precept. All others are counterfeits." (Penguin, p. 241). What Dickens constantly repudiates throughout the later novels is an attitude to business which doesn't just elevate it into the primary concern of life, but makes it the sole concern, at the same time relegating imaginative, spiritual, and religious life to a position of no importance. When Arthur Clennam soberly admitted, "I'm the only child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured, and priced, had no existence." (Penguin, p. 59), he was talking about precisely this phenomenon. The religious and spiritual spheres in particular have become merely an extension of the economic. In Past and Present, Book III, Chapter 2, Carlyle wrote:- "'The word Hell ... is still frequently in use among the English people: but I could not without difficulty ascertain what they meant by it. Hell generally signifies the Infinite Terror, the thing a man is infinitely afraid of, and shudders and shrinks from, struggling with his whole soul to escape from it ... what is it that the modern English soul does, in very truth, dread infinitely, and contemplates with entire despair? What is his Hell, after all these reputable, oft-repeated Hearsays, what is it? With hesitation, with astonishment, I pronounce it to me: the terror of "not succeeding"; of not making money ... "<sup>(1)</sup>. This shrinking of the whole of life to be encompassed in a narrow, sterile, business mould is seen by Dickens as unforgiveable. It is anti-life in that, like the utilitarian statistical perspective, it is another aspect of the system which totally denies the values of heart and the emotions. It is a consuming ethos which, on the individual level, reduces life to a mechanical

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1 Thomas Carlyle, Selected Writings (ed. Alan Shelston), p. 276-7.

robot existence, and which, on the social level, produces a general impoverishment in the quality of social life.

Smallweed (Bleak House) and the official Pancks (Little Dorrit) are the mouthpiece for this hateful business/moneyethos. A conversation between Clennam and Pancks (which will be discussed in greater detail later) is revealing.

" ... 'But I like business,' said Pancks, getting on a little faster. 'What's a man made for?'

'For nothing else?' said Clennam.

Pancks put the counter question, 'What else?' It packed up, in the smallest compass, a weight that had rested on Clennam's life; and he made no answer." (p. 201). This weight lies on the whole of mid-Victorian England too.

We have said that the word 'business' is increasingly used with pejorative connotations. We can see this happening as early as Martin Chuzzlewit (1843/4). Of Major Pawkins we are told, "In commercial affairs he was a bold speculator. In plainer words he had a most distinguished genius for swindling and could start a bank, or negotiate a loan, or form a land-jobbing company (entailing ruin, pestilence, and death on hundreds of families), with any gifted creature in the Union. This made him an admirable man of business." (Penguin, p. 331). The increasingly pejorative use of 'business' parallels the rise of joint-stock companies, and with them the passive, remotely controlling directors of mid-Victorian business, the large-scale investors and stock-market speculators. Mid-Victorian business is presented in the later novels as moving away from the traditional middle-class entrepreneurial business values - where thrift, industry and investment in a small privately owned and managed firm were seen as moral virtues. The values current in the mid-Victorian business world, however, are associated in the later novels unequivocally with spiritual and moral loss.



Thus 'the business ethos', not just a business code but a general way of thinking and feeling; an attitude to people; a judgement and evaluation of life's different goals, is a perversion of the entrepreneurial ideals of early Victorian capitalism.

(ii)

Having described the essential aspects of Dickens's realism, an important sociological problem, relating directly to the nature of Dickens's realistic method, must be posed. It is a critical commonplace to say that Dickens's imaginative vision darkened in his later novels. Yet why was it in the economically expanding and materially prosperous 1850's and '60's and not in the troubled 1840's that the most critical, challenging and pessimistic novels were written? When a social historian contemplates the 1850's and '60's he thinks of a society where capitalism was burgeoning, a society characterised by vigour, enterprise, self-confidence, and stability, and not of a society which, for example, Little Dorrit (1855-7) presents as a huge prison. Of course, Dickens was concerned in his mature fiction with a general condition, and the general quality of social relations cannot simply be determined by statistics of economic growth. Indeed, such a mistake would be the solution of a Gradgrind. But this does not remove the problem. Why was it that the novels became increasingly pessimistic about the general condition when the economy was expanding confidently and aggressively?

Before attempting to explain this paradox, a brief discussion of Dickens's novelistic career is necessary, demonstrating his parallel development as a literary artist and social critic. His early fiction is characterised by a casual, and often improvised plot which offers full scope to show off a large character gallery of comic or grotesque eccentrics. Social criticism takes the form of journalistic attacks on

specific abuses seen as isolated, self-contained problems in a basically healthy system. Significantly, this social criticism is embodied in self-contained passages, (e.g. the Poor Law satire in the early chapters of *Oliver Twist* (1837)), almost arbitrarily dropped into the casually-unified mix of melodrama, sentimentality, and comedy which Dickens stirred up for the reading-public in his early novels. Thus in the earlier fiction self-contained social problems are considered in virtually self-contained essays which intrude into the novels' loose structure.

Most critics see Dombey and Son (1846-8) as the watershed novel which heralds the more mature and artistically satisfying work. Society is now seen as a system of interrelated parts. The necessary connection between the different social worlds of the novel is expressed through the heavy-handed melodramatic plot link between Edith Granger and Alice, the prostitute as well as by an anticipation of the disease metaphor of Bleak House. (This last point will be developed in Part II, Chapter 1.) In the novels which follow society will be seen as whole, and social criticism will no longer be confined to self-contained issues. In the later novels Dickens is against his society in much the same way as Chekhov was in The Cherry Orchard, or as Shaw was in Heartbreak House. Indeed, in the mature novels, the social criticism is embodied in the novels' vision of a total society, and expressed through the marriage of plot, theme and symbol which characterises the much more tightly-knit structures of the later work. The development in the novels' view of society is thus paralleled by a development of form, technique, and organisational prowess. It was necessary for Dickens to divorce himself completely from the picaresque tradition and find new methods which could satisfactorily carry the brunt of his deepening social awareness. The use of emblems and controlled patterns of imagery to make generalised criticisms of society are formal expressions of the radical development in Dickens's novelistic way of seeing society.

The key date in this development, (Dombey and Son was written between 1846 and 1848), comes just before the 1850's and Shaw has suggested an interesting, but rather simplistic, explanation for this. He sees Hard Times (1854) as the crucial watershed novel (surely a mistake for it would relegate Bleak House (1852/3) as well as Dombey and Son to the ranks of the immature fiction), and argues, "Hard Times is the first fruit of that very interesting occurrence which our religious sects call, sometimes conversion, sometimes being saved, sometimes attaining to conviction of sin. Now the great conversions of the XIX century were not convictions of individual, but of social sin. The first half of the XIX century considered itself the greatest of all the centuries. The second discovered that it was the wickedest of all the centuries ... Hard Times was written in 1854, just at the turn of the half century; and in it we see Dickens with his eyes newly open and his conscience newly stricken by the discovery of the real state of England." The awareness of "social sin" that Shaw talks about is a good description of the subject-matter of the post-Dombey novels, which express, to use another phrase of Shaw's, "that it is not our disorder but our order which is horrible." However, to explain this change in the novels' social insight in terms of a rather specious general pattern is an unsatisfactory attempt to explain the problem away. Shaw doesn't explain why the change took place in 1854 and not in 1844. We are still left with the problem of why Dickens produced his most critical and fearful vision of Victorian society in the 1850's and '60's at a time when the economy appeared to have successfully recovered from the crisis and depression of 1837-42, and not during the early or mid '40's, a period characterised by fear, unrest, and working-class political agitation.

Obviously a brief look at the social/economic background to the 1840's and 1850's is necessary. In 1840 it appeared to contemporaries that English capitalism was facing a crisis.

Kitson Clark has pointed out that "by 1840 the bounding prosperity which the new industry had conferred had very largely disappeared and had been replaced by deep depression and ruin and misery to those who had trusted to it for their living".<sup>(1)</sup> Contemporaries saw this crisis as due not merely to the obstruction of the Corn Laws but as the result of the inhuman logic of industrialisation itself - the whole process and the new system it was forging were now regarded by many fearfully, and by most suspiciously. "Many of them felt that something evil had intruded itself into British life, something not only avaricious and cruel but dangerously reckless and unreliable as well."<sup>(2)</sup>

The anxiety and strain of the '40's was reflected in workers' agitation, viewed apprehensively from above. 1838-42 mark the years of greatest support for the Chartists, some of whom expressed a militant desire for revolution (George Julian Harney called himself the English Marat and the Red flag of Liberty was frequently displayed and hung threateningly outside manufacturers' homes.) Ironically, it was 1848, the year of European revolutions, which, with the rejection by Parliament of the People's Charter for the third time marked the effective end of the Chartist movement. In fact, with the advantage of historical hindsight it can safely be asserted that the movement had lost momentum some years before '48. Fear of revolution did not die with the end of Chartism, of course. As W.L. Burn remarks, "For two or three generations the English mind was vitally affected by the idea of revolution (whether as the ultimate hope or the ultimate terror), by the prevalence of the revolutionary mystique."<sup>(3)</sup> The confident judgements of modern historians

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1 G. Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England, p. 88.

2 G. Kitson Clark, *ibid*, p. 88.

3 W.L. Burn, The Age of Equipoise, p. 66.

that there was little possibility of revolution breaking out in the '50's and '60's provided no comfort to the men apprehensively living through the period, touched by the shadow of the French Revolution. It is worth remembering the remark of G.M. Young - "The real, central theme of history is not what happened, but what people felt about it when it was happening."<sup>(1)</sup>

However, despite the 'revolutionary mystique', for most contemporaries the '50's and '60's was a period of greater assurance and optimism than the troubled '40's. Modern historians agree that the economy had produced a marked recovery, though judgements of the nature and extent of economic progress vary. Asa Briggs's assertion that in the 1850's "the economic troubles of the preceding generation vanished almost as if by magic",<sup>(2)</sup> must be balanced by Perkin's more recent challenging of many of the received critical interpretations of the mid-Victorian economy, According to Perkin "for most of the 1850's and 1860's real incomes stagnated or crept up very slowly",<sup>(3)</sup> and he also argues that the mid-Victorian period was characterised by an increase in social inequalities "within as well as between classes",<sup>(4)</sup> and a "contraction of opportunities for social climbing".<sup>(5)</sup> All of Perkin's findings are contrary to what people thought at the time. Young's recently quoted remark about the nature of history is again relevant here. Although the situation is complex and best left to experts in social/economic history two points can be made. The first is that contemporary opinion (despite the fluctuations

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1 G.M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age, p. vi.

2 A. Briggs, Victorian People, p. 10.

3 H. Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880, p. 413.

4 H. Perkin, *ibid*, p. 417.

5 H. Perkin, *ibid*, p. 425.

of 1857 and '66) was reassured by what were seen as more stable and prosperous social and economic conditions. Many of the earlier critics of the system (during the hungry and potentially violent '40's) were able to trade mid-Victorian complacency for the anxiety of the previous decade. The second point is that the threat of social disruption and working-class violence had certainly dissipated. Many reasons have been offered, including the greater efficiency of the police (which shouldn't be exaggerated), the parliamentary reforms since 1842 (such as they were), the economic expansion attendant on the railway boom, and the repeal of the Corn Laws, which "gave to the labouring classes the modest assurance that in the desperately competitive race they had to run they would not be hopelessly handicapped from the start."<sup>(1)</sup>

Yet during this period of relative social calm and economic strength, thankfully following the troubles of the forties, Dickens wrote novels which convey a sense of society collapsing and decaying and moving towards a crisis. Such a social perspective would seem more appropriate to the previous decade.

Two reasons can be offered to explain this paradox. The pessimism of the later novels and the threat of revolution conveyed in many of them is not a reflection of current working-class political agitation, but a response to a creative imaginative grasping of the foundation and dynamics of the capitalist system - which had to be sufficiently and unambiguously developed before this imaginative understanding could be possible. As A.O.J. Cockshut has reminded us, "New social facts take a long time to work down to those imaginative depths where artistic creation originates, and then to work their way back upwards into a finished artistic product."<sup>(2)</sup>

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1 W.L. Burn, *ibid*, p. 68.

2 A.O.J. Cockshut, The Imagination of Charles Dickens, p. 97.

It is easier to grasp the essentials of any process if it is progressing or developing with a steady momentum (as English capitalism was in the '50's and '60's) than if it is in a confused state of flux (as in the '40's). Even in the late '40's it was difficult for contemporaries to define an unambiguous attitude.

Dickens himself shows uncertainty and confusion in his novelistic attitude to industrialisation as late as the watershed novel, Dombey and Son (1846-8). Two apparently incompatible attitudes and reactions to industrialisation are revealed in the novel's treatment of the railway as a symbol for industrial progress. On the one hand the novel communicates Dickens thrilling enthusiastically to the energy, excitement, and promise of a new era. The power to transform whole areas (see the 'before' and 'after' descriptions of Stagg's Gardens) is described with awe. The railway is a symbol of progress - "In short, the yet unfinished Railway was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement." (Penguin, p. 121). Yet, on the other hand, the use of the railway as the instrument of Carker's death implies that the new industrial process is a remorseless, mechanical, anti-life force which will bring about the destruction of the new society it has forged. This implication is made earlier (Chapter XX), when the railway is called the 'way of Death' and 'a type of the triumphant monster, Death'. These two contrasting attitudes - of thrilling triumph and fear - stand side by side in the same novel. Thus, quite apart from the fact that liberal fear of the mob throughout the '40's was not conducive to an objective critical analysis of society, industrial development had to be sufficiently advanced before the necessary unambiguous response could be evoked. The social vision of the last completed novel, for example - Our Mutual Friend (1864/5) - has a clarity and coherence lacking in Dombey and Son. It

wasn't until the 1850's that the system had developed to the extent that it carried irresistible conviction to Dickens's imaginative consciousness. The years between the starting of Martin Chuzzlewit and the starting of Bleak House (1843-52) were years in which this imaginative conviction gradually developed, to express itself most memorably in the three great long novels of the 1850's and 1860's, Bleak House, Little Dorrit, and Our Mutual Friend.

However, in addition to the time-lag theory, there is another important sociological factor which helps to throw light on this apparent paradox. One of the key social facts to which Dickens imaginatively responded and an important catalyst in the formation of his general social vision was the bursting forth of the cities (and in particular the transformation of the city of London). Now in this process the '50's marked the crucial turning point. "We need not quarrel with the basic fact that, in the still-continuing process of siting population in the cities and towns rather than in towns, villages and hamlets, the fifties were the decisive turning point."<sup>(1)</sup> and it was in the '50's and '60's (certainly not the '40's) that the Victorians came to think of their age as "an age of great cities".<sup>(2)</sup>

Recognition of the importance of the city in Dickens's later fiction is crucial to an understanding of both the genesis and the nature of his mature realistic method. Surface changes in the physical face of London which are also social facts, (e.g. the disorderly, haphazard growth of an untidy suburbia), are reflected in the novels (for the growth of suburbia see Dombey and Son (Penguin edition, pp. 555-7) and Our Mutual Friend (Penguin, pp. 267/8)). However, the chief importance of the city in the mature fiction is as an

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1 G. Best, Mid-Victorian Britain, p. 24.

2 A. Briggs, Victorian Cities, p. 57.



emblem for industrial society as a type. From Bleak House onwards, argues Fanger, "London achieved a unity it has never had before ... it takes on its full significance as capital, as the head and symbol of national life."<sup>(1)</sup> In fact we can see this happening in Dombey and Son (but not before). We are told that Harriet Carker often looked at the stragglers wandering into London. "Day after day, such travellers crept past, but always, as she thought, in one direction - always towards the town. Swallowed up in one phase or other of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by a desperate fascination, they never returned. Food for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the river, fever, madness, vice, and death, - they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost." (Penguin, pp. 562/3). Here the city is an emblem for the cruel machinery of the industrial system. In the later novels Dickens came to understand and oppose industrial society through his observation of the city population, and the city landscape.

In these novels descriptions of the physical face of London function artistically as an index of the moral life of the whole society, and the quality of social relations within it. In characteristically describing London as a chaos, a desert, a wilderness, or waste-land ("And London looks so large, so barren, and so wild", Amy Dorrit tells Clennam on her first night spent away from the Marshalsea), Dickens is not merely describing the background scene with a reporter's eye, but is commenting on the general condition (the moral/social life of the whole community) in a way which elevates background description to an integral part of the novel's social vision (an imaginative focus which is often the shortest route to the core of the novels' meaning).

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1 D. Fanger, Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism, p. 81.

"It is astonishing how much of what Dickens has to say in the late novels is concentrated in the images by which London is variously evoked."<sup>(1)</sup>

A good example of this is provided by the description in Little Dorrit of the City, as Arthur Clennam walks towards his mother's house. "As he went along, upon a dreary night, the dim streets by which he went, seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting-houses, with their secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes; the banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the keys of which were in a very few secret pockets and a very few secret breasts; the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill, among whom there were doubtless plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers of many sorts, whom the light of any day that dawned might reveal; he could have fancied that these things, in hiding, imparted a heaviness to the air. The shadow thickening and thickening as he approached its source, he thought of the secrets of the lonely church-vaults, where the people who had hoarded and secreted in iron coffers were in their turn similarly hoarded, not yet at rest from doing harm; and then of the secrets of the river, as it rolled its turbid tide between two frowning wildernesses of secrets, extending thick and dense, for many miles, and warding off the free air and the free country swept by winds and wings of birds." (Penguin, pp. 596/7).

The images here of secrecy and crime, decay and prison, business and death, don't merely anticipate the plot revelations of Merdle and Mrs. Clennam, but combine to define, through their interrelation, the novel's way of seeing society (i.e. the nature of the social vision of Little Dorrit). The chief thematic concerns of the novel are concentrated in this passage. All the details in the description, however

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1 H.M. Daleski, Dickens and the Art of Analogy, p. 273.

negligently included they might appear at first, have a generalising weight of significance. For example, the phrase 'grinders in the vast mill' has relevance to the whole social world of the novel (especially, as we shall see, to Pancks, Clennam, and the inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard). A consideration of the closing words reveals the poetic density of this description. It culminates in a glance at the key thematic emblem of the novel, prison ("the free air and the free country"), and a suggestion that Victorian capitalism, and its chief creation, the urban metropolis, involve a reversal of nature (trenchantly rejecting the forces of the natural world, "winds and wings of birds"). A close reading of the whole passage would be particularly rewarding.

To argue that Dickens use of the city in his novels is mainly metaphoric is not to ignore the fact that he insists on a realistic topography (indeed, London always is given a wealth of concrete, sensuous detail), or that he ever ceased to enjoy the crowded streets as an imaginatively stimulating locale, or to be proud of his expert knowledge of London. It is interesting that in his journalism Dickens showed much interest in the development of a new popular culture, and writes of urban amusements, cheap plays, etc.. But in his novels, with a few exceptions, (Mr. George's visit to the cheap theatre in Bleak House), this aspect of city life is ignored in favour of the opposite perspective - the city as destroyer of community, the producer of loneliness, isolation, and separation. Nadgett, in Martin Chuzzlewit, "belonged to a class, a race peculiar to the city, who are secrets as profound to one another as they are to the rest of mankind". In A Tale of Two Cities (1859) this theme, implicit in the presentation of city life throughout the later novels, is more fully articulated. "A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret;

that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this ... In any of the burial-places of this city through which I pass, is there a sleeper more inscrutable than its busy inhabitants are, in their innermost personality, to me, or than I am to them?" (Penguin, p. 44).

Certainly there is historical justification for this view (though it could also be argued that collective movements to forge a new community - Chartism, trade unionism, and socialism - were themselves born in the cities). However, to most contemporaries the fact of isolation was more strongly felt than the ideal of community. The sense of religious community was fragmented in the major cities - working-class indifference to religion and absenteeism from church in the cities was seen as a major social problem. There is no doubt that for the individual within the urban crowd life in the city could be cruel and wretched. Henry James's verdict on London (in 1868) is relevant here. "London was hideous, vicious, cruel, and above all overwhelming; whether or no she was 'careful of the type', she was as indifferent as Nature herself to the single life ... ". This 'indifference' was seen as characteristic of urban social relations. As early as 1844 Engels, in The Condition of the Working Class in England, had remarked:- "It occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance. The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space." Dickens's novelistic use of the city reflects these characteristics of alienation and isolation as representative of the system as a whole. The inter-connection between classes insisted upon in the later fiction is expressed in parallel with a view of the city population as a stream of individual, separate units.

This way of seeing the city as involving alienation and a breakdown of community, and encouraging individual selfishness and crime, was a catalyst for the pessimistic novelistic vision of society on the verge of crisis and collapse which characterises the later fiction. The mature social vision is thus organically bound up in the observed and experienced social development of London, its burgeoning and transformation throughout the 1850's and '60's.

Dickens's portrait of the nightmare quality of city life puts him in the tradition of romantic critics of the city such as Wordsworth, who, in Book 7 of The Prelude, saw London as a monstrous ant-hill, and Blake, whose Songs of Innocence and Experience, with their symbols of imprisonment in London's "chartered streets" and of the "mind forged manacles" of its inhabitants, anticipate the prison theme of Little Dorrit. But Dickens's understanding of the economic base of social relations within the system adds a unique contribution to this tradition. Dickens is the first great novelist of the city, and it is important to recognise the way in which his creative method reflects the realities of the new urban society (another instance of the social basis of his art). To Raymond Williams Dickens's dramatic method is "uniquely capable of expressing the experience of living in cities".<sup>(1)</sup> Consider his method of character presentation:- "As we stand and look back at a Dickens novel the general movement we remember - the decisive movement - is a hurrying seemingly random passing of men and women that belongs to the street."<sup>(2)</sup>

These two factors - the time-lag involved before social developments are creatively and critically grasped in literature, and the importance for the formation of Dickens's general social vision of the transformation of city life, a

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1 R. Williams, The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence, p. 28.

2 R. Williams, *ibid*, p. 28.

mid-Victorian phenomenon - help to explain why Dickens's coherent and critical vision of society occurred in the mid-Victorian years and not during the anxious and confused '40's. Our argument concerning Dickens's novelistic development is illustrated by a brief consideration of The Old Curiosity Shop (1840/1). The impact of industrialisation is felt in those scenes when Nell and her grandfather pass fearfully and confusedly through towns in the Black Country and experience, as if in a nightmare, scenes of urban squalor and unrest, described in a strained, shrill language which reflects what middle-class opinion (or a large slice of it, at any rate) held all workers to be at the time of Chartist agitation. "But, night-time in this dreadful spot! ... when bands of unemployed labourers paraded the roads, or clustered by torch-light round their leaders, who told them, in stern language, of their wrongs, and urged them on to frightful cries and threats; when maddened men, armed with sword and firebrand, spurning the tears and prayers of women who would restrain them, rushed forth on errands of terror and destruction, to work no ruin half so surely as their own ... " (Penguin, p. 429). And there is more in the same hysterical language! But it is possible to escape from the nightmare of these industrial pockets into the neighbouring country. "Industrial society is strictly localised; it is something you come to, and then rapidly pass through and escape."<sup>(1)</sup> Only with Dombey and Son and more especially Bleak House did Dickens first display an imaginative realisation that the effects of industrial society reach all members and groups within society and produce a general condition from which it is impossible to escape by means as illusory as a fugitive journey. Only in the post-Dombey novels was England imaginatively defined as an industrial society rather than a country within which there were rapidly expanding industrial areas.

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1 A.O.J. Cockshut, Ibid, p. 90.

A final point to be made in this preliminary discussion of Dickens's realistic method concerns the complex relationship between the novelist and the man, which contributes to the difficulty of defining the nature of Dickens's social criticism. We must not expect that there will be a simple identification of content, or correspondence of tone, between the personal opinions of Dickens the man, and the imaginative insights into the essential condition of industrial society contained in the mature work of Dickens the novelist. This distinction is of crucial importance not just to a study of Dickens but to the theory of the sociology of the novel. At all times we must remember that "when we speak of point of view in relation to creative literature we are referring to something somewhat different from a man's consciously held, or fairly easily abstractable, ideas."<sup>(1)</sup>

Dickens was no conscious proto-Marxist. He was in no way drawn towards socialism, a systematic statement of which was lacking in Britain when Dickens died in 1870, anyway. Many of his personal opinions were conservative, even reactionary (especially his Carlylean fear of the masses and revolution). Furthermore, at the very time when his novels were exhibiting an increasingly radical and challenging critique of industrial society (throughout the '50's and '60's), his personal views on contemporary social issues were hardening into a more conservative position. Although he continued to be against public hangings, his attitude to capital punishment and the amelioration of prison conditions hardened into an extreme impatience with would-be reformers.<sup>(2)</sup> He also rallied to the defence of the infamous Governor Eyre in defiance of most liberal opinion in the country at the time. Dickens certainly enjoyed being feted as a literary hero and

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1 A. Kettle, 'Dickens and the Popular Tradition' in Marxists on Literature (ed. D. Craig), p. 215.

2 See P. Collins, Dickens and Crime.

social personality. In his later years he bought a small landed estate at Gadshill and sent his eldest son to Eton. Like the age in which he lived he was a complicated, often confused, and intellectually inconsistent man. This inconsistency is ignored by Marxists such as T.A. Jackson and Jack Lindsay who push Dickens into a pre-conceived mould as a conscious proto-Marxist, distorting (and at times completely ignoring) large areas of his work. Yet the difference between the insights of the novelist and the opinions of the man should not alarm the reader for Dickens is by no means unique in this respect.

The concept of dissociation has been developed by sociologists of literature to account for this phenomenon of inconsistency between a writer's novelistic insight and his admitted or reported stance on contemporary social issues. The germs of this important concept are to be found in two letters written by Engels (in 1885 and '88) to socialist writers in which he argued against a crudely explicit declaration of political belief in literature. "But I believe that the thesis must spring forth from the situation and action itself, without being explicitly displayed. I believe that there is no compulsion for the writer to put into the reader's hands the future historical resolution of the social conflicts which he is depicting." (Letter to Minna Kautsky). In his second letter three years later Engels was even more emphatic. "The more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art." (Letter to Margaret Harkness).

Now though these letters were written to conscious socialists who were concerned with the problem of writing socialist novels, Engels himself applied his tenets to bourgeois writers, preferring Balzac to Zola, and quoting the former (along with Goethe) as an example of a writer whose conscious views were in contradiction to his poetic vision. From Engels's remarks on Balzac the theory of



dissociation has been developed, and these remarks are of particular relevance to the case of Dickens. Balzac, a Legitimist and Catholic, "was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices, that he saw the necessity of the downfall of his favourite nobles, and described them as people deserving no better fate; and that he saw the real men of the future where, for the time being, they alone were to be found - that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, and one of the grandest features in old Balzac." Lukács followed Engels in applying the term "triumph of realism" to Balzac, and indeed the term could be applied to the later novels of Dickens.

Taking their lead from Engels many Marxist literary critics have developed a theory of dissociation, as "the image of the poet as Balaam speaking truth against his knowledge or avowed philosophy". (George Steiner)<sup>(1)</sup>. Lucien Goldmann asserts (in The Hidden God) that "The history of literature is full of writers whose thought was rigorously contrary to the sense and structure of their work (among many examples, Balzac, Goethe, etc.) ... There is nothing absurd in the notion of a writer or poet who does not apprehend the objective significance of his own works." However, it is not only the Marxist school which recognises the phenomenon. Raymond Williams, though in a more tentative fashion, testifies to it. "It seems to be perfectly possible for a writer to hold ideas, even strong ideas, and to express them directly or through particular characters, while at the same time the actions he creates, the values and consequences he explores, bear in quite other directions: a case, we might say, where the writer's opinions outside his writings are different from the ideas he finally embodies in his work."<sup>(2)</sup>

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- 1 G. Steiner, 'Marxism and the Literary Critic' in The Sociology of Literature and Drama (ed. E. & T. Burns), p. 175.
  - 2 R. Williams, 'Dickens and Social Ideas' in Dickens 1970, (ed. M. Slater), p. 81.

Thus the reader must not expect a simple correlation between Dickens's social vision as it appears in the novels (the chief concern of this thesis) and his opinions on contemporary social issues as expressed in letters, speeches, and his extensive journalistic writings.

An example of the 'triumph of realism' in Dickens would be that while Dickens would have personally repudiated a conflict view of society, preferring to see society in functionalist, consensus terms (e.g. when reporting the Preston strike for Household Words (February 1854), he emphasised the identity of interests between the rival parties - "in the gulf of separation it hourly deepens between those whose interests must be understood to be identical or must be destroyed, (the strike) is a great national affliction") - embodied in the fabric of his later novels is a concept of society divided into a class of exploiters and those exploited. This is implicit, for example, in the portrait of Chancery (Bleak House), or in the image of Shares (Our Mutual Friend). It is present most obviously in the presentation of the relation between the French aristocracy and the Paris proletariat in Pre-Revolutionary France in A Tale of Two Cities, and is suggested by Pip's realisation, in Great Expectations, that the degrading foundation of his gentlemanly fortune is the labour of the convict, Magwitch.

The difference in the nature and degree of insight into society expressed by the man and the novelist accounts for much of the difficulty of defining just what sort of social critic Dickens was. Bagehot, siezing on two important elements in his work (how far were they compatible?) called Dickens a "sentimental radical". Trollope had no doubt about Dickens's essential radicalism. "I never heard any man call Dickens a radical: but if any man ever was so, he was a radical at heart, believing entirely in the people,

writing for them, speaking for them, and always desirous to take their part as against some undescribed and indiscernable tyrant, who to his mind loomed large as an official rather than as an aristocratic despot." It will be argued that Dickens's attitude to 'the people' was more ambiguous than this, sympathy for them as victims of an inhuman system being mixed with fear of them in their collective status of mob. Indeed, it is a comment on Dickens's political radicalism that his conception of industrial society relegates the majority of its members to a latent collective status of mob. However, Dickens himself had little doubt about his radicalism. As early as 1841 he wrote to Forster, "By Jove, how Radical I am getting! I wax stronger and stronger in the true principles every day." Of course his radicalism must be judged against the standards of the time. Remember Macaulay found traces of socialism in Wordsworth's Prelude as well as in Hard Times. The age was so sensitive to unorthodox opinions that it was apt to exaggerate their importance within the thought or work of a well-known writer.

However, George Bernard Shaw was in no doubt about Dickens's radicalism. Indeed he saw Dickens as an unconscious revolutionary and made the by now common (if not notorious) comparison with Marx. In the introduction he wrote to *Great Expectations* in 1937 Shaw made explicit the revolutionary implications of Dickens's work. "Dickens never regarded himself as a revolutionist, though he certainly was one ... The difference between a revolutionist and what Marx called a bourgeois is that the bourgeois regards the existing social order as the permanent and natural order of human society, needing reforms now and then and here and there, but essentially good and sane and right and respectable and proper and everlasting. To the revolutionist it is transitory, mistaken, objectionable, and pathological: a social disease to be cured, not to be endured ...

The difference between Marx and Dickens was that Marx knew that he was a revolutionist whilst Dickens had not the faintest suspicion of that part of his calling."<sup>(1)</sup>

Shaw is employing a modified use of the concept of dissociation (i.e. Dickens did not fully grasp the implications of his own writing). Yet Shaw oversimplifies the position. Certainly the later novels do imaginatively assert that the system is "a social disease to be cured", and Shaw's position may be justifiable given his terms and definition of 'revolutionary', but this definition is a highly qualified one. It obscures the fact that Dickens was artistically as well as personally opposed to revolutionary methods as a means to an end.

George Orwell was quite clear about this, but he too was confused when he came to define Dickens as a social writer. After asserting confidently that "The truth is that Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral ... There is no clear sign that he wants the existing order to be overthrown, or that he believes it would make very much difference if it were overthrown ...

It seems that in every attack Dickens makes upon society he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than to a change of structure ... A 'change of heart' is in fact the alibi of people who do not wish to endanger the status quo." ('Charles Dickens', Inside the Whale, 1940)<sup>(2)</sup>. Yet Orwell goes on to modify his definition of 'revolutionary' in an effort to accommodate Dickens. "I said earlier that Dickens is not in the accepted sense a revolutionary writer. But it is not at all certain that a merely moral criticism of society may not be just as 'revolutionary' - and revolution, after all, means turning things upside down - as the politico-economic criticism which is fashionable at this moment.

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1 Also in Charles Dickens (ed. S. Wall), pp. 285-288.

2 Also in Charles Dickens (ed. S. Wall), p. 297-300.

Blake was not a politician, but there is more understanding of the nature of capitalist society in a poem like "I wander through each charter'd street" than in three-quarters of Socialist literature."<sup>(1)</sup> Thus like many left-wing critics Shaw and Orwell feel sympathetically drawn to the social vision of Dickens's novels, claiming him as a radical fellow-traveller. However, though both assert that he can be regarded as a 'revolutionary' writer, they are forced to use qualified definitions of a highly general nature to support their view.

The problem of defining the nature of Dickens's radicalism is exacerbated by the fact that his social criticism is in the form of a general vision of society rather than concrete proposals for social change. "For Dickens arouses the revolutionary impulse but seems to most critics to do little to direct the revolutionary purpose towards a specific constructive programme", claims Lauriat Lane<sup>(2)</sup>. And yet if the novelist reveals the essential forces within his society at work he has no additional duty to describe the manner of their resolution, or to produce a detailed blueprint of the future society which will result from this resolution. Engels believed that "there is no compulsion for the writer to put into the reader's hands the future historical resolution of the social conflicts which he is depicting", (letter to Minna Kautsky), and also asserted that a "socialist-biased novel fully achieves its purpose ... if, by conscientiously describing real mutual relations, breaking down conventional illusions about them, it shatters the optimism of the bourgeois, instils doubt as to the eternal character of the existing order, although the author does not offer any definite solution or does not even line up openly on any

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1 Ibid, p. 300.

2 Lauriat Lane, The Dickens Critics, (ed. Ford and Lane), p. 7.

particular side." Dickens's mature novels certainly cut beneath the surface prosperity of mid-Victorian England to break down 'conventional illusions' about the system, and by repeatedly warning about the danger of revolution the novels shatter 'the optimism of the bourgeois', and instil 'doubt as to the eternal character of the existing order', though this is not to argue that Dickens is, in any meaningful sense, a 'socialist writer'.

The fact that the mature novels contain both explicit warnings of the fearful possibility of revolution, and implicit imaginative pointers to revolution as the most probable result of the existing social conditions (for the latter see the reading of Bleak House), presents problems for the nature of Dickens's realism. There was no revolution. The shadowy figures lurking in the darkness of Tom's did not bring the system down. Critics have adopted various strategies to deal with what might appear a failure in Dickens's realistic vision. Talking of Bleak House Robert Barnard claims, "When we read this novel we do not stop to meditate that Dickens was certainly mistaken in his diagnosis - we simply enter his world, and accept his vision."<sup>(1)</sup> He solves the problem by simply avoiding it. Georg Lukács, on the other hand, confronts the problem but his efforts to get round it are less than totally convincing. "Only 'prophetic' vision, or subsequent study of a completed period, can grasp the unity underlying sharp contradictions. One would misconceive the role of perspective in literature, though, if one were to identify 'prophetic' understanding with correct political foresight. If such foresight were the criterion, there would have been no successful typology in nineteenth-century literature. For it was precisely the greatest writers of that age - Balzac and Stendhal, Dickens and Tolstoy - who erred most in their view of what the future would be like."<sup>(2)</sup>

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1 R. Barnard, *ibid*, p. 76.

2 G. Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, p. 56.

Dickens lived and wrote in an historical situation. He exaggerated the danger of revolution (the mid-Victorian English working class was far closer to the passive, apathetic sufferers of Bleeding Heart Yard than to the Paris mob which stormed the Bastille), but this does not necessarily invalidate the novels' revelation of the essential nature of social life within an industrial society, (the relation of the individual and the system, the quantitative nature of everyday social relations, etc.). We come back to the point that if the novelist grasps the essential nature of the present he is not obligated to attempt to predict the future. The absence of a late-Victorian revolution does not destroy the credibility of the social vision of the mature novels.

Though Barbara Hardy is justified in claiming that in the later fiction there is "a sense of capitalist human sacrifice seen precisely in at least some Marxist ways"<sup>(1)</sup>, we cannot call Dickens a 'revolutionary writer' in the accepted sense that his novels reveal an enthusiastic support for revolutionary aims and methods. However, what should be clear from this discussion is that the social perspective of Dickens's novels is more complex than is implied by the term frequently hung round Dickens's neck by sociologists of the novel as a defining label, - 'bourgeois novelist'. It is to consider the implications of this term, and their relevance for Dickens's mature fiction that we now turn.

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1 B. Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens, p. 10.

## CHAPTER 3

## DICKENS AS A BOURGEOIS WRITER

As early as 1855 Dickens was identified by Blackwood's Magazine as a class writer, and this view has remained current to the present day. "We cannot but express our conviction that it is to the fact that he represents a class that he owes his speedy elevation to the top of the wave of popular favour. He is a man of very liberal sentiments ... one of the advocates in the plea of Poor versus Rich, to the progress of which he lent no small aid in his day. But he is, notwithstanding, perhaps more distinctly than any other author of the time, a class writer, the historian and representative of one circle in the many ranks of our social scale. Despite their descents into the lowest class, and their occasional flights into the less familiar ground of fashion, it is the air and breath of middle-class respectability which fills the books of Mr. Dickens."

Ruskin declared, on Dickens's death in 1870:- "The literary loss is infinite - the political one I care less for than you do. Dickens was a pure modernist - a leader of the steam-whistle party par excellence - and he had no understanding of any power of antiquity except a sort of jackdaw sentiment for cathedral towers ...

His hero is essentially the ironmaster; in spite of Hard Times, he has advanced by his influence every principle that makes them harder - the love of excitement, in all classes, and the fury of business competition, and the distrust both of nobility and clergy." (from a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, June 1870).

Certainly Dickens wrote for a middle class reading public, and deferred to their standards of decorum (see Part I,



Chapter 1) but it will be argued that his relationship with the class that he wrote for, and his literary commitment to their ideals and values was far more complex and problematic than either of the above views would indicate. Ruskin, in particular, offers a simplistic view of Dickens's ambiguous (but essentially hostile) attitude to industrial progress, probably because Dickens had no truck with mediaevalism.

However, before we can develop this discussion of the relationship between Dickens's novels and middle-class values or ideology, it is necessary to examine the social and class background to the mid-Victorian period and consider some of the problems attendant on the concept of a middle-class ideology.

What was the experience of the middle class at the time when the mature novels were written? Was it a homogeneous group with a consciously held and coherent ideology? Certainly within this 'class' there was a great variety in levels of income and life-styles. The middle class would contain everybody from a Dombey to a Walter Gay, from a Rouncewell to a Guppy, from a Merdle to a Pancks. Kitson Clark has argued, "In fact, the people who at any given moment might be called middle-class vary so widely in so many different ways that there seems to be a high probability that any general statement that purports to include them all must be fallacious, any common attribute credited to them all must be a delusion."<sup>(1)</sup> However, it is worth remembering G.M. Young's dictum that "History, is not what happened but what people felt about it when it was happening."<sup>(2)</sup> Certainly a belief in the importance and significance of the middle class as a group derived from contemporary

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1 G. Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England, p. 6.

2 G.M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age, p. vi.

opinion. Kitson Clark himself admits that "From fairly early on in the century men recognised the political importance of what they called the 'middle class'. When they used these words they did not often define clearly whom they meant and probably did not realise the great difficulties of any such definition, but they knew in general whom they were talking about and they talked about them a great deal."<sup>(1)</sup> Even admitting that for contemporaries at any rate the middle class existed as a group - and a group with an important social and political role to play in the life of the country - it is worth exploring the question of how coherent this group was throughout the mid-Victorian period. Asa Briggs has argued that, "The 'middle classes' which Cobden had struggled to pull together during the 1840's, separated out into diverging elements after 1846, and the plans of the more daring spirits of the Manchester School to carry through a 'middle-class revolution' were never realised."<sup>(2)</sup> Indeed throughout the mid-Victorian period divisions within the middle class - sometimes called sub-classes - were often stressed by contemporaries. If the concept of a coherent middle-class ideology through the mid-Victorian period is problematic, it is also a vexed question whether we can talk of an aristocratic ideology. Burn has observed of the mid-Victorian period that "the aristocracy was not a homogeneous, exclusive caste, although it might appear as such to the outsider. The Duke of Omnium and the small squire were half a world apart."<sup>(3)</sup> Divisions within the aristocracy might not have been easily discerned from Manchester or Birmingham but they existed. And in addition, "It is more important to notice that, for the moment, there was no body of thought, no

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1 G. Kitson Clark, *ibid*, p. 123.

2 Asa Briggs, "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England" in Essays in Labour History (ed. Briggs and Saville), p. 72.

3 W.L. Burn, The Age of Equipoise, p. 316.

'ideology', which (as distinct from social habit) cut off the aristocracy from those below them."<sup>(1)</sup>

But the chief difficulty in a scheme of class relations which regards the aristocracy and the middle class as two homogeneous groups standing in stark opposition socially, politically and ideologically is that in the period under consideration the division between the upper regions of the middle class and the aristocracy became increasingly messy, confused and blurred. This period - the 1850's and '60's - is regarded by many as marking the triumphant rise to political power of the middle class. Before examining the increasingly messy nature of the social hierarchy a few remarks should be made on the vexed question of who actually held the political power during the mid-Victorian period.

What is insisted by most modern historians is that until at least the late sixties "the country at large, and within it the counties, was governed by the upper and not by the middle classes."<sup>(2)</sup> 1867 might be taken as the beginning of the break up of the old order. Certainly the extent of middle-class political power must not be exaggerated in the period relevant for Dickens's mature fiction. Throughout this period the aristocracy resiliently survived, maintaining both its political power and its privileged status in the eyes of society. The survival of aristocratic status is of particular importance - "The English, of all ranks and classes, are at bottom, in all their feelings, aristocrats" wrote Mill in 1858 - and though many reasons have been offered for the obstinate survival of the aristocracy as a privileged class, including the economic benefits of control of agriculture (still, according to G.M. Young, "the

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1 W.L. Burn, The Age of Equipoise, p. 316.

2 W.L. Burn, *ibid*, p. 226.

chief English industry"<sup>(1)</sup>), without the continued emulation and respect for the aristocracy and its mode of life from the successful members of the middle class exerting pressure from below it is doubtful if the aristocracy would have been able to maintain its privileged social/political position.

Middle-class propagandists were celebrating the imminent demise of the aristocracy by the late '40s. John Bright told a Manchester audience in 1849 - "The Anti-Corn Law League will hence forth stand before the world as a sign of a new order of things. Until now, this country has been ruled by the class of great proprietors of the soil. Every one must have foreseen that, as trade and manufacture is extended, the balance of power would, at some time or other, be thrown into another scale. Well, that times has come, and the rising of the League ... was sufficient to have pointed out to any statesman that the power of the landed aristocracy had reached its height and that henceforth it would find a rival to which eventually it must become subjected. We have been living through a revolution without knowing it."

Yet the English aristocracy showed no intention of retreating from a world in which it should have been an anachronism. On the contrary, Kitson Clark argues that "after 1848 their position was stronger than it had been before, for they had abandoned what was indefensible in their position and retained what was material for their power."<sup>(2)</sup> The aristocracy continued to dominate membership of parliament and especially the cabinet. "No system of differentiation is unchallengable but it would seem that of the 68 men who held cabinet rank between the beginning of 1851 and the general election of 1868 only 14 had been born in a class of society below (and those in most cases

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1 G.M. Young, *ibid*, p. 83.

2 G. Kitson Clark, *ibid*, p. 43.

not much below) that of the aristocracy and the greater landed gentry."<sup>(1)</sup> It is true that aristocratic politicians took into account middle-class wishes and views (Perkin has argued of Gladstone that "until the 1880's certainly, his policies were those which the middle class would have pursued for themselves if they could have found in their midst a leader as appealing and representative as Gladstone."<sup>(2)</sup>). Yet this happened in what D. Thomson calls "a somewhat crude and unsystematic way"<sup>(3)</sup> and though it certainly implies practical limits to aristocratic political power it doesn't alter the fact that basic control and direction of political power lay chiefly in the hands of the old order - a more resilient and flexible order than its critics had imagined. "During the forties these tribunes of the middle classes (e.g. Bright and Cobden) believed they were winning. During the fifties they were driven to admit that they had lost."<sup>(4)</sup>.

Aristocratic status still maintained its hold on society by Dickens's death (1870) and it was this which enabled the aristocracy to make a strategic compromise with the upper reaches of the middle class (the industrial barons) which was crucial in lending "to old habits of mind and modes of life a new power of survival, which they would not have otherwise possessed."<sup>(5)</sup> Traditionally, the crown of the merchant's career had been a place in the country. Now, successful businessmen sought to transfer their wealth into status on aristocratic terms of land ownership and often marriage into an aristocratic family. "The English bourgeoisie had never

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1 W.L. Burn, *ibid*, p. 314.

2 H. Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880, p. 380.

3 D. Thomson, England in the Nineteenth Century, p. 122.

4 G. Best, Mid-Victorian Britain, p. 239.

5 G. Kitson Clark, *ibid*, p. 277.

been isolated long enough to frame, except in the spheres of comfort and carnal morality, ideals and standards of its own. It was imitative."<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed, once successful the mid-Victorian businessmen "showed only a limited interest in the values by which they had risen. Many of them were deferential rather than rebellious, snobbish rather than independent, and usually tempered by what Gladstone described as 'a sneaking kindness for a lord'."<sup>(2)</sup> Thus the big businessmen were characteristically willing to come to terms with the aristocracy rather than assert their claim to status in terms of middle-class values and on behalf of their class as a whole. This factor alone makes it particularly difficult to talk of a coherent bourgeois ideology.

The aristocracy themselves were more willing to meet halfway the business giants of the '50s and '60s than the earlier (smaller and more provincial) industrial entrepreneurs. By this time the aristocracy was less suspicious and contemptuous of business and industrialisation - many of them had done well out of the industrial process, drawing an increasing proportion of their income from mines, docks, canals, railways, and urban property. Indeed, "a considerable landowner who derived no benefit at all from the contemporary economic developments was exceptionally unfortunate."<sup>(3)</sup> Thus, though in hardly any instances did an aristocratic landowner draw the majority of his income from non-agricultural sources, to differentiate between the aristocracy and the middle class in terms of two separate and exclusive sources of wealth (land v. business) is too simple. The result of this strategic union between aristocracy and the large-scale business impresarios was a fusion of classes - birth and

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1 G.M. Young, *ibid*, p. 85.

2 Asa Briggs, Victorian People, pp. 19-20.

3 W.L. Burn, *ibid*, p. 308.

land meeting (and marrying) with money and business to plant the seeds of a new Late-Victorian plutocracy. The open English aristocracy, "when at last it failed to absorb the rising men as individuals, ended by absorbing them as a class."<sup>(1)</sup>

The reformed universities and especially the public schools (where the sons of businessmen mixed with those of the aristocracy) also played an important part in this readjustment and fusion of classes and values. The public schools increasingly came to be seen as creators of a new type of 'moral' gentleman (extending, opening, and making available to the sons of businessmen the traditional aristocratic concept of the 'gentleman', heretofore based on birth and land ownership). "The significance of this extension and modernisation of the gentleman idea is that it filled out and internally strengthened those upper social strata from which was drawn the bulk of the parliamentary, Whitehall, and county governing class."<sup>(2)</sup> Thus though the businessmen gained from the strategic role of the public schools, the aristocracy made gains too. This is true of the fusion of interests and values generally.

This fusion was the chief means in the defensive mechanism of a threatened aristocracy of ensuring survival (albeit through amalgamation with the heads of business), and reserving for itself an important role to play in the future development of British industrial society. In the short term, however, this strategic compromise created a blurred and messy set of class divisions. Not only was the class system confused by the aspiration of many in the middle order to be gentlemen but also by the desperate ambition of the lower

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1 H. Perkin, *ibid*, p. 437.

2 G. Best, *ibid*, pp. 255-6.

middle class to be respectable, by preserving all signs of differentiation from the working class below. Generally we can say that while membership of the middle class brought with it respectability, not all who were respectable were gentlemen - a factor responsible for the driving force of middle-class ambition to gain gentlemanly status (for themselves or their sons), not in terms of a middle-class ideology but essentially on traditional aristocratic terms, (blood, through marriage, and land-ownership).

The social phenomenon of this fusion of interests was recognised by contemporaries. For example, Bernard Cracroft - "Half the peerage have mercantile and manufacturing interests. The mercantile interest is in itself a hierarchy in which the little shopman looks up with not unfounded hope to the position of the merchant, while the merchant in his turn generally has one ambition at heart, to found a county family. The landowners on their part are often on the look out for heiresses. Thus the fusion of the two interests is becoming daily more and more complete."

This fusion is reflected in Dickens's novels through Dombey's marriage with Edith Granger, aristocratic lionisation of Merdle, and Veneering's attempt to establish his social position by inventing a family crest and using the aristocratic Lady Tippins to legitimise his status. However, in one of the most explicit dramatisations of the class situation and social forces at work in mid-Victorian society - the meeting between Sir Leicester Dedlock and Mr. Rouncewell, the ironmaster, in Bleak House, the complexity and ambiguity surrounding the relation between the aristocracy and the upper middle class is not reflected and instead (in a manner itself characteristic of the age) the opposition is presented in oversimplified and extreme social terms. The meeting of the two men is presented as a clash of irreconcilable social forces and ideologies. Sir Leicester himself declares,



"Mr. Rouncewell, our views of duty, and our views of station, and our views of education, and our views of - in short, all our views - are so diametrically opposed that to prolong this discussion must be repellent to your feelings and repellent to my own." (Penguin, p. 454).

The comparatively sympathetic portrait of Rouncewell as well as the election victory of the candidate he supports is indicative of a newly won, or at least imminent middle-class social/political ascendancy over an obsolete and anachronistic aristocracy. The whole tenor of the Dedlock satire reinforces this. One of the reasons for Dickens's willingness to grant Sir Leicester some partly redeeming characteristics could well be a generosity to a beaten foe. The novel offers an over-simplified social perspective in which the possibility of a compromise between the two interests and/or the ability of the aristocracy to maintain its social position through a flexible adaptation to the new social realities are rejected. The novel also errs in its treatment of who actually held the political power at the time. Paradoxically, one element in the treatment of the theme is suggestive of a more complex situation than the novel elsewhere admits. In his decision to educate his daughters by handing them over to the equivalent of a Mrs. General who will polish away until the required surface is formed, Rouncewell is trying to make 'ladies' of his daughters according to the received conventions of the fashionable world. As we have seen this was a familiar strategy. "In the battle between the self-made man and the gentleman the self-made man won in England only if he became a gentleman himself, or tried to make his son one."<sup>(1)</sup> Is the specialised education of his daughters the first step in a general orientation to aristocratic values which would bridge the gulf between the two mutually 'repellent' sets of class attitudes? It is not too fanciful to see one of Rouncewell's heirs buying or marrying his way into ownership

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1 Asa Briggs, Victorian People, p. 142.

of Chesney Wold itself! However, apart from this hint the novel presents the class situation in a way which does scant justice to the complexity and ambiguity of the social fact.

However, the point which most concerns us, at this moment, is the difficulty of talking about a bourgeois ideology in the mid-Victorian period (a problem for those who read Dickens's novels as a direct expression of such an ideology). Such was the adulteration of middle-class values, especially in the upper reaches of the middle class, consequent upon the fusion and compromise with the aristocracy; such was the snobbery and jealously guarded degrees of privilege and status within the middle class - that a coherent bourgeois ideology throughout the 1850s and '60s is a suspect concept.

Dickens's mature novels are full of examples of the adulteration of the traditional entrepreneurial bourgeois values implicit in the middle-class social experience of the period. In Hard Times we are told of the Gradgrind school, the social/political theorists of the bourgeois interests - "They liked fine gentlemen - they pretended that they did not, but they did. They became exhausted in imitation of them; and they yaw-yawed in their speech like them; and they served out, with an enervated air, the little mouldy rations of political economy, on which they regaled their disciples. There never before was seen on earth such a wonderful hybrid race as was thus produced." (Penguin, pp. 157-8). It is interesting that in a letter to W.C. Macready (October 1855), Dickens himself remarked that Victorian society had "no such thing as a middle class (for though we are perpetually bragging of it as our safety, it is nothing but a poor fringe on the mantle of the upper)."

However, any discussion of Dickens's novelistic attitude to the middle classes must take into account the presence in

each of the later novels of certain middle-class values, artistically utilised as moral positives. These selected middle-class values are woven into the fabric of the later novels, in each case, it will be argued, an important element in the organisation of the total structure.

The middle-class values which are chosen to be moral positives in the novels' schematic design are the traditional values associated with the middle classes in the earlier, entrepreneurial stage of English capitalist development - self-dependence, work as vocation, industry, thrift, earnestness, perseverance, patience, duty, etc.. By the mid-Victorian period many of these had been perverted within the middle class itself into a blind worship of wealth and property for its own sake - not, as in the earlier, idealistic model, for the moral/spiritual qualities responsible for its accumulation (work, grace, etc.). Duty had become secularised into an obsession with business success; work, industry, thrift into worship of money, etc.. It is a point of crucial importance that the middle-class values which were associated with what Lukács calls the heroic epoch of bourgeois development are utilised in Dickens's mature novels as a means of criticising the contemporary social situation and behaviour of the mid-Victorian middle class itself. The values of the entrepreneurial stage of capitalist development no longer accurately embody the essential nature of moral behaviour in a social world dominated by Merdle, Podsnap, and Veneering. What's more, the earlier middle-class ideals implicitly recognised the moral superiority of the industrious worker to the idle aristocrat. Following the mid-Victorian alliance of aristocracy and bourgeoisie the traditional middle-class value stance was severely compromised. Thus the existence of these values in the later novels as an important means of structural organisation implies the very reverse of a loyalty on Dickens's part to the contemporary middle class - indeed, an increasingly

fierce opposition to the prosperous mid-Victorian middle class is what gives the later novels their peculiar force.

Lukács's reading of Balzac's Lost Illusions in Studies in European Realism is relevant here. Lukacs argues that the illusions seen in the novel as empty are the ideals of the heroic stage of bourgeois development, now destroyed by the ongoing movement of their own economic base. Lukács's remark that the 'heroic pioneers' of the early stage of capitalist development had to make way for the 'humanly inferior exploiters of the new development, the speculators and the racketeers',<sup>(1)</sup> has direct relevance for Dickens's opposition of, for example, Merdle and the firm of Doyce and Clennam in Little Dorrit.

It is interesting that Dickens's earlier novels reflect an easy middle-class optimism: a belief in progress, in the direction in which the system was moving, (though changes might be necessary to remove certain local abuses); an impatience with tradition; a contempt for those who idealise the Middle Ages; above all a critical opposition to the aristocracy, seen in the aristocratic caricatures of the early novels, e.g. Sir Mulberry Hawk, Lord Frederick Verisopht (Nicholas Nickleby), and in occasional passages such as the opening pages of Martin Chuzzlewit, with their satire on aristocratic preoccupation with birth and lineage. When middle-class values were utilised in the earlier novels the object of criticism was the aristocracy but in the later novels it is the contemporary middle class. This change parallels Dickens's growing awareness that the whole system of mid-Victorian society was corrupt, not just particular areas. In Dombey and Son we can see the change taking place. In describing Harriet Carker Dickens talks of "the dull, household virtues, that have so little in common with the

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1 G. Lukács, Studies in European Realism, p. 48.

received idea of heroism and greatness." Her middle-class domestic virtues stand in opposition to traditional aristocratic views of chivalry and heroism; but also to Dombey's mercantile business view of greatness. Her ideal home, the cottage in North London which she shares with her brother, is contrasted with the grand but spiritually empty Dombey mansion, scene of a characteristic social marriage of business wealth (Dombey) and aristocratic blood (Edith Granger).

Thus the 'heroic' middle-class values of entrepreneurial capitalism continue to be utilised as a positive moral basis for Dickens's social satire though the social or class object of this satire widens to include the middle class itself. It is not only the expanding social/political power of the Merdles, or the moral compromise attendant on the aristocratic alliance with the upper reaches of the middle class that disgusted Dickens. The entrepreneurial middle-class ideals were hardly characteristic of the other regions of the middle class either. The middle areas of this class produced the snobbery of Meagles and Mrs. Pocket; the hypocrisy of Casby and Mr. Pumblechook; Mrs. Clennam's perverted economic evangelicalism; Vholes's obsession with respectability; the self-centred philanthropy of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, etc.. The lower regions produced the greed of the Smallweeds; the vulgarity of Guppy; the egocentric 'mission' of Chadband; the paranoid concern for respectability of Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam; and the inhumanity of the official business code of Pancks and Wemmick. Indeed, in the lower regions of the middle class, peopled by the clerical grubbers and grinders, the hollow men Dickens described so well, commitment to the degraded business and money ethos which he detested (a perverted form of the earlier entrepreneurial ideals), was particularly strong.

Thus, throughout the mid-Victorian middle class the

general quality of moral and social life is represented in the novels as being of a piece. As Arnold Kettle points out, if Charley Hexam never made the Podsnap sphere socially, he is already there in terms of his values. No areas of the middle class are exempt from Dickens's novelistic criticism. Thus, the survival of the middle-class ideals as an organising agency in the later novels, following the change in Dickens's attitude to the middle class, (summarised by Angus Wilson - "Broadly speaking, one could say that the young Dickens aspired to respectable middle-class radicalism attacking particular social evils, and ended as a middle-aged revolutionary with a peculiar hostility to the middle classes"),<sup>(1)</sup> embodies, in a sense, both positive and negative aspects of Dickens's social criticism. These values are still presented as moral positives, but by contrasting with the current social experience of the middle classes they provide the moral basis for, and hence contribute towards, the novels' satire on contemporary bourgeois society, and reflect Dickens's social pessimism. Dickens's utilization of these middle-class ideals will now be examined in greater detail.

The selected middle-class values which operate in the later novels form a loosely integrated moral touchstone, a means of judging character, behaviour and action within the crowded, superficially chaotic and disordered social world of the novels. Thus within these novels the social vision is presented in parallel with a set of loosely-bound values which act as an interpretive code - that these are traditional middle-class values, provides the middle-class reading public with a familiar and accessible route into the novels. The result is a complex situation in which a social vision which is essentially hostile to bourgeois society is to be read and interpreted by means of a mediation through middle-class

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1 A. Wilson, 'The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens' in Dickens and the Twentieth Century (ed. Gross & Pearson), p. 576.

values. The relation between the social vision and the interpretive code is crucial to an understanding of Dickens's mature fiction. The readings of individual novels will demonstrate the manner in which the social vision transcends the limitations of the interpretive moral framework. The novels as a whole refuse to accept the bourgeois interpretation of industrial society, (an optimistic, complacent view of industrialisation as materialistic and social progress). However, it is as well to recognise at this point, that though the middle-class value index implicitly criticises the general moral condition in mid-Victorian England, the essential nature of its relationship with the social vision is problematic. In so far as Dickens provides a decoding mechanism in conjunction with his basic social vision we consistently feel that he has, by mistake, given us the wrong or inadequate code. The tension between the middle-class value index and the social vision accounts for many of the inconsistencies and contradictions within the novels. Sometimes the middle-class code may act to reinforce the essential social vision; more often it obstructs or contradicts it, most often it dilutes or weakens it. The sociologist of the novel must not concentrate on either of these elements at the expense of the other. The result would be a crude, partial, and one-sided view of Dickens's fiction. By concentrating on the social vision alone a case could be made out for regarding Dickens as a revolutionary writer, while a concentration solely on the middle-class moral filter might suggest that Dickens was merely a bourgeois writer, the relevance of whose work is constricted by the limiting influence of his class position. What characterises Dickens's mature fiction is the tension between these two elements.

It should be pointed out here that there are occasions on which the two structures - the social vision and the interpretive moral framework - are superimposed in such a

way that the content of the social vision is reinforced, though this often happens in a manner which dilutes the imaginative impact of the latter. For example, consider the use made in the later novels of the middle-class concept of the ideal home.

In the ideal the home was seen as a walled garden, a shelter or refuge from the indifference of a business-orientated world. (The concept is given one of its most articulate and developed expressions in Ruskin's lecture Of Queens' Gardens.) It was a shelter not only from the corrupt values of the system but from the alienating effects of the division of labour (think of Wemmick in Great Expectations). It is a place where fancy and innocent play could thrive around the family fireside, where the breadwinner could find the emotional support to sustain him in the harsh and competitive world outside. This myth was essentially the product of the middle class. "It seems at least highly probable that the idealized home was the home of the several sections of the middle classes; although their concept had its influence on those above them and those below them."<sup>(1)</sup> Though there are some horrendous households in Dickens's novels (e.g. the Wilfers in Our Mutual Friend) and frequent examples of unnatural, perverted relations within the family (from Dombey to the reversal of roles in the 'family' relationships of Amy Dorrit/Maggy and the Doll's Dressmaker/her drunken father), the myth of the ideal home is positively utilised in the later fiction (ironically at a time when Dickens's own family relations had deteriorated) - and when this occurs it almost always produces on Dickens's part an embarrassing slice of arch and sentimental coyness. The virtues of hearth and home are declared to the background accompaniment of the busy, cheerful 'little' woman (both playmate and housekeeper) jangling her housekeeping keys in a

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1 W.L. Burn, *ibid*, p. 247.



happy and dutiful manner. This opposition is particularly explicit in Martin Chuzzlewit where Ruth Pinch's domestic virtues (embarrassing as they are to the modern reader) are contrasted directly with the domestic arrangements of Anthony and Jonas Chuzzlewit who live more in a business office than a home - ("Business, as may be readily supposed, was the main thing in this establishment, insomuch indeed that it shouldered comfort out of doors and jostled the domestic arrangements at every turn." (Penguin, p. 235).

However, the ideal house in Dickens's novels - Jarndyce's St. Albans haven is an obvious example - also operate as implicit criticisms of the general condition within the total system. They are both literal plot refuges from, and idealised social alternatives to, the system. They often operate as microcosms of a social environment within which relations are healthy and qualitative, representing a radical criticism of the materialistic values and loss of community in the wider system. Yet the fact that Dickens is utilising the middle-class myth of the Victorian hearth to clarify (by opposition) what is wrong with the system dilutes and emasculates a penetrating social criticism by cloaking it within a cosy, sentimental gloss so that the criticism becomes as comfortable as the tool used to convey it. Also Dickens is involved in a basic inconsistency - an alternative to a corrupt bourgeois society is framed in terms of one of the chief myths of the bourgeoisie. The sting of the criticism is obscured.

Some more points about the nature of the middle-class value index should be emphasised at this point. Those values which are utilised are chosen selectively and hold together in a loosely integrated form. There is no attempt made artistically to give coherence to and articulate a middle-class ideology. Often a value which is utilised as part of the middle-class value code is subject to implicit criticism

elsewhere within the structure of the same novel, e.g. Jarndyce's private charity in Bleak House. And the moral framework itself does not remain constant from one novel to another. A middle-class concept or ideal utilised comparatively uncritically in one novel is often subjected to increasing criticism in subsequent novels. A good example of this is the hardening in Dickens's novelistic treatment of the middle-class value of self-help and the ideal of the self-made man.

The concept of self-help is associated with Samuel Smiles but it was current amidst the middle classes for a considerable time before Smiles gave its most memorable articulation with the publication of Self-Help in 1859. His aim was to "re-inculcate those old-fashioned but wholesome lessons - which cannot perhaps be too often urged - that youth must work in order to enjoy - that nothing creditable can be accomplished without application and diligence - that the student must not be daunted by difficulties, but conquer them by patience and perseverance, and that, above all, he must seek elevation of character without which capacity is worthless and worldly success is nought." His chief assertion was that "What some men are, all without difficulty might be. Employ the same means, and the same results will follow." He argued that it "is not eminent talent that is required to insure success in any pursuit, so much as purpose - not merely the power to achieve, but the will to labour energetically and perseveringly." It is difficult today to comprehend the strength of the concept of self-help within the Victorian middle class. Beatrice Webb (My Apprenticeship) - "It was the bounden duty of every citizen to better his status; to ignore those beneath him, and to aim steadily at the top rung of the social ladder. Only by this persistent pursuit by each individual of his own and his family's interest would the highest level of civilisation be attained ... no one of the present generation realises with what

sincerity and fervour these doctrines were held by the representative men and women of the mid-Victorian middle class."

Perkin has shrewdly pointed out that "It was a real myth, in that it had a sufficient basis in fact - as Samuel Smiles' Lives of Engineers from James Hindley to George Stephenson bears witness - to make it eminently plausible, while remaining utterly fictitious as a sociological explanation of the entrepreneurs as a class."<sup>(1)</sup> What's more, most of Smiles' examples of great self-made men are drawn from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the 1850s and '60s there was much less possibility for this sort of social rise. In fact, The Times, in 1859 (ironically the same year as the publication of Self-Help) admitted "ninety-nine people in a hundred cannot 'get on' in life but are tied by birth, education or circumstances to a lower position, where they must stay."

Of course, Dickens himself was a walking example of the Victorian self-made man and celebrated his own success in David Copperfield (1849/50). We are explicitly told that David Copperfield's success was due to his "habits of punctuality, order and diligence", his "perseverance", and his "continuous energy". (The last two are spoken of as the "source of my (i.e. David's) success".) In this novel the treatment of the concept of the self-made man is heroic rather than critical or ironic, and in his next novel Bleak House (1852/3) the portrait of Rouncewell the ironmaster reflects this middle-class ideal in a favourable, positive light. Rouncewell, without initial property or patronage, makes his own way by his character and talent to wealth and status. However, from this point Dickens's attitude to the myth and its social implications becomes increasingly ambiguous.

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1 H. Perkin, *ibid*, p. 225.

In Hard Times (1854) Bounderby with his vaunting boasts of heroic and independent social climbing is ruthlessly satirised in a way which casts aspersions on these concepts themselves (though Bounderby's boasts are not true). The novel also explicitly undermines the validity of universal application of the concept. It was crucial to Smiles' argument that "what some men are, all without difficulty might be". However, in Book II, Chapter 1 of the novel Dickens explicitly rejects this. "This, again, was among the fictions of Coketown; any capitalist there, who had made sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, always professed to wonder why the sixty thousand nearest Hands didn't each make sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, and more or less reproached them every one for not accomplishing the little feat. What I did you can do. Why don't you go and do it?" (Penguin, p. 152).

In Little Dorrit (1855-7), however, Doyce is presented sympathetically and he is a classic embodiment of Smiles' ideal. Clennam regards Doyce as an "honest, self-helpful, indefatigable old man, who has worked his way all through his life". The details given of Doyce's life are strikingly similar to the classic pattern sketched out by Smiles in his Lives of Engineers, even to the detail of early parental help and encouragement in his vocation. Doyce "was the son of a north-country blacksmith, and had originally been apprenticed by his widowed mother to a lock-maker; that he had 'struck out a few little things' at the lock-makers, which had led to his being released from his indentures with a present, which present had enabled him to gratify his ardent wish to bind himself to a working engineer, under whom he had laboured hard, learned hard, and lived hard, seven years. His time being out, he had 'worked in the shop' at weekly wages seven or eight years more; and had then betaken himself to the banks of the Clyde, where he had studied, and filed, and hammered, and improved his knowledge, theoretical

and practical, for six and seven years more. There he had had an offer to go to Lyons, which he had accepted; and from Lyons had been engaged to go to Germany, and in Germany had had an offer to go to St. Petersburg, and there had done very well indeed - never better." (Penguin, pp. 232/3). From humble beginnings through a long apprenticeship to actively managing his own firm, it is the classic middle-class myth, and Doyce has particular relevance for the mid-Victorian period, for as Asa Briggs remarks, "Quite rightly the mid-Victorians chose engineers as their folk-heroes".<sup>(1)</sup> Smiles himself argued that, without the skills of the engineer, "Society, as it is, could not exist.". Dickens's portrait of Doyce, then, utilises the middle-class myth of the self-made man even more sympathetically than in the portrait of Rouncewell in Bleak House, who at times betrays a glib, self-satisfied tone.

However, the portrait of Doyce must be seen in terms of its implicit criticism of Merdle (see Part Two, Chapter 2) and in Great Expectations (1860/1) the emphasis changes again. Pip's boyhood yearnings for achievement of higher social status are seen as a perverse source of frustration. Pip would have been better off without them. For the working class as a whole (subject to the seductive logic of Smiles' argument that effort and perseverance would bring social success), a general expectation of upward social mobility was only likely to cause unhappiness and wretchedness, and the agony of frustrated aspiration. In Our Mutual Friend (1864/5) Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam are both successful in rising in the scale of society, but in both cases self-improvement is seen as a problematic gain leading to extreme social uncertainty and a neurotic anxiety over the stability of this all too vulnerable and fragile social achievement.

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1 A. Briggs, The Making of Modern England, p. 395.

In addition, increasingly in these later novels outstanding examples of achievement or social success are portrayed unsympathetically as a spiritual compromise or moral crime - think of Lady Dedlock, Bounderby, Merdle, and Veneering etc.. It is as if success on society's terms is incompatible with moral goodness - thus the heroes are either only successful on moderate terms or (in the interests of a happy ending) have the trappings of success gifted to them, (a far cry from success being earned by work, perseverance, endeavour, etc.). Thus an excessive social ambition and an obsession with upward social mobility increasingly comes to be regarded in the novels as far from natural or laudable - indeed as morally ambiguous. From being a valid social ideal the self-made man has come to be a concept surrounded with morally shady implications. Its relevance for promoting the health of the whole social organism and of all groups within it has been rejected. Instead of maintaining the efficient running of the machinery of society the ideal has come to be seen as having a socially divisive potential spreading unhappiness and social frustration throughout the lower social orders.

That it is far too simple to encompass Dickens within the bland term of bourgeois novelist would come as no surprise to Lucien Goldmann. In his Towards a Sociology of the Novel he declared that "The novel with a problematic hero thus proves, contrary to traditional opinion, to be a literary form bound up certainly with history and the development of the bourgeoisie, but not the expression of the real or possible consciousness of that class."<sup>(1)</sup> But in his general literary theory Goldmann directs us to look towards a social group (usually a class) to explain the genesis and meaning of a work of literature. Is there another group (other than the middle class) which we can identify as providing through its

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1 L. Goldmann, Towards a Sociology of the Novel, p. 13.

world vision the key to an understanding of the imaginative structures of Dickens's mature novels?

In his journalism Dickens frequently talked of "us, the people" and identified with the popular interest. However, it is impossible to make out a case for Dickens being a 'popular' novelist either in the sense that he drew on the experience and values of the working classes to structure his novels, or that he helped to promote through his fiction a sense of identity and class consciousness amongst the urban masses. Dickens's novelistic attitude to the working class reveals no sympathy with any of the popular appeals for working-class solidarity or for any form of collective action. The novels express sympathy for the urban poor in their character of passive, suffering victims but "the aggregate of distress and sorrow has only to move, collectively, to be converted into its opposite, and be seen as a howling mob."<sup>(1)</sup>

The novels applaud the emotional solidarity and mutual help amongst the working class (e.g. Liz and Jenny in Bleak House). And Dickens is willing to make the gesture of moral equality to the morally good members of the working class - i.e. nature's gentlemen. (Gissing - "The 'gentleman' Dickens loved to contemplate was - in echo of Burns's phrase - he who derives his patent of gentility straight from almighty God. These he found abundantly among the humble of estate, the poor in spirit; or indulged his fine humanity in the belief that they abounded." (Charles Dickens, 1898).) But it will be argued that this is not a radical gesture, an implied criticism of the nature of the class system, a declaration of faith in the people as a class - but, instead, a mere sentimental sop to his readers, with conservative social implications. Moral gentility is only awarded to the individual member of the working class who dutifully accepts

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1 R. Williams, The English Novel, from Dickens to Lawrence, p. 49.

his allotted place in society, and the need to be governed from above. It is a necessary condition to accept a passive, non-political role in society. Although moral equality might be awarded, this operates within the divisions of the existing class system. The natural gentleman was still expected to defer to his social superiors. A true gentleman would not push in where he wasn't wanted (think of Joe Gargery in Great Expectations). Thus the idea of the natural gentleman "was loaded to support the social hierarchy."<sup>(1)</sup>

This can be demonstrated by examining the role of Stephen Blackpool in Hard Times. It is strongly implied that he is a moral gentleman. When Louisa offers him her gift of money we are told of Stephen's behaviour - "He was neither courtly or handsome, nor picturesque in any respect; and yet his manner of accepting it and expressing his thanks without more words, had a grace in it that Lord Chesterfield could not have taught his son in a century." (Penguin, p. 190). His natural grace and moral goodness is organically linked to political apathy. He refuses to join the trade union for reasons which he doesn't make clear, and in answer to Bounderby's question of how he would put right the muddle he answers, "'I donno, Sir. I canna be expecten to't. 'Tis not me as should be looken to for that, Sir. 'Tis them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us. What do they tak upon themseln, Sir, if not to do't?'" (Penguin, p. 181). He is, throughout the novel - and in this he is representative of all Dickens's good working-class characters, "cap-tweaking, foot-shuffling, and reassuringly un-revolutionary."<sup>(2)</sup>

Dickens has often been viewed as a democrat, mainly on account of his famous speech to the Midland Institute at Birmingham, September 1869. "I will now discharge my conscience

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1 G. Best, *ibid*, p. 269.

2 M. Goldberg, Dickens and Carlyle, p. 37.



of my political creed, which is contained in two articles, and has no reference to any party or persons. My faith in the people governing is, on the whole, infinitesimal; my faith in the People governed is, on the whole, illimitable." Forster, however, added a shrewd postscript when he claimed that "it may be suspected, with some confidence, that the construction of his real meaning was not far wrong which assumed it as the condition precedent to his illimitable faith, that the people, even with the big P., should be 'governed'." Dickens was no embryonic socialist, and his view that the working class should be governed from above owes a lot to Carlyle. (In his Latter-Day Pamphlet, Carlyle portrayed the working class as a "dumb inarticulate class" crying out for good paternalistic leadership. "Guide me, govern me! I am mad and miserable and cannot guide myself.") In the later fiction the working class tend to be seen as a dehumanised (animal) mass in need of strong control and management - in Bleak House Jo and his like are described as blind oxen, badly guided and sorely goaded, but liable to do an injury to themselves and to innocent others if they unwisely attempt to find their own way. The political analogy is clear.

Shaw has questioned the extent of Dickens's knowledge of the urban working class. "But of the segregated factory populations of our purely industrial towns he knew no more than an observant professional man can pick up on a flying visit to Manchester." As a result, lacking real knowledge, Dickens was forced to view the urban masses through spectacles of middle-class ideology either as idealised good workmen or terrifying mob rioters - both equally unreal.

Also present in his treatment of working-class characters is an implicit patronising element. The dignity of his working-class characters is denied by their being presented as comic figures of fun, or childlike innocents (often at

the same time). This has the effect that Dickens's good workers come across as a very short distance removed from being half-wits. Mr. Bagnet, Mr. Boffin, Joe Gargery etc. - all innocents abroad in a corrupt world where they are terribly vulnerable. This vulnerability, of course, is consistent with the necessity (for their own good) for government to be imposed in a benignly paternalistic fashion from above. The working class - like dumb, inarticulate animals - are incapable of helping themselves. That is the message of Dickens's mature novels. There is no way that this implicit message reveals Dickens to be a 'popular writer' in any sense other than the simple non-political one that his books sold well.

However, an interesting suggestion for our purposes is Perkin's assertion that within the middle class there existed a class or sub-group with its own, however vague, ideal - not necessarily committed to the orthodox middle-class position, indeed, openly critical of it on occasions. This class was the professional middle class, which "had a separate, if sometimes subconscious, social ideal ... Their ideal society was a functional one based on expertise and selection by merit."<sup>(1)</sup> It will be argued that despite elements in the social vision which implicitly suggest conflict, the view of society which Dickens consciously reflects in the later novels is a functionalist, consensus model. Certainly, during the mid-Victorian period, an attempt was made by a number of professions to gain respectability and/or gentlemanly status for their members, by exercising a more severe control over the recruitment, competence and conduct of their fellow professionals. Exams were instituted, parliamentary recognition and registration was sought, and a new and much larger wave of professional institutions came into existence - e.g. the British Medical Association in 1856.

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1 H. Perkin, *ibid*, p. 258.

Among Dickens's own friends there were many professional men - as one would expect, professional journalists and writers (e.g. Lytton, Wilkie Collins, Mark Lemon) - but also doctors (Dr. Conolly and Dr. Elliotson, both reformist physicians) and prison governors (Chesterton and Tracey). In so far as Dickens's mature novels offer an alternative social ideal to mid-Victorian capitalism, it is framed largely in terms of the efficient, talented professional man - e.g. Woodcourt (Bleak House) and Doyce (Little Dorrit). The representative man in these social ideals is the talented and trained new professional, with a social conscience. It is as if Dickens sees men from the new professions as being uniquely capable of responding to the problems of the new industrial society. (In his novels Dickens remains suspicious or hostile to members of the old professions, the law and the clergy.) But this social ideal is presented within a familiar framework. It is as if Dickens is saying that if all men were like Doyce and Woodcourt - especially if the political governors were talented, responsible, or efficient - then all would be well. Thus in a sense the new professional man is the equivalent (as a representative solution to the problems of Victorian society) in the later novels, to the individual philanthropist of the earlier fiction - the latter a type whose methods and likely success Dickens seems to have viewed with increasing doubt and ambiguity (despite the reappearance of Boffin in Our Mutual Friend). The new professional rather than the philanthropist comes to be the representative man in the moral society the latter novels contrast idealistically to the reality of industrial society.

But we must beware of seizing on the role of the professional man as a key to Dickens's mature fiction. The concept is suggestive but inadequate for the purpose. For example, the role of a character such as Doyce is complex. He is a new professional man, an engineer, but also an embodiment of the traditional (old) middle-class ideal of

the self-made man. The engineer might have been the folk-hero of the mid-Victorian period but Doyce's personal business ethos (anti-speculation) looks to the past, and seems more applicable to an earlier stage of English capitalist development. Though by profession he is a new man, in terms of attitudes and values Doyce is a relic from entrepreneurial capitalism standing in stark contrast to the new capitalist hero of the mid-Victorian period, represented in *Little Dorrit* by Merdle. Perhaps significantly, unlike the young and energetic Woodcourt, Doyce is physically older and more worn. It is worth remarking that the entrepreneurial ideal is still important in structuring the experience of the hero in Dickens's later fiction - both Arthur Clennam and Pip end up as active partners in a small, independent firm, though this is not completely divorced from the professional ethos, for, as Humphry House has pointed out, the small independent businessman is "a man whose work bears a relation to his income similar to that of professional people to theirs."<sup>(1)</sup>

However, it is difficult to attribute any world vision (in Goldmann's sense) to this professional group. The values utilised in the moral code or interpretive index of the later novels seem more consistent with the old entrepreneurial ideals, than a new professional ethos. Unfortunately, Perkin leaves the nature of the professional ethos vague anyway. We can say that Dickens greeted the arrival on the social scene (and particularly in the area of urban sanitary and health reform) of the well-trained, talented, and dedicated professional man with both personal and artistic sympathy. He utilised professional men, particularly Woodcourt, as a hopeful emblem for a better future. But beyond this we cannot argue that his novels are a literary transposition of the world vision of the mid-Victorian professional class.

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1 H. House, The Dickens World, p. 164.

This is not to admit that our reading of Dickens's fiction must offer simply an individualistic explanation for its genesis and characteristics. Dickens's novels creatively reflect the general social condition, and critically evaluate a shared social situation, and our argument roots the creative motor for Dickens's mature fiction in his social situation - but this social situation is characterised by the absence of an unambiguous commitment or orientation towards any one contemporary class or group within mid-Victorian society. The imaginative world of his later novels stubbornly refuses to be reduced to an expression of the point of view, ideology, or world vision of any one social group. And this absence of an ideological commitment to a cohesive social group operates along with the important social fact of the developing city to give Dickens's mature novels their peculiar brooding tone and strongly communicated sense of individual isolation and separateness within the social organism.

As his literary career progressed Dickens increasingly came to have no faith in any group platform or programme. In his private life he was alienated: his marriage and family relations were suffocating; his affair with Ellen Ternan was frustrating and unfulfilling. His personal letters to friends in his later years reflect a frustrated yearning; a feeling of having missed the boat; of (like the widowed David Copperfield) never having met the one true friend who could have given him fulfilment; a desire to be recalled to life like the heroes of his later novels. His portraits of Skimpole and Gowan (representing polar positions of art as aesthetic beauty, or as a commercial commodity) reveal his scant sympathy with the most common attitudes of the contemporary literary/cultural circles. He had no political faith, either in a party, pressure group, or even in the basic system. As early as 1855 he had written to W.C. Macready - "As to the suffrage, I have lost hope even in the ballot.

We appear to me to have proved the failure of representative institutions without an educated and advanced people to support them ... I do reluctantly believe that the English people are habitually consenting parties to the miserable imbecility into which we have fallen, and never will help themselves out of it. Who is to do it, if anybody is, God knows. But at present we are on the down-hill road to being conquered, and the people will be content to bear it, sing 'Rule Britannia', and will not be saved ... I have no present political faith or hope - not a grain." By 1870, the year of his death, he wrote to Lytton, "I do not think the present Government worse than another, and I think it better than another by the presence of Mr. Gladstone; but it appears to me that our system fails."

In his later years Dickens experienced the strain of belonging and not belonging. As a rejection of society in his novels became more extreme, in his private life Dickens felt a proportionate need to remain socially acceptable (cf. his public declaration of the reasons for separating from his wife). Though his novels repudiated the existing order, Dickens still felt a deep commitment to a social order of some sort against the disruptions which he feared were either concomitant with the democratic principle, or liable to erupt from the urban slums. C.P. Snow has acutely observed of the later Dickens, "In many ways he reminds one, at the time when he was writing the dark novels of his last period, of a middle-aged American liberal of the present day: who has had great hopes and found them eroded: who doesn't like what he sees round him and can't find a place to stand: who is nevertheless unbreakably bound to the society in which he grew up."<sup>(1)</sup>

Lukács (in Studies in European Realism) makes the

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1 C.P. Snow, 'Dickens and the Public Service' in Dickens 1970 (ed. M. Slater), p. 127.

important point that "the really honest and gifted bourgeois writers who lived and wrote in the period following the great upheavals of 1848 naturally could not experience and share the development of their class with the same true devotion and intensity of feeling as their predecessors ... And because in the society of their time they found nothing to support wholeheartedly ... they remained mere spectators of the social process."<sup>(1)</sup> The later Dickens is an outsider; he takes no partisan position. With reference to his novels the position of spectator is a source of both strength and weakness - it is a strength in that it frees him to criticise the middle class, in which he occupies an esteemed but uneasy position, but, on the other hand, the lack of ideological commitment to a group contributes to the messy logic and lack of consistency within the imaginative structures of his novels. For example, Dickens's novels are pro Carlyle and Ruskin in most of their moral criticisms of industrial society, but they reveal a contempt for the cult of the Middle Ages, associated with these two critics. In the latter instance, the novels are pro-utilitarian, but in all other respects they attack utilitarianism, with its reduction of life to the quantitative level. In consideration of urban abuses the novels generally support government intervention, but in their consideration of corrupt political/governmental institutions (for example the Circumlocution Office) they are generally pro-individualism.

Lukács's remark (above) is made in the course of an argument which denies the greatness of virtually all post-1848 European literature, relegating it to the status of mere bourgeois apologetics. (The novels of Thomas Mann provide a rare exception.) It is worth briefly looking at his general theory and discussing its relevance for Dickens's mature fiction.

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1 G. Lukács, Studies in European Realism, p. 141.

Lukacs argues that before 1848 the bourgeoisie was associated with progressive social forces (the bourgeois novelists were thus expressing the values and ideology of the progressive social class). But 1848 marks the triumph of the bourgeoisie as a ruling class - the progressive social class is now the proletariat. Literature which does not imaginatively identify with the proletariat and reflect a positive acceptance of socialism (or at least refuse to reject socialism) is seen as reactionary, as bourgeois apologetics. The writer, post-1848, instead of sharing the aspirations of a progressive social class is now increasingly seen as a problematic person - critical of bourgeois society but unwilling to accept socialism as representing the only future for survival of civilised society, hence producing a sterile, subjectivist, experimental literature which represents man as a partial, isolated, and alienated being. Post-1848 literature is thus marked by the decline of the bourgeois critical realist tradition.

Certainly after 1848 (Dombey and Son was written from 1846-8) Dickens became increasingly a problematic person, no longer capable of sharing the aspirations and optimism of the mid-Victorian middle class. He did not embrace socialism (a systematic statement of which was lacking in Britain, even in the '70s), but the qualitative life-values which he opposes to the market values of the money/business ethos could be regarded as progressive in the general sense of being anti-materialistic/market orientated.

However, there is no way that Dickens's post-1848 novels can be regarded as bourgeois apologetics. They offer the most radical and challenging vision of industrial society in English literature throughout the 19th century. Furthermore, there is no artistic decline in the novels after 1848 - the very reverse is true, the later novels exhibiting greater control, structural unity, and a more



penetrating and radical social insight. A crucial element in the strength of the mature fiction is the appearance of aspects of what Lukács would call the perverse, modernist tradition, (i.e. the portrayal of society as a reified world, an alienating environment where identity is increasingly problematic, etc.). It must be emphasised, in opposition to Lukács, that this is a source of strength in the novels. In addition, this phenomenon occurs in Dickens's novels sooner than Lukács would have anticipated.

As a general theory Lukács's position is far too dogmatic, inflexible, and mechanical. However, his concept of the problematic hero searching for true/authentic values in a degraded world (developed in a much earlier phase of work, that stage of Lukács's thinking which made such an impression on Goldmann, especially The Theory of the Novel (1920)) can be applied quite usefully to the heroes of the later novels, Arthur Clennam, Pip, and John Harmon, while Lukács's concept of the post-1848 novelist as classless spectator is of particular relevance to this thesis.

We have said that Dickens was, in a sense, outside society. But the later novels make it clear that this is an impossible position. Jarndyce in Bleak House finds this out when fever, engendered in the slums of Tom-All-Alone's, penetrates his refuge from the system at St. Albans. To claim that Dickens was not a committed member of any class or group is not to say that he was not involved in society. "The act of writing and publishing serially for a particular public, and the experience of pleasing them, is for Dickens to enact his own involvement in English society."<sup>(1)</sup> This involvement is both social and economic.

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1 W. Myers, 'The Radicalism of Little Dorrit', in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century, (ed. John Lucas), p. 80.

Dickens fully recognised the social changes which had produced a democratic literary market, and he saw the novel genre as a response to these new market conditions. In a speech in Birmingham, in 1853, Dickens exclaimed, "Literature has turned happily from individual patrons, sometimes munificent, often sordid, always few, and has found there at once its highest purpose, its natural range of action, and its best reward ... From the shame of the purchased dedication, from the scurrilous and dirty work of Grub Street, from the dependent seat on sufferance at my Lord Duke's table today, and from the sponging-house and Marshalsea tomorrow ... from all such evils the people have set literature free. And my creed in the exercise of that profession is, that literature cannot be too faithful to the people in return - cannot too ardently advocate the cause of their advancement, happiness, and prosperity." Dickens's use of the term 'people' here is problematic. (His readers were mainly middle-class.) What is certain is that Dickens's sensitivity to the demands of this market was remarkable. Following Dickens's death, Trollope said this of him in St. Paul's Magazine (July, 1870) - "I remember another novelist saying to me of Dickens - my friend and his friend, Charles Lever - that Dickens knew exactly how to tap the ever newly growing mass of readers as it sprang up among the lower classes. He could measure the reading public - probably taking his measure of it unconsciously - and knew what the public wanted of him. Consequently the sale of his books has been hitherto so far from ephemeral - their circulation has been so different from that which is expected for ordinary novels - that it has resembled in its nature the sale of legs of mutton or of loaves of bread. The butcher or baker will know how many of this or that article he will 'do' in a summer or in a winter quarter, and so does the bookseller know how many 'Pickwicks' and how many 'Nicklebys' he will 'do'."

Dickens's relations to his literary market are particularly

interesting to the sociologist of literature. In his novels Dickens repudiated a social system in which mediated and quantitative relations of exchange value predominated. Yet as soon as his novels themselves were released they became market commodities, and involved the novelist in a web of mediated (money) relations towards both his creative work and his public. In his portrayal of Gowan, the artist, in Little Dorrit, Dickens ruthlessly criticises the view of art which sees it merely as a potentially remunerative stand in the market. Yet Dickens, himself, was acutely sensitive to circulation figures and was willing to alter his artistic intent to give his readers what they wanted and so increase sales figures. When initial reaction to Martin Chuzzlewit was disappointing Dickens hastily sent its hero to America to exploit the widespread public interest in the life of the New World. At other times he tentatively sounded likely public reaction before committing himself to an important development of characterisation. Regarding the prospective change in Walter Gay (who was to go bad on similar lines to the elder Carker), he wrote to Forster, "Do you think it can be done without making people angry?" Of course, the ending of Great Expectations was changed at Lytton's advice. Dickens himself (as he wrote to Forster) had "no doubt that the story will be more acceptable through the alteration". Dickens's editorial advice to a would-be contributor to his magazine reveals an important aspect of Dickens's attitude to his own fiction. "I particularly entreat you to consider the catastrophe. You write to be read, of course. The close of the study is unnecessarily painful - will throw off numbers of persons who would otherwise read it, and who (as it stands) will be deterred by hearsay from doing so, and is so tremendous a piece of severity, that it will defeat your purpose." When Dickens did include some tragic enormity in his own work it was usually cloaked in enough sentimentality to make it successful market fare. In Fiction, Fair and Foul (1880) Ruskin pertinently remarked that "Nell, in The Old Curiosity

Shop, was simply killed for the market as a butcher kills a lamb". Another editorial remark by Dickens, as late as 1858, is of particular relevance to this question. He cautioned Wills, a member of his staff, "I particularly wish you to look well to Wilkie's article ... and not to leave anything in it that may be sweeping, and unnecessarily offensive to the middle class. He always has a tendency to overdo that." Yet the novels he was writing at this very time revealed scant artistic sympathy for the middle class (though he did defer to their dictum not to 'offend the Young Person'). Once again we are directed towards Engels's argument for the 'triumph of realism' in Balzac's novels.

Dickens's relations with the literary market are also bound up in his serial form of publication, which by encouraging episodes to end on notes of sensation, melodrama, and suspense, greatly influenced Dickens's realistic method, accounting for the proliferation of theatrical scenes and exchanges which give to the early novels in particular the character of popular drama. Indeed, Dickens wished his relations to the reading public ('the people' of his earlier quote) to be similar to those between the great popular dramatists and their public. This desire to have his public at his feet influenced the nature of his realism. In a speech of 1858, he expressed the view that "Every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage." Though the organic unity of his later novels is greatly improved, elements of melodrama and sensationalism are still present, and Dickens still cannot resist the theatrical overtones of scenes such as Bucket's revelation of Tulkinghorn's murderer to Sir Leicester, or Boffin's admission to Bella that his miserly greed was only an act.

The nature of Dickens's expert recognition of the market conditions operating in the literary sector (the nature

of demand, etc.) encourages the critic to look for the external social function (rather than the internal artistic function within a total imaginative structure) of elements within the novels.

For example, consider the high degree of sentimentality, often accompanied by quasi-biblical language and construction, present throughout Dickens's fiction, though in the later novels there is some improvement in artistic control. In particular, consider the presence of sentimentality in relation to the novels' revelations of the miseries suffered by the urban poor. This social question had important political implications. However, a sentimental treatment of the theme can be seen as constituting a safe, non-political response, functional in meeting the readers' need to purge repressed feelings of guilt for the wretchedness of social conditions recognised but tolerated. In this argument tears are seen as an alternative to political involvement. The sobs of vicarious suffering preclude the need for political change. There is no doubt that Dickens felt strongly the emotions latent in his most sentimental scenes. And so did his readers. Yet the language used by Jeffrey in a letter to Dickens, describing his reaction to the death of Paul Dombey suggests an unconscious compensatory or purgative social motive. He wrote, "I have cried and sobbed over it last night, and again and again this morning, and felt my heart purged by those tears and blessed and loved you for making me shed them." A comment by Houghton is relevant here. To an attack of indifference towards social suffering "there was a ready answer. The heart was not closed up; why, it even burst into tears at the sight of suffering and death. But they were not tears of genuine pity. They were tears of purgation. And thus 'purified', one could return next day to business as usual."<sup>(1)</sup>

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1 W.E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, p. 278.

Yet at the same time as Dickens was conscientiously satisfying the demands (conscious and unconscious) of the reading public, he was making exalted claims for his own status as a literary artist. "Whoever is devoted to an Art must be content to deliver himself wholly up to it, and to find his recompense in it", Dickens claimed, and complained to Forster that the complex artistic effects of his later work did not receive the critical recognition and acknowledgement to which they were due. Indeed, Dickens's claims for the novel as art were somewhat in advance of general critical opinion. It wasn't until 1867 that the British Quarterly Review could assert that "a writer of fiction (i.e. the novel not poetry) who neglects his high vocation, and accepts only the low one of paid entertainer ... commits a crime against the age in which he lives, and gainst all future ages."

In large part the confusions and contradictions which characterise even Dickens's best novels are due to their dual nature as, on the one hand, artistically committed repudiations of industrial society which transcend Dickens's own middle-class social situation, and, on the other, carefully constructed products for a specific literary market, expertly aimed at the Victorian middle classes.

Part Two

THE MATURE NOVELS

## CHAPTER 1

BLEAK HOUSE, AND THE "SPRINGING OF A MINE"

When Lady Dedlock, the most famous beauty in the exclusive fashionable world, dies dressed in the clothes of a brickmaker's wife, lying on the steps of a pauper's burial ground in one of the most depressed and squalid areas of London we are directed to the very core of the novel's meaning. The first point to note about Bleak House is the almost obsessive manner in which through plot, theme, and symbol the novel asserts the necessary connection between different, apparently self-contained social groups, and demonstrates that society is a system of organically related and interconnected parts. The novel shatters the cosy fiction of a complacent bourgeois world that the respectable members of society can have no connection at all with the wretched, ragged inhabitants of an urban slum, such as Tom-all-Alone's. We are all in this together. All member and groups in society are necessarily connected as part of one total system. This is one of the key themes of Bleak House.

The systematic nature of society is emphasised in different ways. One is by means of the plot itself. Just about every character in the novel is linked in various ways with almost every other character. The role played in the novel by coincidence and surprising connections is directly advertised, as in the scene where Sir Leicester Dedlock visits John Jarndyce, and in the process meets Esther, the illegitimate daughter of Lady Dedlock. Jarndyce himself remarks, "Why, Esther, ... our visitor and you are the two last persons on earth I should have thought of connecting



together." (p. 661)<sup>(1)</sup>. Indeed, these attempts to drive home the point are often artistically heavy-handed and clumsy - as when Dickens intrudes into the narrative in Chapter 16 this loaded question. "What connexion 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 that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion 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!" (p. 272).

In view of the emphasis, sometimes superfluous, with which Dickens underlines his theme it is surprising that some critics have seen the Lady Dedlock sub-plot merely as a melodramatic appendage to the novel. In fact it has the same function as, for example, the disease metaphor in emphasising the collective nature of social experience. Lady Dedlock's death, heavy in social irony, illustrates most dramatically her function in the novel. She brings together in significant association Chesney Wold and the whole exclusive world of fashion, and the brickmaker's cottage and the paupers' burial ground near Tom-all-Alone's. After Lady Dedlock, Jo the crossing sweeper probably has the most important symbolic function, wandering unthinkingly into the lives of members of all social classes, a point underlined when Jarndyce and Woodcourt reflect at Jo's death-bed "how strangely Fate has entangled this rough out-cast in the web of very different lives" (p. 703).

The different social worlds of the novel are also put

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1 All page references to the novel are to the Penguin edition (Harmondsworth 1971), edited by Norman Page, with an introduction by J. Hillis Miller.

into significant association by a whole series of verbal echoes and repetitions. Many examples could be given. A less obvious one occurs in the description of the slum, Tom-all-Alone's. The main thoroughfare through Tom's is "deep in black mud and corrupt water". The mud is a verbal echo of Chancery, coated in mud in the opening chapter of the novel, while the corrupt water reminds us of the stagnant floodwater which covered Chesney Wold in Chapter Two. Thus the imagery helps us to associate Tom's with both Chancery and the aristocratic world. The connection is important. Tom's is a property in Chancery, while its continued existence is due to the inefficiency of a political system dominated by aristocratic influence.

However, the most memorable way in which the corporate nature of society is emphasised is through the great symbols of the novel - the fog of Chapter 1 (which engulfs all the inhabitants of London regardless of age or class in a collective misery), the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce (which involves, whether they like it or not, members from all social groups), and most imaginatively powerful of all, the metaphor of disease.

In Dombey and Son the concept of disease spreading from the slums "to blight the innocent and spread contagion among the pure" is introduced (Chapter 47) but the idea is not fully developed in a way which is integral to the meaning of the novel. Dickens talks of "the thick and sullen air" of the slums "where Vice and Fever propagate together, raining the tremendous social retributions which are ever pouring down, and ever coming thicker!" (Penguin, p. 738). However, we must wait until Bleak House for the metaphor to be given its most articulate and dramatically impressive formulation. In his treatment of the theme in Bleak House Dickens may well have drawn on a passage in Carlyle's Past and Present (1843). In the chapter 'Gospel of Mammonism'

Carlyle refers to a story told in William Alison's Observations on the Management of the Poor in Scotland (1840). A poor Irish widow after appealing unsuccessfully to various charitable establishments for help contracts typhus fever and dies, but not before infecting seventeen others who also died. Carlyle's comments are particularly relevant for Bleak House - "The forlorn Irish widow applies to her fellow creatures, as if saying, "Behold I am sinking, bare of help: ye must help me! I am your sister, bone of your bone; one God made us: ye must help me!" They answer, "no, impossible; thou art no sister of ours." But she proves her sisterhood; her typhus-fever kills them: they actually were her brothers, though denying it! ... Seventeen of you lying dead will not deny such proof that she was flesh of your flesh; and perhaps some of the living may lay it to heart."<sup>(1)</sup>.

However, if Carlyle was a literary source immediate inspiration came from the contemporaneity of the public health and sanitation issue, in which Dickens was directly involved in a practical journalistic fashion. Cholera had struck London in 1848/9, and was to return in 1854, a fact which makes Bleak House in a sense prophetic. The disease metaphor in Bleak House is an example of documentary material being utilised artistically. Its significance for the novel transcends its literal meaning, without ever rendering its realistic meaning redundant. In 1849, Dr. John Simon, in the first of his famous City Medical Reports, warned, "In all those larger parochial burial-grounds where the maintenance of a right to bury can be considered important - in all such, and in most others too, the soil is saturated and super-saturated with animal matter undergoing slow decomposition ... The atmosphere in which epidemic and

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1 Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present, Book III, Chapter II in Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings (ed. Alan Shelston), pp. 279-80.

infectious diseases most readily diffuse their poison and multiply their victims is one in which organic matters are undergoing decomposition ... and I may say with certainty, that there are many churchyards in the City of London where every spadeful of soil turned up in burial sensibly adds to the amount of animal decomposition which advances too often inevitably around us ... From the circumstances which I have mentioned, it can hardly fail to appear most desirable to you, that the use of some spacious and open cemetery at a distance from the City should be substituted for the present system of interment, and the urgency of this requirement will be demonstrated all the more cogently, when it is remembered that the annual amount of mortality in the City averages about 3,000, and that under the present arrangements every dead body buried within our walls receives its accommodation at the expense of the living, and to their great detriment."

Thus it is appropriate that in the novel the disease metaphor is introduced in the description of Nemo/Hawdon's burial in the paupers' graveyard. He is taken "to a hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed" (p. 202). Into this place "they lower our dear brother down a foot or two: here, sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many a sick bedside." (p. 202). These ideas are fully developed in the famous description of Tom-all-Alone's, the urban slum, in Chapter 46. "But he (i.e. Tom-all-Alone's) has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion some where. 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, not one 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." (p. 683).

Disease is no respecter of class and person. It makes a mockery of the claims of any group to be a self-contained unit in society. In Bleak House disease is the link between the Two Nations, and the plot works in parallel with the disease emblem to reinforce this theme. The fever (probably smallpox) carried by Jo from Tom-all-Alone's penetrates the 'safe' middle-class haven from social injustice set up by John Jarndyce at St. Albans and strikes at Charley and Esther Summerson, thus exposing the myth of a self-contained, private world within society. The analogy between disease and revolution strongly suggested at the end of the passage - both forms of plundering and spoiling would shatter the complacent world of respectable society - emphasises the importance, indeed the necessity, of recognising the systematic nature of society and the organic relation between the rich and poor, the respectable and disreputable. For revolution is the most extreme instance of the way in which one social group can affect the destinies of all the others within the system.

(ii)

The novel does not merely emphasise that society is a system. It offers a critical evaluation of the quality of life, of everyday social relations within the system. The key to this social vision is provided by the novel's portrayal of Chancery, not only at the heart of the fog of

Chapter 1 but at the core of the meaning of the novel. The Court of Chancery is the real organising crux of Bleak House. It is more important for the unity and coherence of the text than the much discussed symbol of the fog in Chapter 1 (which, whether the latter is read as suggestive of the confusion and muddle of Chancery, or is seen, in the manner of the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, as an emblem for the corrupt and contaminating environment of the whole system, has certainly received more than its due share of critical attention in recent years). Much of the suggestiveness of Dickens's later fiction is derived, as Edgar Johnson claims, from the fact that the characters are enclosed in a significant setting. Chancery is the setting which dominates Bleak House.

Of course, Chancery is a source of corruption and decay spreading outwards throughout the whole society. But the concern of the novel is not limited to a specific attack on the legal system but extends to a repudiation of a whole society. Chancery operates in the novel as the classic representative example of the universal social corruption. The novel "regards legal injustice not as accidental but as organically related to the very structure of that society."<sup>(1)</sup> In its representative function Chancery operates as a social microcosm. Yet though as the novel's representative social institution it represents "the essence of society viewed as a single entity",<sup>(2)</sup> we are never allowed to forget that it is also one system linked to other important, mutually reinforcing systems within a total structure.

Thus an examination of Chancery reveals not merely the failings of the legal system but what is the essential

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1 Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens, His Tragedy and Triumph, p. 762.

2 Grahame Smith, Dickens, Money and Society, p. 138.

condition of mid-Victorian English society as a whole. What are the representative characteristics of life in Chancery?

Of course, Chancery reflects the bewilderment, confusion, and impersonality of the greater world outside. But it reveals much more than this. Chancery is presented in the novel via two analogies which when extended to the system as a whole are of crucial importance in grasping the social vision contained in the novel. On the one hand, Chancery is seen as a cruelly indifferent and inhuman machine, an external thing grinding up the individuals it should serve. On the other hand it is seen as an independent business firm, dealing profitably in people as business assets. This latter perspective is developed in the novel in an extended analogy between society and a giant market-place.

We turn to the first of these analogies. Chancery is presented as operating as a force in itself, an alien thing indifferent to the individual suitors caught up in its mechanism. It is an alienating social world, external and hostile to the luckless individual with whom it comes in contact. It is the best example of Shaw's claim that in the later novels the social system is "a huge machinery which grinds to pieces the people it should nourish and ennoble". Indeed, Tom Jarndyce's involvement in Chancery is described by himself as "being ground to bits in a slow mill" (p. 102), and Jarndyce talks of "dead suitors, broken, heart and soul, upon the wheel of Chancery" (p. 547). In a novel full of parasites the mechanism of Chancery feeding off Chancery suitors is the ultimate symbol of parasitic life. Chancery's capacity to swallow up its clients is like the appetite of an insatiable monster, and is suggested by the shape of the bags containing Vholes's legal documents, "stuffed out of all regularity of form, as the larger form of serpents are in their first gorged state" (p. 605).

One of Esther's remarks about Vholes's relation to his client, Richard Carstone, is particularly significant. She felt "as if Richard were wasting away beneath the eyes of this adviser, and there were something of the vampire in him." (p. 876). The application of this remark is general. Krook the pseudo-Lord Chancellor stands over the dead body of Nemo, the law-writer, another Chancery victim, "with his lean hands spread out above the body like a vampire's wings" (p. 189). The mechanism of Chancery, vampire-like, sucks the life-blood and humanity from its suitors - not only Richard, but Gridley, who wastes away to death, and Miss Flite, who preserves her touching humanity at the cost of madness. In view of the characteristic fate of Chancery suitors it is appropriate that Chancery should be associated with the imagery of slow or violent death, and torture. Snagsby's shop, for example, is described as a "storehouse of awful implements of the great torture of the law" (p. 184).

Through the experience of Richard Carstone (and the destruction of Miss Flite's family) we see that the influence of Chancery expectations (almost a thing-like presence in the novel) can change and pervert character. As a study of social environment on individual psychology Carstone anticipates Miss Wade and Bradley Headstone, as well as Pip. Indeed Richard Carstone is Dickens's first victim of his own expectations. The only logic governing the behaviour of the Chancery system is the logic of the machine - impersonal and indifferent to the individual life. It would not be misplaced to compare this cruel indifference to the indifference of the world Meursault contemplates in Camus' novel L'Etranger.

Within the alienating Chancery system there is a crisis of individuality and identity. Most suitors are stripped of their individuality by a system which characteristically



treats them as instruments or objects of convenience. For the agents of the system too life has lapsed into mechanical functioning, a condition nicely caught in the opening chapter showing the court in action - "Eighteen of Mr. Tangle's learned friends, each armed with a little summary of eighteen hundred sheets, bob up like eighteen hammers in a pianoforte, make eighteen bows, and drop into their eighteen places of obscurity." (p. 54). The lawyers act like mechanical cogs within a greater machine.

Some desperately seek a frame of reference in the behaviour of others, and try to conform to a slavish model. Conversation Kenge "formed himself on the model of a great lord who was his client", and for Young Smallweed "to become a Guppy is the object of his ambition. He dresses at that gentleman (by whom he is patronised), talks at him, walks at him, founds himself entirely on him" (p. 327). Snagsby surrenders his identity to the will of his wife, while the name taken by Hawdon in his occupation as law-writer is appropriately Nemo (latin for no-one).

The other major analogy concerning Chancery is with an independent business firm. Though Chancery has a will of its own some profit economically from it. "The one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself. There is no other principle distinctly, certainly, and consistently maintained through all its narrow turnings. Viewed by this light it becomes a coherent scheme, and not the monstrous maze the laity are apt to think it." (pp 603/4). Chancery indeed maintains a coherent scheme of economic exploitation. It is as if the system is divided into two classes - the Chancery lawyers who exploit, and the majority who are exploited. Chancery suitors are regarded by the legal profession merely as business assets - remunerative commodities valued solely in quantitative terms of exchange value. A good example of this is provided by the letter

Kenge sends to Esther, communicating Jarndyce's plans for her. The legal language and abbreviations strip Esther of her humanity and reduce her to the level of an economic object or piece of merchandise. "We have arrngd for your being forded, carriage free, p eight o'clock coach from Reading, on Monday morning next, to White Horse Cellar, Piccadilly, London, where one of our clks will be in waiting to convey you to our offe as above." (p. 74).

The essential nature of everyday life in Chancery is reinforced by various means. Three in particular are worth discussion: the use of representative characters (for example, Tulkinghorn and Vholes); the imaginatively suggestive descriptions of Chancery houses and buildings (which reflect the moral/spiritual life of those living and working within); and the metaphor of the representative suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce (which is relevant for the quality of social relations throughout the whole social system).

Two characters more than any others are representative of the quality of life in Chancery - Tulkinghorn and Vholes. It could be argued that neither is fully credible as a real, rounded human being but this is to miss the point of Dickens's method of characterisation (see Part I, Chapter 2). Both Tulkinghorn and Vholes are real in the sense that they reveal essential truths about some area of social reality. For example, Tulkinghorn reflects both Chancery indifference and mechanism in his relationship with his aristocratic clients. He is "mechanically faithful without attachment", and is "indifferent to everthing but his calling" (p. 567). Like the system he represents his behaviour is essentially that of a destructive machine. Though the implications of his talk with Lady Dedlock in which he reveals to her that he knows her secret extend literally to matters of life and death, Tulkinghorn reduces the meeting to a business interview. Soon he "has by this time got his hands in his pockets and

is going on in his business consideration of the matter, like a machine" (p. 637). And this machine is destructive. Mr. George remarks that Tulkinghorn is "no more like flesh and blood, than a rusty old carbine is". After a life of treating his clients as economically remunerative instruments in his ego power game he has become spiritually paralysed himself - merely an impersonal, anti-social object. In the conversation with Lady Dedlock mentioned above he is described as a "dark, cold, object". Not surprisingly (in view of the appetite of the Chancery machine) Tulkinghorn operates as a symbol of death. He wears black clothes which never shine, habitually wears "a countenance as imperturbable as Death", and suffers the fate of a violent murder.

The other major representative figure of Chancery is Wholes. He is the quintessential Chancery lawyer - the ultimate symbol for the rapacious, parasitic nature of Chancery. Wholes is completely caught up in a web of social relations in which people are valued and regarded instrumentally as objects of convenience. His clients (e.g. Richard Carstone) are valued as sources of money to be mined until there is nothing more to be got out of them. He uses his family as instrumental objects to justify his business rigour. Because of the responsibilities of his private life to provide for his father and daughters, it is "indispensable that the mill should be always going". When we remember how the mill grinds up Chancery suitors we realise the truth of the comment, "So might an industrious fox, or bear, make up his accounts of chickens or stray travellers with an eye to his cubs" (p. 611). However, Wholes himself is reduced to an object of use by the legal profession. His respectability is a useful counter in the legal strategy to frustrate Chancery reform. If reform took place (so runs the argument) it would destroy the incomes of a valuable legal group, well represented by the

highly respectable Vholes. "Now you cannot afford - I will say the social system cannot afford - to lose an order of men like Mr. Vholes." (p. 604). And so "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" (p. 605). Thus the respectability granted Vholes is utilised to help maintain the legal status quo, a reminder of the truth of G.M. Young's remark that respectability "was at once a select status and a universal motive. Like Roman citizenship, it could be indefinitely extended, and every extension fortified the state."<sup>(1)</sup>

Throughout the novel Vholes is associated with birds and animals of prey. This pattern of imagery culminates in the detail that shortly before Richard's death Vholes gives "one gasp as if he had swallowed the last morsel of his client.". Vholes's relation to his clients is essentially a form of social cannibalism (Vholes is explicitly compared to a minor cannibal chief). Like Tulkinghorn, Vholes is given multiple associations with death. For example, (and many examples could be given), when he raps his office desk "it sounds as hollow as a coffin" and later it gives "a sound as if ashes were falling on ashes, and dust on dust" (p. 609). Vholes is a fitting symbol for the death in life attendant on total orientation to the philosophy of the office.

Vholes is one of Dickens's first victims of the bureaucratisation of official life. Max Weber has described the necessary separation of private and official life attendant on the bureaucratic process. This process, being the best fit with the needs of industrial society, was spreading to influence the working lives of an increasing number of the

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1 G.M. Young, Victorian England, Portrait of an Age, p. 25.

Victorian population. Not only was the office separated from the home and private property of the official but there was a strict separation of methods and procedure. In contrast to the private sphere, emotional commitment and personal loyalty were banned from the office, where the official files, inflexibly laying down rules and precedents, operate as the only criterion for action. Methods of procedure in the office are formally pre-determined and mechanical.

One of the latent dangers in this artificial separation is the possibility of the official becoming a split-man, leading two distinct lives each with its own values and frame of reference. (Vholes's distinction between his private and official lives is to lead eventually to Wemmick.) However, Vholes is less of a split-man than a partial man, for whom a spiritual paralysis resulting from habitual reference to the impersonal rules of the office has spread over into the private sphere. Vholes is in effect a mechanical man in both private and official life - a "speaking machine" as Jarvis Lorry refers to himself in A Tale of Two Cities. But though the bureaucratic code of the office can have as dehumanising an effect on the individual as the market ethos of the Smallweeds which reduces all social relations to a form of speculation - the motives for adherence to the office mentality need not be mercenary or selfish. Force of habit or even a sense of duty may be involved. It was force of habit that led Morfin in Dombey and Son "to let everything about me to go on, day by day, unquestioned, like a great machine" (Penguin p. 840) and not offer any assistance to John Carker or warn Dombey about the danger from the younger Carker, his manager. It was a sense of duty to Tellson's bank that led Jarvis Lorry in A Tale of Two Cities to labour by the same impersonal code all his life until the time comes when he admits "In short, I have no feelings; I am a mere machine." (Penguin p. 54).

Whatever the motive, the effects of orientating oneself to the bureaucratic office mentality can be grave - a lapse into mechanical functioning for at least part of one's life, and possibly a severe crisis of identity.

Neither Tulkinghorn nor Vholes experiences such a crisis for in each case the office mentality has taken over and dominated the man<sup>(1)</sup>. In their adherence to the official code both men reflect a general condition within Chancery. Remember Esther describes Chancery as "that dry official place". The only face of Tulkinghorn seen by his aristocratic clients is his official mask, and in his official role Tulkinghorn represses all signs of individuality. "It is part of Mr. Tulkinghorn's policy and mastery to have no political opinions; indeed no opinions." (p. 627). The official self seems to completely dominate the man. "He never converses, when not professionally consulted." (p. 59). Though Vholes strategically distinguishes between the two spheres, in a real sense he has no private life. One of the marks of his respectability is that "he never takes any pleasure". During the Chancery vacation he remains at work in his office - his spiritual home. He describes it to Esther as a "dull place, Miss Summerson, for a life that is not an official one" (p. 875).

In addition to the use of representative characters the description of Chancery buildings suggests the essence of

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1 In fact Mr. Bucket has greater claims to being considered a split-man than either Vholes or Tulkinghorn for unlike them there is an extreme opposition between his private affability and companionship and the impersonal scientific methods of procedure he rigorously follows in his official role as police detective. (A role which, because he is an agent of a corrupt system, involves him in such acts as harrassing destitute children such as Jo.)

the moral and spiritual life within Chancery, and the system as a whole. Throughout the novel the description of Chancery buildings emphasize their rot and decay. For example, of Symonds Inn where Vhole's office stands, we are told - "It looks as if Symond were a sparing man in his way, and constructed his inn of old building materials, which took kindly to the dry rot and to dirt and to all things decaying and dismal, and perpetuated Symond's memory with congenial shabbiness." (p. 603).

Probably the most significant building in the Chancery part of the novel is owned by Krook, the pseudo Lord Chancellor, and which houses his rag and bone shop, his rapacious cat, Lady Jane (who permanently lusts after Miss Flite's caged birds and even had designs on the body of the newly dead lodger, Nemo/Hawdon), as well as the garret lodgings of Miss Flite and Nemo (one a victim of the legal system; the other trying to eke out a precarious living through it). The analogy between Chancery and Krook's ("a deadly caricature of Chancery"<sup>(1)</sup>) is clearly signposted. The neighbours refer to Krook as the Lord Chancellor and to his shop as Chancery. Krook himself accepts it, ("There's no great odds betwixt us, we both grub on in a muddle" (p. 101)), and explains the reasons for his nickname, offering Dickens the chance of underlining (by analogy) the main points in his legal satire. Krook reflects Chancery by his muddled organisation and hoarding of goods that decay and waste away ("I have so many things here ... wasting away and going to rack and ruin" (p. 101)), and by his refusal to embrace any degree of change or reform ("and I can't bear ... to alter anything, or to have any sweeping, nor scouring, nor cleaning, nor repairing going on about me" (p. 101)). The emblematic function of Krook's must be remembered when later discussing its owner's death

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1 P. Hobsbaum, A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens, p. 153.

by spontaneous combustion - an incident of crucial importance to the social themes of the novel.

Finally, we must emphasise the importance of the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Not only is this the quintessential Chancery case, but because Chancery itself is a microcosm of the whole system the suit (as Leavis points out) is a metaphor for the general quality of life in industrial society. To live within the boundaries of the suit is analogous to living within a social environment which, with the important exception of John Jarndyce, is presented as being almost universally corrupting. "No man's nature has been made the better by it" (p. 53), and we are told "If two angels could be concerned in it, I believe it would change their nature" (p. 547). Being a party to the suit also means involvement in a competitive, free-for-all struggle for its spoils - an appropriate emblem for an individualistic, laissez-faire society. Ada tells Richard "I am only grieved that I should be the enemy - as I suppose I am - of a great number of relations and others; and that they should be my enemies - as I suppose they are; and that we should all be ruining one another, without knowing how or why, and be in constant doubt and discord all our lives." (p. 108). And there is no way of divorcing oneself from this individualistic competition. As John Jarndyce says of the suit, "We can't get out of the suit on any terms, for we are made parties to it, and must be parties to it, whether we like it or not." (p. 146). No man can deny his participation in society. The individuals born into the suit must accept their necessary involvement in something they cannot control. This is the general condition within mid-Victorian England. Richard's joke to Ada, "We are never to get out of Chancery" (p. 97), when their walk returns them to their haunts of the previous day, is truer than he thinks. Even if their suit is resolved they will not be free of the inhuman and mechanistic spirit



characteristic of Chancery, for the whole society is morally caught up in the Chancery fog of Chapter One.

(iii)

We will now return to the concept of Chancery as an independent business firm. The metaphor is extended to embrace a whole society where everyday social relations (including friendship and marriage) are increasingly being degraded into a form of economic speculation. This analogy between society and a market-place is of crucial importance in the novel's attempt to understand the workings of mid-Victorian capitalism and is probably the most important imaginative focus in the later novels. We can see best what is implied in what we have called the 'money/business ethos' as a governing frame of reference for everyday relations by examining the role of the Smallweeds.

Old Small weed has been completely dehumanised by his obsessive commitment to the money/business ethos. He was socialised into accepting this frame of reference by his own father, of whom we are told, "the name of this old pagan's God was Compound Interest. He lived for it, married it, died for it." (p. 342). The effects of this have been to rob Old Smallweed of all recognisable human traits. After a life's career of treating people as economic objects he has become little more than an inanimate object himself - "a mere clothes-bag with a black skull-cap on the top of it" or a "bundle of clothes". Smallweed's wife shares his values with equal obsession, and has become literally as well as metaphorically a talking machine. Not only physically paralysed, she is also mentally brainwashed to the extent that whenever a number or figure is mentioned in her presence she mechanically associates it with money or some other form of capital, repeating the result out loud like a deranged puppet.

The market ethos which reduces morality to economic rationale can dehumanise even children. In a passage which anticipates the theme of childhood and fancy in Hard Times we are told that the Smallweed grandchildren were prematurely acquainted with a harsh economic frame of reference, without ever knowing a childhood of fables and innocent play. The result was a dehumanising imaginative imprisonment. The Smallweed children traditionally bear a likeness to "old monkeys with something depressing on their minds" (p. 342), and young Judy appeared, in the company of other children "like an animal of another species" (p. 344). Not merely in relation to childhood does the market mentality repudiate all forms of imaginative life as economically irrational. Asked if he ever reads, Smallweed replies, "No, no, no. We have never been readers in our family. It don't pay. Stuff. Idleness. Folly. No, no!" (p. 351).

Of course, regarding people as economic objects is obviously incompatible with friendship in the true sense where people are valued qualitatively for their own intrinsic merit. The Smallweed view of friendship degrades it into an economic investment. On hearing that young Bart Smallweed has been dining at Guppy's expense, Grandfather Smallweed exclaims, "That's right. Live at his expense as much as you can, and take warning by his foolish example. That's the use of such a friend. The only use you can put him to." (pp. 345-6).

The family dissolves as a cohesive, mutually sustaining unit in the face of such a mentality. The Smallweeds' home reflects not community but the principles of individualistic competition. Bucket asserts, "Lord! there ain't one of the family that wouldn't sell the other for a pound or two, except the old lady - and she's only out of it because she's too weak in her mind to drive a bargain." (p. 897). Commitment to such a philosophy makes for spiritual death, and

appropriately the Smallweeds live confined in "a little, narrow street, always solitary, shady, and sad, closely bricked in on all sides like a tomb" (p. 341).

But it is emphasised again and again in the novel that the money/business ethos (and quantitative relations of exchange value in general) infiltrates and undermines relations in all spheres of society, not merely the business sphere, represented by the money-lender Smallweed.

For example, it governs the behaviour of the philanthropists. Mrs. Jellyby, described by Esther as being "full of business", treats her daughter, Caddy, as a clerk or employee, and makes her home into an office. Mrs. Pardiggle, too, boasts of her businesslike approach to charity, which is reflected in her visit to the brickmaker's house. Esther criticises the impression she makes ("her voice had not a friendly sound, I thought; it was much too businesslike and systematic") and adds pertinently, "I hope it is not unkind in me to say that she certainly did make, in this, as in everything else, a show that was not conciliatory, of doing charity by wholesale, and of dealing in it to a large extent." (p. 159). Indeed, the values implicit in her charity work are those of the market-place, for Jarndyce admits that too often "charity was assumed, as a regular uniform, by loud professors and speculators in cheap notoriety" (p. 256). The philanthropists view charity as little more than a market speculation, an attempt to gain through the socially viable image of public benefactor a cheaply bought fame and status.

This is true also within the religious sphere where Chadband, too, is a speculator in cheap notoriety. Gissing commented shrewdly on this. "Mr. Chadband is a tradesman, dealing in a species of exhortation which his readers have agreed to call spirit, and to rate at a certain value in coin of the realm; religion in its true sense never comes

into question." (Charles Dickens, 1898). In an anticipation of Mrs. Clennam, Chadband's religion is characterised by a form of moral/spiritual bookkeeping - a profit and loss account of the balance between his good deeds and sins. Thus a form of business organisation characteristic of capitalism (Weber saw profit and loss bookkeeping as one of the preconditions of capitalism) is thus applied by Chadband to the regulation of his spiritual life. For example, when Jo yawns during his moral lecture, Chadband proclaims, "I stumbled, on Sabbath last, when I thought with pride of my three hours improving. The account is now favourably balanced: my creditor has accepted a composition." (p. 325). Dickens comments, "It is Mr. Chadband's habit - it is the head and front of his pretensions indeed - to keep this sort of debtor and creditor account in the smallest items, and to post it publicly on the most trivial occasions." (p. 318).

Market-place activity characterises the political world too. Sir Leicester deals in parliamentary seats like a political merchant. 'In fact, as to this question of opposition, the fair Dedlock's observation was superfluous; Sir Leicester, on these occasions, always delivering in his own candidateship, as a kind of handsome retail order to be promptly executed. Two other little seats that belong to him, he treats as retail orders of less importance; merely sending down the men, and signifying to the tradespeople, "you will have the goodness to make these materials into two members of parliament, and to send them home when done."' (pp. 623-4).

Within the system in general people are regarded as marketable objects. For example, Guster is sold by her workhouse as a tarnished, imperfect good. She "goes cheap with this unaccountable drawback of fits" (p. 180). More often in the novel individuals, in order to make an economic/status gain, invest in a society valued image or surface,

in the process exhibiting a calculated market orientation.

The theme (which is to be developed in Little Dorrit) is stated in a general way in the opening paragraph of Chapter 26. In the neighbourhood of Leicester Square a whole colony associated with the criminal world (it contains "more crime than is in Newgate") strategically aspires to social recognition as 'gentlemen' so that access can be gained to potentially profitable social situations (ranging from the gaming table to the stock market), and invest in a false but socially approved surface to that end. (Life is led under "false names, false hair, false titles, false jewellery, and false histories" (p. 418). This is a direct anticipation of Rigaud and Merdle.

The chief individual examples of this process in the novel are Skimpole and Turveydrop. To enable himself to lead a parasitic life Skimpole cultivates an image which he uses strategically as a social investment - the romantic concept of the 'child' or 'innocent', which he presents in opposition to "the world, an agglomeration of practical people of business habits" (p. 120). In fact his guileless, open admissions of his inability to manage his own affairs, and his consequent disavowal of responsibility for the effects of his actions constitute a practical and very businesslike strategy to enable Skimpole to live comfortably at other people's expense. Bucket comments on this market-orientated 'simplicity': "Whenever a person proclaims to you 'in worldly matters I'm a child' you consider that that person is only a-crying off from being held accountable, and that you have got that person's number, and it's Number One." (p. 832).

Turveydrop, too, successfully sells to his family an image as a "model of Deportment", succeeding, like many others who parasitically prey on society, in assuming the

role of benefactor. (He is regarded as "the benefactor of Caddy's life" (p. 740).) This boasting self-assertion of a dual image gains him economic security at his family's expense.

The extension of rights of property throughout society, possession of things increasingly being extended to possession of people, is another way in which the market mentality characterises the general quality of life within the system. Property is one of the great social gods of mid-Victorian society, (later to be crystallised in the image of Podsnap's plate), and the desire to pursue it and protect it is one of the chief motivating forces within the system.

Grandfather Smallweed rushes to take possession of Krook's papers and belongings obsessively repeating "like an echo, 'the - the property! The property! - property!'" (p. 522). The politicians and theorists appropriate Tom-all-Alone's and the misery of the urban poor as subject for endless debate. The Chancery lawyers make their own (constantly accumulating) property out of the cases and miseries of their clients. Vholes appropriates vampire-fashion Richard Carstone's physical body (as well as his money). Tulkinghorn jealously guards his exclusive rights of property over aristocratic family secrets. Sir Leicester views seats in parliament as his own private property. The philanthropists make objects of property out of the recipients of their charity - Esther remarks that "we both thought that Mrs. Pardiggle would have got an infinitely better, if she had not had such a mechanical way of taking possession of people." (p. 159). Chadband exercises a right of property over those like the helpless Jo who listen to his sermons. As Bucket proceeds towards the end of his revelations about Tulkinghorn's murder in front of Sir Leicester, "he seems imperceptibly to establish a dreadful right of property in Mademoiselle." (p. 797).

Indeed the whole treatment of the metaphor of society as a giant market place in which everyday social relations increasingly take on a mediated quantitative value asserts the primary importance of the relations and values of the economic sphere in determining the general quality of social life. The moral nature of general social relations within England in the 1850's is seen chiefly as a product of the economic environment of mid-Victorian capitalism. Bleak House is an important literary contribution to the understanding of industrial society.

(iv)

Bleak House is a novel in which few characters make any real or meaningful contact with each other. Two classic cases of non-communication are Chadband's sermon to Jo, and Mrs. Pardiggle's visit to the brickmaker's. The latter reflects not just isolation and separation between individuals but also the lack of communication between classes. Esther reflects, "We both felt painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier which could not be removed by our new friend. (i.e. Mrs. Pardiggle). By whom or how it could be removed, we did not know, but we knew that." (p. 159). Bleak House reflects the class extremes of mid-Victorian society. Within the novel Dickens explores his own version of the Two Nations theme. Ironically this happens at a time when most writers were shrinking from portraying the social extremes of high and low life which had dominated the literature of the '40s. (See W.L. Burn, The Age of Equipoise, p. 81.) In this section the novel's portrayal of the aristocratic world will be considered.

Such is the consistency of Dickens's social vision in the novel that within the aristocratic world of fashionable society behaviour is just as mechanical and automated as it is in Chancery. Within it we find a clockwork observation

of a cultivated surface, a life of inflexible forms and conventional gestures which work to stifle spontaneity and individuality. The fashionable world is an alienating world peopled by dandified objects in emotional and spiritual isolation from each other.

Sir Leicester, of course, is the representative character of this world - "a magnificent refrigerator" - his emotions and imagination are both frozen. (We are told that the quality of his imaginative life is on a par with that of the animals on his estate.) His opinions and views are so predictable as to reduce his mental life to the level of automatic response. (Thus in essence he is a frozen machine.) He views and interprets all situations in life through the same class-bound filter, what we would call his creed of Wat Tylerism.

The best example of this occurs in his first conversation with Mr. Rouncewell, the ironmaster, a meeting which involves a clash of ideologies between representative figures of the old and new sources of social/political power. It was argued in Part I, Chapter 3 that the presentation of this class opposition ignores many of the complexities of the mid-Victorian class situation, as well as simplifying the vexed question of who actually held the political power.

Although both characters are presented critically and the moral issues are not seen in black and white terms (e.g. Sir Leicester hospitably offers Rouncewell a bed for the night, and at times Rouncewell's tone betrays a self-satisfaction and glibness) yet over the piece there is no doubt that Rouncewell is presented more sympathetically. Where Sir Leicester particularly loses our sympathy is in his mechanical response to moderate, self-controlled statements by Rouncewell. For example, this is his reaction to



the remark that the local village school (supported by the Dedlocks) might not teach everything that Rouncewell would desire his daughter-in-law to know. "From the village school of Chesney Wold, intact as it is this minute, to the whole framework of society; from the whole framework of society, to the aforesaid framework receiving tremendous cracks in consequence of people (ironmasters, lead mistresses, and what not) not minding their catechism, and getting out of the station unto which they are called - necessarily and forever, according to Sir Leicester's rapid logic, the first situation in which they happen to find themselves; and from that, to their educating other people out of their stations, and so obliterating the landmarks, and opening the floodgates, and all the rest of it; this is the swift progress of the Dedlock mind." (pp. 453-4).

The imaginative paralysis which produces this sort of automatic response strips Sir Leicester of the dignity he is given elsewhere in the scene. Though Sir Leicester is presented in the novel in a more ambiguous way than the aristocratic caricatures of earlier novels (e.g. Sir Leicester is "an honourable, obstinate, truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man" (p. 57)) and although he shares (for example, when he pauses before the mausoleum) in the sentimental handout of the required happy ending, the dominant attitude towards him in the novel is critical and satiric.

There is a terrible irony in Sir Leicester's physical shock and paralysis on hearing from Bucket of his wife's secret past. The shock reduces him on a physical level to the condition of paralysis that was his imaginative and mental condition before. His actions are now literally mechanical - to Bucket's suggestions "Sir Leicester mechanically bows his head" (p. 788). Significantly, when he forgives Lady Dedlock, unexpectedly and for the first

time thinking without his class-bound mental straitjacket, he also breaks out and partially recovers from his physical paralysis. A comparison with Mrs. Clennam in Little Dorrit is relevant here. Mechanical imagery is a crucial element in the social vision of the later novels - we will consider this more closely in Little Dorrit where it is even more important.

Lady Dedlock is used to reinforce this picture of the essence of aristocratic society. It is a deadened, unhealthy world and significantly the imagery used of the Chesney Wold scenes is of stagnation, death, and decay. Lady Dedlock's marriage to Sir Leicester was no more than an investment, a decision, motivated by ambition and pride, to marry for comfort and convenience. The cost of her contract (the same bargain Edith Granger made in selling herself to Dombey) is a spiritually sterile confinement behind a mask of proud indifference. This indifference, an emotional paralysis regarded as a mark of good breeding, is seen throughout Dickens's novels (from Harthouse to Wrayburn) as one of the chief aristocratic vices. In this criticism Dickens is positively utilising the middle-class value of earnestness.

Not only is the aristocratic world an imprisoning world of empty and mechanical social gestures but it is presented in the novel as a world which has outlived its social utility and justification. Bleak House (unlike other of the later novels) does not look forward to the fusion of aristocracy and bourgeoisie through strategic marriage alliances which enabled the aristocracy to play an important role in the development of the new industrial society. In Bleak House instead, the emphasis is on the ineluctable erosion of the traditional aristocratic powers and privileges. The flood-gates of society which (according to Sir Leicester) will obliterate landmarks and uproot distinctions have already opened. When we first see Chesney Wold the landscape is

obliterated under floodwater. In the street where the Dedlock town house is situated "extinguishers for obsolete flambeaux gasp at the upstart gas" and "even oil itself, yet lingering at long intervals in a little absurd glass pot ... blinks and sulks at newer lights every night, like its high and dry master in the House of Lords." (p. 709). The metaphor for the social/political situation of an obsolete and anachronistic aristocracy is obvious - but historically misleading. The treatment of the complex relation between the aristocracy and the middle class in Bleak House is (as we have seen) crude and simplistic.

Not only can Dickens be criticised here for historically inaccurate reflection but critics have also attacked the political satire which overlaps with his repudiation of aristocratic life. G.M. Young claims dismissively, "The political satire of Dickens is tedious and ignorant."<sup>(1)</sup> In fact, this criticism is too stringent. Dickens's political satire must be read against the political background of the 1850s and '60s. Though during this period there was progressive economic prosperity there was in the political sphere almost constant uncertainty and fragmentation, and ministerial instability and crisis. Young, himself, admits that mid-Victorian parliamentary politics "as the years went on, seemed to be generating more and more into an unseemly scuffle between Ins and Outs."<sup>(2)</sup> This is reflected in Bleak House by the quarrels and manoeuvres between the Coodle/Doodle and Buffy/Cuffy factions. This is one of the chief points made in the political satire.

Another related point is the monopoly of political life by the aristocracy who treat it as a hereditary plaything or hobby. "A People there are, no doubt - a certain large

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1 & 2 G.M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age, p. 29.

number of supernumeraries, who are to be occasionally addressed, and relied upon for shouts and choruses, as on the theatrical stage; but Boodle and Buffy, their followers and families, their heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns, are the born first-actors, managers, and leaders, and no others can appear upon the scene for ever and ever." (p. 212). This was a common (and by no means misinformed) criticism of the time. In 1851, the year before Bleak House was started, this appeared in The Times - "It is an insult to a free people and a constitutional State to allege that the faculty of government is confined among us just to a score of two of hands. What becomes of all our institutions of self-government ... if, with all this apparatus of political training, the sacred gift of government, is after all, an heirloom in two or three families."

The other chief point in the novel's political satire is the corruption involved in the election process. This too is a valid point. Dickens's political insights may not be particularly original or penetrating but they are usually valid comments well supported by contemporary evidence. Of the extent of corruption countenanced by the aristocracy Dickens leaves us in no doubt. "Doodle has found that he must throw himself upon the country - chiefly in the form of sovereigns and beer." (p. 619). When Sir Leicester admits that the party has paid out hundreds of thousands of pounds in "necessary expenses" Dickens adds the postscript, "it is whispered abroad that the necessary expenses will, in some two hundred election petitions, be unpleasantly connected with the word bribery." (p. 625).

Sir Leicester's dominant attitude to the people is one of non-comprehending apprehension. To him they make up a collective manifestation of the Wat Tyler philosophy, or form a collective object called "mob". To an examination

of this collective object - the other side of the Two Nations division - we now turn.

(v)

The representative member of the urban poor is Jo, presented as a pathetic zombie, a thing "of no order and no place; neither of the beasts, nor of humanity." (p. 696). Usually he is compared to an animal - but with the significant addition that he comes out of the comparison unfavourably. Listening to a musical band Jo receives much the same satisfaction as a drover's dog but "otherwise, how far above the human listener is the brute!" (p. 275). When he sickens, Jo is "more difficult to dispose of than an unowned dog." (p. 691).

This comparison with an unintelligible animal is extended to cover the whole class of urban poor, and has clear conservative political implications. Consider this passage. "Jo, and the other lower animals, get on in the unintelligible mess as they can. It is market day. The blinded oxen, over-goaded, over-driven, never guided, run into wrong places and are beaten out; and plunge, red-eyed, and foaming, at stone walls; and often sorely hurt the innocent, and often sorely hurt themselves. Very like Jo and his order; very, very like!" (p. 275). The urban poor have wrongs ("over-goaded, over-driven, never guided") but blinded by lack of education their own attempts at social improvement are liable to be disastrous, hurting both the working class themselves, and the 'innocent' middle class. The solution to their problems lies in responsible paternalistic government imposed from above.

The same political implication is present in the other metaphor applied to Dickens's workers in the novel - they are immature children, innocents abroad in a materialistic

world. Dickens's good working-class characters generally conform to this pattern of kind hearts but weak heads (See Part I, Chapter 3). Mr. Bagnet is typical - kind and loyal, but virtually a simpleton, on an intellectual par with a helpless child. George Rouncewell exhibits "a certain massive simplicity, and absence of usage in the ways of the world" (p. 906). When George and Bagnet set off to visit Smallweed we are told "two more simple and unaccustomed children, in all the Smallweedy affairs of life" could hardly be imagined, (p. 534). Of course, this is not a moral criticism but children are socially vulnerable and need protection. The implication is that the working class could not be expected to handle political power responsibly if they were given it. Like Matt Bagnet they would need to be looked after.

This, in addition to a tendency to strip his working-class characters of dignity by reducing them to figures of fun, implies a basic condescending and patronising novelistic attitude towards the working class, which contrasts ironically with Dickens's praise of Woodcourt's ability to communicate with the poor (and break down the barrier so apparent during Mrs. Pardiggle's visit to the brick-maker's house), by means of "avoiding patronage and condescension, or childishness (which is the favourite device, many people deeming it quite a subtlety to talk to them like spelling books)." (p. 684).

Returning to Jo, his alienation is not due to the effects of the industrial division of labour (we do not see the urban working class in a factory situation) but to extreme poverty and lack of education. He wanders through life an isolated observer of incidents he does not understand. He habitually "don't know nuthink". But if we do not have a factory situation in the novel then we do have Tom-all-Alone's, a representative example of urban slum conditions.

Just how representative is Tom's? It is probably too extreme to be a realistic reflection of the conditions in which the majority of the urban working class lived. But it does reflect conditions in which a very sizeable minority lived and into which those hitherto more fortunate might fall. Taine remarked of England "more effort is required here than elsewhere for a man to keep himself afloat; at the slightest weakening he sinks to the bottom, and that bottom is peculiarly horrible."<sup>(1)</sup> Geoffrey Best has argued that "there can well have been, through the fifties and sixties, at least as much rather painful poverty as Booth and Rowntree proved to exist in the nineties: i.e. affecting about 30 per cent of the population."<sup>(2)</sup>

So horrible was the bottom that Taine talks about that the danger is not that Tom's is too extreme a representation but that it does not go far enough. We have seen (Part I, Chapter 1) that Dickens does not give as much of the unpleasant detail as he might have. Whether this was through delicacy and a desire not to offend his readers, or through a legitimate artistic tact it remains true that Tom's works successfully in the novel as a moral type of an urban slum. The horror of conditions in Tom's is communicated to the reader by the shock and amazement experienced by Snagsby, a London dweller all his life, on viewing life in Tom's for the first time - "he, who had lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses." (p. 364). Snagsby's shock also reflects an important social fact about the development of slum ghettos in the industrial cities and the lack of social interaction in the same. In E. Chadwick's Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of

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1 Taine's Notes on England, translated with an introduction by E. Hyams, (London, 1917), p. 241.

2 G. Best, Mid-Victorian Britain, p. 144.

Great Britain (1842) we are told that "The statements of the condition of considerable proportions of the labouring population ... have been received with surprise by persons of the wealthier classes living in the immediate vicinity, to whom the facts were as strange as if related to foreigners or the natives of an unknown country." Thus Snagsby's horror is socially revealing and historically valid as well as artistically necessary.

But Tom's is not just a realistic reflection of the urban slum problem. It also has a generalising suggestiveness. Life in Tom's is a logical extreme of the dehumanisation which the novel describes as taking place throughout the system. Thus Tom's can be read as a frightening model for a future social condition to set against the idealistic social alternative represented by the new Bleak House, home of Woodcourt and Esther.

Who is responsible for Tom's? The question is dealt with in some detail. The original responsibility lies with Chancery - "This desirable property is in Chancery, of course. It would be an insult to the discernment of any man with half an eye, to tell him so." (p. 273). Tom's is born of Chancery corruption. That is - because of Chancery's representative function - it is in the corrupt nature of the whole system of industrial society that the genesis of the urban slum problem lies. The development of Victorian capitalism has inevitably produced bastard children of industrialisation like Tom's. However, within the system there are various agencies with the potential power to relieve the extent of the hardship suffered by the urban poor, which fail to do so. In an important passage in Chapter 46 Charles Dickens explicitly points the finger of blame - at the political system, the public institutions for social welfare, the utilitarian political economists ("force of figures"), the aesthetic world of culture, and



all the religious denominations. Dickens concludes, "in the midst of which dust and noise, there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will, be reclaimed according to somebody's but nobody's practice. And in the hopeful meantime, Tom goes to perdition head foremost in his old determined spirit." (p. 683).

The crucial point is that all these agencies for change concern themselves with the problem on the level of theory. In effect these groups and institutions are appropriating the evil and misery of Tom's to serve time as fuel for the arguments and debates, and inner conflicts within each respective area. Utilising the metaphor of two alternative punishments to remedy a criminal the novel suggests an alternative course. (To set Tom right the question is "whether he shall be set to splitting trusses of polemical straws with the crooked knife of his mind, or whether he shall be put to stone-breaking instead." (p. 683).) To polemical straw-splitting is opposed stone-breaking, with implications of direct action and vigorous practical reform - perhaps even suggested by the term is the actual physical demolition of the urban slums, the necessary destruction which must precede moral rebirth. The moral corruption attendant on slum dwelling was a chief concern of contemporaries. In presenting moral life in Tom's as a direct product of the physical environment, complete restructuring of which is a necessary pre-condition for Tom's reclaiming, Dickens is expressing a belief about environment which both develops the insight of Dombey and Son - "calling up some ghastly child, with stunted form and wicked face, hold forth on its unnatural sinfulness, and lament its being, so early, far away from Heaven - but think a little of its having been conceived, and born and bred, in Hell! ... where we generate disease to strike our children down and entail itself on unborn generations, there also we breed, by the

same certain process, infancy that knows no innocence, youth without modesty or shame, maturity that is mature in nothing but in suffering and guilt, blasted old age that is a scandal on the form we bear" (Penguin, pp. 737-8) - and anticipates the scientific observations of Dr. John Simon in 1865 - "For where 'overcrowding' exists in its sanitary sense, almost always it exists even more perniciously in certain moral senses. In its higher degrees it almost necessarily involves much negation of all delicacy, such unclean confusion of bodies and bodily functions, such mutual exposure of animal and sexual nakedness, as is rather bestial than human. To be subject to these influences is a degradation which must become deeper and deeper for those on whom it continues to work. To children who are born under its curse it must often be a very baptism into infamy." (Privy Council Medical Reports, No. 8). The moral of Tom's as a test-case for social change would appear to be that a social problem demands a social answer - and that this answer must be in the form of direct systematic change. However, elsewhere in the novel in the Jarndyce theme, the social problems of the system are given a moral solution (a general moral change of heart).

Within the novel there is certainly a confusion in the treatment of the particular problem of urban poverty. On the one hand, the practical problem of Tom's can only be solved by direct political/administrative action (sanitary reform, rehousing etc.). This is a radical solution to counter the twin evils of disease and crime. Yet to the problem of poverty in the abstract Dickens offers through Jarndyce the conservative solution of private charity.

One thing the novel does make clear, however, is that a social problem such as Tom's (or for that matter, Chancery) cannot be treated as a separate, isolated phenomenon to be cured by some form of local surgery or amputation. This

follows from the presentation of society as a system of interrelated parts, which fit together in such a way that they reinforce each other and support the total structure. For example, the legal system reinforces the existing class system dominated by aristocratic power and privilege because it "gives to monied might the means abundantly of wearying out the right" (p. 51). Any reduction of aristocratic legal privilege resulting from Chancery reform would alter the balance of the class system by weakening the aristocratic position vis-a-vis other social groups. That is why Sir Leicester is "upon the whole of a fixed opinion, that to give the sanction of his countenance to any complaints respecting it, would be to encourage some person in the lower classes to rise up somewhere - like Wat Tyler" (p. 61). We have seen the close fit between the class system and the political system. Similarly any successful or permanent solution to the problem represented by Tom's must also come to terms with the legal and political systems which combined to produce Tom's, and continue to produce similar spectres.

In the earlier fiction social criticism was aimed at isolated, self-contained issues, but in Bleak House what is being criticised is a whole system, and the problem is how to bring about total change. Yet although Tom's is not seen as an isolated, self-contained problem it is presented as the most crucial issue facing mid-Victorian society, because it is necessarily bound up with the great Victorian nightmare of revolution. In the Preface to a new edition of Oliver Twist published in 1851, a year before he started work on Bleak House, Dickens declared that without reform of slums and sanitation "those classes of the people which increase the fastest, must become so desperate, and be made so miserable, as to bear within themselves the certain seeds of ruin to the whole community." (my italics). The

danger was revolution, and to a discussion of this important theme in the novel we now turn.<sup>(1)</sup>

(vi)

Throughout the novel there are frequent warnings that some form of sudden violent change is about to explode and shatter the respectable world of Victorian society. It is as if forces are building up in the darkness and shadows of the mid-Victorian urban underworld undermining the superficial social/economic prosperity until the moment when they will burst forth upon a smug and complacent, self-contemplating society.

The aristocratic world is especially threatened. "Both the world of fashion and the Court of Chancery are ... sleeping beauties, whom the Knight will wake one day, when all the stopped spits in the kitchen shall begin to turn prodigiously." (p. 55). This ominous note is echoed in the description of the crowd which gathers at Chesney Wold - "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." (p.212). There is little doubt that these "strange appearances ... in active motion" are identical to the shadowy movements in the darkness of Tom-all-Alone's.

There is no one character in the novel who represents the urban poor in the role of agents of revolution. However,

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1 To Arnold Kettle "the revolutionary feeling of the book ... is not peripheral to Bleak House but at the very heart of its power and profundity." 'Dickens and the Popular Tradition', p. 237 in Marxists on Literature, ed. D. Craig.

Jo's progress from Tom's to Jarndyce's respectable middle-class home at St. Albans, carrying the fever which strikes at Charley and Esther, is analogous to the revolutionary process. Monroe Engel remarks, "Epidemic is nature's counterpart for revolution."<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed, both are forms of "spoiling and plundering" by which Tom's has his revenge. When Jo was compared to a drover's dog the warning was given - "Turn that dog's descendants wild, like Jo, and in a very few years they will so degenerate that they will lose even their bark - but not their bite!" (p. 275).

Apart from these explicit warnings of the latent danger of revolution there is wedded into the imaginative structure of the novel a suggestive pattern of imagery which is organically related to this theme - the image of the springing or exploding of a mine or bomb. We are told of Tom's, "Twice, lately, there has been a crash and a cloud of dust, like the springing of a mine, in Tom-all-Alone's; and, each time, a house has fallen ... As several more houses are nearly ready to go, the next crash in Tom-all-Alone's may be expected to be a good one." (p. 273). The 'next crash in Tom's' suggests the social crash of a revolution engendered in the urban slums (of which Tom's is the representative case in the novel), which will explode on an unsuspecting society "like the springing of a mine". In this passage we are not being told what could happen unless certain measures are taken. The implicit meaning is more positive and pessimistic. Given the existing social conditions ("as several more houses are nearly ready to go"), revolution is the probable if not inevitable social result. It is not surprising that this more pessimistic insight is expressed implicitly through Dickens's art, not via an explicit authorial intrusion into the narrative.

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1 M. Engel, The Maturity of Dickens, p. 121.

The imagery links "the next crash in Tom-all-Alone's" to Boythorn's extreme solution to the problem of reforming Chancery. Remembering the representative nature of Chancery, remarks about Chancery reform embody a generalising suggestiveness for change of the whole system. Boythorn's solution is that "Nothing but a mine below it on a busy day in term time, with all its records, rules, and precedents collected in it, and every functionary belonging to it also, high and low, upward and downward, from its son the Accountant-General to its father the Devil, and the whole blown to atoms with 10,000 hundredweight of gunpowder, would reform it in the least!" (p. 169). What Boythorn is saying is that the only way to reform a system so corrupt as Chancery/Victorian society is by violent and total change. Partial or peaceful change is not possible. If Boythorn's statement was an isolated one in the novel and not part of a related scheme of imagery we might regard it as typical eccentric Boythorn extremism and receive it, as his audience does, with a laugh. However, the common imagery emphasises its importance within the total structure. It is the first unequivocal statement that peaceful change of the mid-Victorian industrial system is impossible.

The same image is used to convey the special aristocratic vulnerability to revolution. Probably the French Revolution with its attack on aristocratic privilege was in Dickens's mind. Shaw has remarked, "Trollope and Thackeray could see Chesney Wold; but Dickens could see through it. And this was no joke to Dickens. He ... understood how revolutions begin with burning the chateaux." One of the pictures at Chesney Wold is of "a Sir Somebody Dedlock, with a battle, a sprung-mine, volumes of smoke, flashes of lightening, a town on fire, and a stormed fort, all in full action between his horse's two hind legs: showing, he supposed, how little a Dedlock made of such trifles." (p. 588). In the days portrayed in the painting aristocratic

battlefields were abroad. But now the aristocracy is complacently sitting on a domestic mine and indeed the novel suggests that the fuse is already burning. The effect on the aristocracy as a class if the mine of revolution is sprung is represented by the analogy of Sir Leicester's personal stroke and collapse when the truth about his wife's past is revealed by Bucket in Chapter 54, appropriately called "Springing a Mine". Perhaps it is significant that the murderer responsible for the crime which results in the shattering of Sir Leicester's private world, Hortense, is described earlier by Esther as "some woman from the streets of Paris in the reign of terror" (p. 373).

In addition to the social suggestiveness of the image of the springing of a mine, the most important contribution to the theme of revolution is the death by spontaneous combustion of Krook, the pseudo Lord Chancellor. Dickens cited specific historical and medical evidence to defend this incident against the criticism of G.H. Lewes. However, its real significance lies in its symbolic suggestiveness. Krook's home, we have argued, is "a deadly caricature of Chancery", reflecting the essential quality of life in the whole system. Krook's death provides an image of this structure tearing itself apart from within. It is one of the most important emblematic images in the book - and it is a revolutionary image. The language drives home the representative significance of the incident.

"Help, help, help! Come into this house for Heaven's sake! Plenty can come in but none can help. The Lord Chancellor of that Court, true to his title in his last act, has died the death of all Lord Chancellors on all Courts, and of all authorities in all places under all names so ever, 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 - in born, 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." (pp. 511-2).

The social process analogous to spontaneous combustion is clearly revolution - "inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours (i.e. Tom's) of the vicious body itself (mid-Victorian capitalism)". The language stresses the general, universal nature of the process, one common to "all authorities in all places under all names so ever, where false pretences are made and where injustice is done". Its relevance applies not just to the legal system, but to the political system, and the aristocratic world, with its hierarchy headed by "Your Highness". The crucial point is that what is being described here is an inexorable process, bound by some sort of causal law, in which spontaneous combustion (in social terms, revolution) is seen as the logical, inevitable, the ineluctable product of a general social corruption. Admittedly the details are vague and as a theory of social/historical development it is somewhat crude and unsophisticated. However, this does not alter the fact that Krook's death provides the strongest imaginative statement in the novel of the inevitable nature of revolution as the fate awaiting mid-Victorian England.

We should not expect that this is reinforced by any explicit statement of revolutionary propaganda. Arnold Kettle, after recognising that "the spontaneous combustion image is a revolutionary image, as opposed to a reformist one. ... The whole implication is that processes are involved which can culminate only in explosion and that such explosions are not exceptional and unnatural but the inevitable consequences of the processes themselves" goes on to admit that "though Bleak House is in this deep undeniable sense



a revolutionary novel, there are no revolutionaries in it. Obviously this contradiction corresponds to the actual contradiction in Dickens's own attitude to capitalism."<sup>(1)</sup> Dickens was no conscious revolutionary. Indeed his portrayal of the mob in Barnaby Rudge and later in A Tale of Two Cities testifies to his Carlylean inspired hatred of revolutionary means. That is why Michael Goldberg should not be surprised that in "consigning Krook to the flames he (Dickens) is making a gesture of revolutionary impatience that is unmatched by any ideological statement to be found in his works."<sup>(2)</sup> What is at work in the Krook passage is Dickens's imaginative consciousness. Krook's death is not a carefully wrought intellectual proposition put forward by a systematic or scientific political thinker. It embodies an imaginative insight into the nature of industrial society (and this insight is in certain respects of a Marxist nature, i.e. it sees capitalist society developing within itself the conditions which will lead to its demise). In the matter of Engels or Lukács we could regard this as a 'triumph of realism' were it not for the problem already discussed that this prediction of revolution was historically mistaken.

How consistent is the rest of the novel with the implied meaning of Krook's explosive death? Does the novel offer an alternative to revolution as a means of redeeming the system? Certainly it is clear from the Dedlock satire that there is little hope of productive change coming from the political system, dominated as it is by the influence of an aristocracy which has a vested interest in maintaining the social/political status quo.

To redeem the whole system of Victorian society would

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- 1 A. Kettle, 'Dickens and the Popular Tradition' in Marxists on Literature, (ed. D. Craig), p. 237.
  - 2 M. Goldberg, Carlyle and Dickens, p. 73.

need, it would seem, a miracle. In fact Esther (in a passage deleted only because of the demands of space) declares that Chancery was "so flagrant and bad, that little short of a miracle could bring any good out of it to any one" (p. 378). The social vision of Bleak House then, is of the mid-Victorian system as an inhuman piece of machinery, morally rotten, and on the verge of collapse. "Bleak House is not so much a warning to society to reform itself as a picture of a society long past the stage at which reform is still possible."<sup>(1)</sup>

And yet few contemporary readers of Bleak House found the novel uncomfortable or subversive. This is because the social vision was qualified and compromised by the reassuring dual operation of two reinforcing structures - what we have called an interpretive code of middle-class values (see Part I, Chapter 3), and the closed 'happy' ending in line with contemporary novelistic conventions. The middle-class index is embodied in certain characters (Jarndyce, Esther, Woodcourt) whose experience is ineasted with a general social significance which, against the logic of the social vision, offers the sort of 'miracle' to save Victorian society which is needed. These elements which contradict and to a certain extent defuse the revolutionary implications of the novel must now be discussed at some length.

(vii)

The 'miracle' comes in the form of a general moral change throughout society, an infusion of new values which will produce a 'hopeful change' in the general quality of social life. To a social problem a moral cure is offered.

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1 R. Barnard, Imagery and Theme in the Novels of Dickens, p. 74.

In a sense moral change is a short-cut solution, the very reverse of revolution, for moral change makes change of institutions unnecessary. While revolution is an inbred process of destruction, moral change is an inbred cure, a gradual spread of new values which change the general quality of life from within without any systematic change of the outer structure of society.

The representative figure for this form of peaceful yet total change is John Jarndyce, the only man who remains free from contamination by the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Jarndyce is (in Lukács's term) a problematic individual who in the midst of a corrupt environment attempts to orientate himself to the human qualities of people and to qualitative relations of use value. We meet him mainly in Esther's narrative - and here it is very important to be aware of the distinction of tone and emphasis between Esther's first person narrative and the third-person omniscient narrative. The brunt of the novel's social vision (especially the loaded descriptions of important locales - for example, Chancery, the fashionable world, and Tom's) is contained in the omniscient narrative, the tone of which (appropriately for a critical analysis of society) is consistently impersonal and objective. The tone and emphasis of Esther's narrative, however, is altogether more cheerful and optimistic, and through Esther's views and values and in the presentation of Jarndyce it cosily reflects reassuring middle-class values, perspectives and maxims. Against the overwhelmingly bleak background of the social vision and the omniscient narrative, Esther's narrative hopefully asserts that relations of use value can be achieved in private life by selected individuals within a corrupt environment. The formal device of the double-narrative would appear to enable Dickens to have it both ways. The social vision

of the objective third person narrative is critical and oppositional to Victorian capitalism, while Esther's narrative, on the other hand, reflects the values of the bourgeois world.

J. Hillis Miller in his Penguin edition introduction to the novel remarks, "Though the happy ending of Bleak House may beguile the reader into accepting Esther's view as the true one, the novel does not resolve the incompatibility between her vision and what the other narrator sees."<sup>(1)</sup> The consequence of this lack of resolution for the unity and integrity of the novel will be discussed later.

If we turn to Esther's narrative we can see that the views and implied values of Esther are an important part of the interpretive code which enables the reader to make sense of the crowded canvas of the novel. "Dickens's treatment of Esther is devoid of irony ... Esther's responses, attitudes, and actions are never qualified or criticised. She is, in short, thoroughly idealised."<sup>(2)</sup> Her narrative "offers us stability, a point of rest in a flickering and bewildering world, the promise of some guidance through the Labyrinth."<sup>(3)</sup> Esther is both a means of charting our way through the book and a moral touchstone.

We have said that her narrative is cosier, its implications less subversive than the omniscient narrative.

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- 1 Bleak House, Penguin edition (Harmondsworth 1971), p. 33.
  - 2 W.G. Harvey, 'Chance and Design in Bleak House' in Dickens and the Twentieth Century (ed. Gross and Pearson), p. 149.
  - 3 W.G. Harvey, *Ibid*, p. 152.

There is an interesting exception, where the two narratives gell rather than collide. In her nightmare dreams when in the grip of fever Esther sees herself as a thing, a helpless, depersonalised, suffering part of a greater system. She imagines that "strung together somewhere in a great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing." (p. 544). This is one of the strongest images in the novel of what the social vision reveals as the essential condition of the individual caught up in cruel and indifferent machinery of the system. However, for the most part, Esther's narrative is reassuring.

The values implied in her narrative perspective are safely middle-class, chief of which are hard work and duty. Jarndyce tells Richard Carstone, incidentally offering a non-economic criterion for judging people, "I must do my duty, Rick, or you could never care for me in cool blood" (p. 392), while Esther's characteristic act is to disconcertingly jingle her house-keeping keys and to repeat merrily, "Duty, my dear, Duty". Esther's whole history embodies middle-class virtues - duty, hard work, house-keeping thrift and efficiency, character, and self-sacrifice - while Jarndyce too is presented sympathetically in terms of middle-class values. His career advice to Richard is an anticipation of Samuel Smiles - "Trust in nothing but in Providence and your own efforts" (p. 232), he tells him, emphasising the necessity of hard work and perseverance. In lecturing Richard against an indecision of character, and a light-hearted, frivolous attitude towards his finances, Jarndyce reflects a middle-class approval of earnestness and responsibility (especially in money matters). Of course, Esther's house-keeping thrift wins his praise.

Yet within his role as an embodiment of middle-class virtues there are flawing contradictions, the first of a series of inconsistencies and weaknesses which make Jarndyce an artistic failure. Despite his recommendation of self-help and perseverance to Richard, Jarndyce is willing to enlist Sir Leicester's aid to smooth Richard's way and boost his career chances, and is disappointed when Sir Leicester refuses this appeal for patronage and nepotism. Jarndyce urges on Richard the importance of work, yet does no work himself. We have to assume that Jarndyce's present income was not totally inherited from his uncle but was to a considerable extent the result of past work and business success. Yet Jarndyce is defined in moral terms which makes materialistic success on society's own terms extremely improbable. Though earnestness and responsibility in money matters is urged on Richard, Jarndyce continues to indulgently tolerate Skimpole, who is an embodiment of the extreme opposite of these values. Such is the difficulty of talking of a coherent middle-class perspective on social issues that even Jarndyce's private charity can be seen as inconsistent with a strict middle-class view of morality. By the mid-Victorian period many members of the middle class were suspicious that the sentimental base of benevolence might work to dilute in the giver the virtues of self-discipline and strenuous work. For example, in 1850 Clough pointed out, "It is a good deal forgotten that we came into this world to do, not kindness to others, but our own duty, to live soberly righteously, and godly, not benevolently, philanthropically, and tenderheartedly."

The social implications of Jarndyce's private charity are worth discussing at some length. Humphry House has declared of Dickens's good characters that "their scope of action is narrow and domestic, because if it

were wider they might be in danger of becoming politicians"<sup>(1)</sup>. Jarndyce represents a spirit of uninquiring philanthropy, with a minimum of intellectual concern. He doesn't try to analyse the system - instead he retreats from it helping its casualties when he can by pulling them protectively into his own private world. But that does not mean that his private charity can be dismissed as non-political. Indeed, the phenomenon of individual philanthropy, far from being an alternative to a political response, was not only sanctioned by contemporary political theory but was firmly located at the centre of this as the chief political solution to the problem of urban poverty.

Kitson Clark has written of the mid-Victorian period that "it is important to remember how far in such matters as social reform the effective action was still, and by prevailing theory ought to have been, in private hands, or if public action were needed, localised in scope, the result of the initiative not of a ministry or of a legislature but of those directly concerned."<sup>(2)</sup> An example of a major politician's view of this problem is provided by Gladstone. Burn has said of him, "It would be broadly true to say that he saw the work of private philanthropists as the positive and the work of the state as the negative side of the task of social improvement."<sup>(3)</sup>

Thus it is too simple for critics to condemn Jarndyce's philanthropy as an alternative to a political response. However, it must also be recognised that if private charity is a political response it is not a radical but a conservative one. Burn admits that though individual

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1 H. House, The Dickens World, p. 51

2 G. Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England, p. 45.

3 W.L. Burn, The Age of Equipoise, p. 117.

philanthropy was seen as a moral obligation attendant on wealth the philanthropist "was expected to direct his activities so that they conformed with and if possible strengthened the existing social system."<sup>(1)</sup> The work of individual philanthropists was not expected to prevent Chancery from grinding on.

The interesting thing about the novel's treatment of Jarndyce's philanthropy is that though in the scheme of the novel it is a moral positive, presented sympathetically, it is subjected to an implied critical comment from within the imaginative structure of the novel itself. Whenever Jarndyce meets social distress (as, for example, in Skimpole's house) "we could not help hearing the clink of money" (p. 655). There is an ironic parallel to this in Snagsby's habit of leaving a half-crown whenever he encounterd social distress. The consistently ironic tone reveals the inadequacy of Snagsby's response and serves as a comment on Jarndyce's analogous behaviour.

For example, when he views conditions in Tom's in the room occupied by the brickmaker's families "Mr. Snagsby has to lay upon the table half-a-crown, his usual panacea for an immense variety of afflictions" (p. 368). At the bedside of the dying Jo "Mr. Snagsby, touched by the spectacle before him, immediately lays upon the table half-a-crown; that magic balsam of his for all kinds of wounds" (p. 702). Later he repeats "that infallible remedy", and by the time he leaves there are four in the pile - "he has never been so close to a case requiring so many" (p. 703). Jarndyce's charity is an analogous one though the sums he dispenses are larger, extending to free board at Bleak House. But he can only accommodate half-a-dozen casualties in his home at St. Albans and how

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1 W.L. Burn, *ibid*, p. 117.



many half-crowns will the case of the whole corrupt system require if the individual benevolence of a Jarndyce or Snagsby is to provide effective relief? If Snagsby's response is inadequate, the significance of this embraces Jarndyce too. The ironic parallel with Snagsby renders the novel's treatment of the theme more ambiguous and inconsistent than is at first apparent.

We have seen that there is a lack of consistency in following up the implications of Jarndyce's role as an embodiment of middle-class virtues. However, the association of certain middle-class values with Jarndyce makes him an appropriate figure to suggest to contemporary readers the sort of 'miracle' cure needed to redeem the system.

There is little doubt that Dickens intends Jarndyce's transformation of the original Bleak House which he inherited from his great uncle, Tom Jarndyce, to be read as a metaphor for this general change. The condition of the house he inherited was much as Tom's is now. "There is, in that city of London there, some property of ours, which is much at this day what Bleak House was then" (p. 146), admits Jarndyce, who also tells us that "Although Bleak House was not in Chancery, its master was, and it was stamped with the same seal" (p. 147). The physical condition of the house then reflects the moral and spiritual condition of the contemporary social system - rotten and non-functional. "In the meantime, the place became dilapidated, the wind whistled through the cracked walls, the rail fell through the broken roof, the weeds choked the passage to the rotting door. When I brought what remained of him home here, the brains seemed to me to have been blown out of the house too; it was so shattered and ruined." (p. 146). But Jarndyce inherited the house and restored the ruin to healthy, vigorous life, bringing to it what Esther describes

as a "hopeful change" (p. 146), and transforming the moral climate of the house through his own kindness and generosity. This 'hopeful change' was no doubt intended as a model for the general change of heart necessary for the regeneration of the mid-Victorian system. The novel is called Bleak House, not Tom-all-Alone's - in fact many of the possible titles on the short list which Dickens considered made mention of Tom's - thus drawing attention towards the redemption of the house and implying a note of optimism. We will come back to this metaphor later, however, for if the intended meaning is clear the objective significance of the episode points in a different direction to that intended, making the metaphor far more ambiguous than Dickens himself was aware.

Apart from this analogy there is little detail given about the way in which this 'miracle' cure will work its effect. How will the new morality spread? It is unrealistic to expect such a change to be a sudden, all-in-a-moment phenomenon. Yet the nurturing of new moral values and their spread is only possible if individuals can retain these new values and social relationships under pressure from the basically corrupt environment. Of course the novel asserts that this can be done - the model for such a survival is Jarndyce's ability to remain unaffected by Chancery contamination despite his involvement in the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. However, the argument suffers badly here from a series of contradictions which expose serious flaws in Jarndyce's representative moral survival.

How is it that Jarndyce survives the otherwise all-embracing corruption of the suit? Esther provides the answer to this paradox. Jarndyce is successful because "he is an uncommon character, and he has resolutely kept himself outside the circle" (p. 581). Yet earlier Jarndyce

himself had said, "We can't get out of the suit on any terms; for we are made parties to it, and must be parties to it, whether we like it or not." (p. 146). This is the first contradiction in Jarndyce's role. There is no way an individual can keep himself 'outside the circle' of society. Indeed the whole novel emphasises the corporate nature of the system.

This point is worth developing in greater detail. In avoiding Chancery corruption Jarndyce's retreat into a self-contained world at St. Albans is crucial. Of course this strategy is consistent with the middle-class myth of the ideal home as a haven from a materialistic world (see Part I, Chapter 3). Though he recognises the corruption of Chancery (i.e. he sees society as it is) Jarndyce rejects positive action to fight for its reform. His attitude to Chancery (like Snagsby's to Tom's) is passive acceptance of its condition, and this is accompanied by an attempted retreat into the safety and seclusion of the private sphere of life where he seeks individual salvation by his works of private charity. The salvation of the whole of society is given up as a hopeless task.

Yet how practical as a representative solution is Jarndyce's strategy? From within the imaginative structure of the novel itself it is exposed as inadequate and self-defeating. From the much emphasised systematic nature of society it is clear that there is no such thing as an isolated, self-contained private world. The effectiveness of Jarndyce's private sanctuary is exposed when it is penetrated by the fever, bred in the London slums, which strikes at Charley and Esther, two of the social victims Jarndyce had drawn protectively into his retreat.

Of course, Jarndyce's ability to retreat from Chancery

to St. Albans (qualified as it is) is only possible because of his private fortune - another factor which flaws its representative significance. Though we are not told the source of Jarndyce's money it certainly was not gained from being 'outside the circle' of society. Elsewhere in the novel money is one of the chief corrupting forces but Jarndyce's whole tactic relies on it. As we have seen the ironic parallel with Snagsby comments critically on the final element in Jarndyce's strategy - his individual benevolence to ease the sufferings of the system.

Weaknesses and contradictions in Jarndyce's role are even more glaring if we examine once again the metaphor of Jarndyce's transformation of Bleak House. Closer consideration reveals that the objective significance of the episode is at odds with the intended meaning. The first thing that Jarndyce did after inheriting the house was to embark on a vigorous course of structural rebuilding. The ruined outer structure of the house was repaired and restored to utility and functional efficiency. This necessarily preceded the change in moral climate. Thus the implications of Jarndyce's regeneration of Bleak House are that an environment at the stage of imminent collapse must first be countered by direct structural change before a moral rebirth can be attempted. Of course, constructive demolition and rebuilding corresponds to the recommended remedy for the test-case of Tom's, while to offer only a general moral change as a solution to the social problems of the system is to grasp the issue in the theoretical terms Dickens rejected when brought to bear on Tom's. What is more, direct structural rebuilding of a corrupt environment is the very thing Jarndyce rejected by his strategic retreat from Chancery. Thus the meaning of the two analogies involving Jarndyce - the tactic of non-involvement which enabled him to escape Chancery corruption, and his

positive, vigorous redemption of Bleak House - operate in completely opposite directions. This is indicative of Dickens's own confusion about the problem of social change.

Jarndyce is not the only character in the novel who asserts the human value of people against their market value. There are also the Bagnets, Caddy Jellyby, Mr. George. But all these characters have a childlike innocence and simplicity which may protect them like a cocoon from corrupt materialistic values but which leaves them extremely vulnerable to the Smallweeds of society. Their social survival is fragile and perilous. Caddy is duped by Mr. Turveydrop after being exploited by her mother; George is manipulated by Smallweed and Tulkinghorn; and the Bagnets are merely helpless observers of the situation which threatens to bankrupt them. Furthermore these figures are not powerful enough to provide an imaginative counter to the pessimistic social vision of the novel. Thus it is to the two Bleak Houses - Jarndyce's St. Albans home, and its miniature copy into which Esther and Allan Woodcourt move in Yorkshire - that we must turn for the chief representative expression of humanistic, qualitative values as a reference for social action.

Though neither of these locales provides a viable model for peaceful means of total social change they do offer abstract models of an ideal alternative society. However, neither is totally successful in realising its function.

Jarndyce's redeemed Bleak House is clearly the weakest in this respect, suffering from all the inconsistencies we have discussed in Jarndyce's role. The intention is clear enough. The roles of Jarndyce and Esther within the house are analogous to the functions of social and political

institutions in an efficiently governed society. Jarndyce's role (remember he wishes to be called 'Guardian') corresponds to the protective function of the Lord Chancellor and the legal system, while Esther's role as housekeeper, responsible for orderly and efficient government within the system, corresponds to the governing function of the political system. Skimpole says of her, "You appear to me to be the very touchstone of responsibility. When I see you, my dear Miss Summerson, intent upon the perfect working of the whole little orderly system of which you are at the centre, I feel inclined to say to myself ... that's responsibility." (p. 587). In this sense Jarndyce and Esther are in their domestic roles ideal opposites of Chancery lawyers and aristocratic politicians. However, it is a serious flaw in the ideal nature of Bleak House that when we first see it it indulgently contains Skimpole (the chief individual parasite in the novel) and is always hospitably open to the philanthropists. In addition to the other inconsistencies involving Jarndyce there is the moral irresponsibility of his east-wind fiction. This "pretence to account for any disappointment he could not conceal, rather than he would blame the real cause of it, or disparage or depreciate any one" (pp. 130-1), is a form of moral cowardice, inconsistent with Jarndyce's protective 'Guardian' role. By indulging Skimpole Jarndyce allows him to prey on other members of society - in time Skimpole introduces Richard to Vholes. All the contradictions in Jarndyce's role - including his curious willingness to assist Richard into taking up the law as a profession despite what he knows about Chancery - reduce the artistic integrity and coherence of Bleak House as an idealistic social microcosm.

The new Bleak House of Esther and Woodcourt is more successful, as "a small-scale model of construction"

following "the anatomy of destructiveness"<sup>(1)</sup>, yet even here the attempt is far from being totally artistically convincing. Certainly the new Bleak House does not tolerate a Skimpole or support the philanthropists. Within it there is an implied system of value which puts the market values of a Smallweed in their place, subordinated to the humanistic life values. Esther admits, "we are not rich in the bank" (p. 934), but listing the respect, affection, and love with which her husband is held in the community she adds, "Is not this to be rich?" (p. 935). Furthermore, in the new Bleak House there is no retreat from the evils of the system. Woodcourt is no revolutionary but in contrast to Jarndyce he has a specialised job - and this job is given clear social overtones which imply a direct reformist confrontation with the evils of the system. Woodcourt is a public medical attendant for the poor in an area in the industrial north. His capacity to communicate with members of the working class (mentioned earlier by Dickens) implies that not only will he improve the quality of life for working men in that area but will also help to break down the 'iron barrier' between classes so apparent to Esther in the brickmaker's cottage. Woodcourt's role implies not only social relief but social control through mutual understanding. As a member of one of the newly recognised professions Woodcourt is felt to be particularly well qualified to deal with the problems of the new industrial society and hence an ideal choice for the representative man in this small-scale utopian social alternative.

The marriage of Esther and Woodcourt is to be read as the symbolic union of the doctor and the housekeeper - duty and skilled social service (Woodcourt) allied with

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1 B. Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens, p. 14.

duty, order, and responsible government (Esther, who retains the same symbolic role as she filled in the old Bleak House). However, if it is being suggested that a corrupt social system can be cured by internal doctoring of the unhealthy parts (Woodcourt) or internal spring-cleaning of the dirty parts of the structure (Esther), then this flies in the face of the imaginative logic of the novel's social vision. The systematic nature of society means that diseased parts of the structure cannot be dealt with separately as self-contained problems for local surgery. Esther and Allan do not point the way to the manner in which general change can take place - at best they make up an ideal alternative to the existing system, and thus by opposition throw into light its chief failings.

However, the social implications of Esther and Woodcourt are confused and to some extent diluted by their marriage being incorporated into the general happy ending. The new Bleak House as a social ideal operates as an implicit criticism of existing society but it is also a cosy embodiment of the middle-class myth of the ideal home (and thus an ending consistent with the tone and implied middle-class values of Esther's whole narrative). Thus it is no surprise that Dickens's language when describing the house is altogether too cute and sentimental. The house is "a cottage, quite a rustic cottage of doll's rooms" (p. 912), and though Woodcourt's appointment is for an economically developing area ("a thriving place ... streams and streets, town and country, mill and moor" (p. 872)), what is strongly emphasised in the description of the house is the countrified, tranquil, idyllic surroundings, vaguely suggesting a romantic escape from the urban horrors of Tom's into the innocent, pure, and natural world of the country.



Of course, Esther's marriage is just one part of a conventional, sentimental happy ending which satisfactorily meets contemporary expectations. However, as is the case with most of the later novels the ending is problematic. Dickens intervenes to produce by main force a happy ending out of his material. In fact he overdoes it. Not only does Sir Leicester share in the sentimental handout but there is even a tentative suggestion on the closing page that Esther's facial scars have disappeared.

The novel opened with the objective probing tone of the omniscient narrative laying bare fog-bound Chancery. It ends with Esther's narrative, her marriage, and the confident suggestion that her future domestic happiness is assured. Chancery and Tom's are forcibly pushed into the background. Not surprisingly few critics find the ending satisfactory. For example, Barbara Hardy remarks, "We have seen so much of bleakness and desolation in Bleak House, seen so much diagnostic passion exposing government, religion, law, the aristocracy, the establishment as a whole, that a happy ending, even for Esther and Allan, even faintly muted by Richard's deterioration and death, seems too complacent."<sup>(1)</sup> and goes on to point out that in a novel which tells us of society that parts cannot be separated from the whole, we can only endorse the ending by cutting it off and isolating it (as a part) from the whole structure. "The one part of the novel that does not respond to the complexity of the whole is its end."<sup>(2)</sup>

The real problem here is that neither in tone or content are the two narratives satisfactorily resolved. What we have to consider here is the structural problem of whether a novel has an open or closed form, (the latter

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1 and 2 B. Hardy, 'The Complexity of Dickens' in Dickens, 1970 (ed. M. Slater), p. 47.

being almost obligatory in the popular Victorian novel). The open form of a work of literature has been defined by R. Adams (in Strains of Discord: Studies in Literary Openness) as "a structure of meanings, intents, and emphases" which deliberately include "a major unresolved conflict". Esther's narrative is given a closed ending. This coincides with the ending of the novel as a whole thus implying that the whole structure of the novel has been satisfactorily closed. But the marriage and future happiness of Esther and Allan is not resolved with the bleak social vision contained in the omniscient narrative. Chancery and Tom's are merely ignored at the end. The omniscient narrative in fact has an implicitly open ending.

What is more, the experience of the hero and heroine is closed in such a way as to contradict the imaginative logic and integrity of the social vision, thus seriously weakening the artistic coherence of the novel as a whole. The social vision has depicted the essential relations of the individual and the system of industrial society. The individual is shown intension and conflict with his society, which is often seen as an external, hostile thing. But in the close of Esther's narrative the relations between the individual and society are not left as oppositional and problematic. Dickens forcibly intervenes to suggest a spurious harmony. The closed ending to Esther's narrative implies that Esther and Allan are no longer at odds with their environment, it is made to appear that they are now integrated within the society whose dominant values they have denied and opposed. The novel has made clear that to affirm humanistic, authentic values within the system of mid-Victorian capitalism is to be in comparative social isolation - one is part of society, but one has no spiritual contact, no common values and ideals, and no shared moral life with the crowd. However, at the end of the novel

Esther and Allan are presented as no longer problematic persons. The demands of self and community have been reconciled. Yet the position they occupy - integration without moral compromise - seems desired rather than convincingly worked for, or believably achieved. We feel that the close of Esther's narrative is a betrayal of the imaginative truth and realism of the social vision.

A more open ending to Esther's narrative - a sober qualification of Esther's happiness, no assurances for the future, an awareness of the vulnerability and fragility of her stand against the dominant values, a warning of the difficulties ahead - would have been more consistent with the tone and content of the social vision, but this would have rendered the ending of the novel as a whole more open, and would have disappointed the reading public. It is true of Dickens's later novels generally that the material - his tragic view of society - demands an open form. The closed form (tying up the social issues of the plot in conveniently tidy fashion) denies (or at least severely compromises) the problematic nature of the social world.

It could be argued that the new-found critical respect won by Dickens this century is directly related to an increasing awareness that the imminent form of his later novels is open, encouraging critics to look beneath the rosy endings to the tragic view of society which is the imaginative motor in all the great novels.

We have earlier discussed the 'revolutionary' implications of Dickens's social insights in the novel. It is worth remembering that Dickens was not revolutionary in most aspects of literary form - he did not transcend the strongly entrenched literary legacy of the closed ending which he inherited from the English realist novel tradition

(though as we shall see there is a strong tension in his best work between open and closed forms). While this is unfortunate from an artistic point of view, working against the resolution and unification of his complex insights into society, there is little doubt that his closed, happy endings were useful in gaining middle-class readers' acceptance of novels which in tone and mood were pessimistic and disturbing. The convention of the closed ending was not a structural accident. It is bound up in the very form of the English critical realist novel, which is both oppositional to the middle-class and the existing order, and yet expresses imaginatively as moral positives the received contemporary opinions of that class. The mutually reinforcing relationship between the closed ending and the middle-class value index cannot be emphasised too strongly. The successful operation of a middle-class interpretive code implies the necessary existence of a closed ending, to remove doubts about the future, and reward (hence legitimise and celebrate) the moral position of hero and heroine, defined in middle-class terms. The dual operation of these two imaginative structures helps to explain why novels which were critical and oppositional towards Victorian society were acceptable to a middle-class reading public. However, in so far as the Jarndyce, Esther, and Woodcourt themes are a conscious attempt to relieve the gloom of the bleak social backcloth and suggest that the system can be redeemed by a moral change of heart, this attempt is artistically unsuccessful, thematically muddled, and lacking in imaginative power (e.g. Jarndyce's "hopeful change" lacks the imaginative power of Krook's spontaneous combustion).

Above all it goes in the face of the imaginative awareness that the quality of the moral life of the system increasingly reflects the relations of the economic sphere.

(This insight is contained in the developed metaphor of society as a market-place in which everyday social relations take on a quantitative and mediated character.) The moral life of the community in Bleak House is seen less in terms of abstract moral qualities and chiefly as the product of social institutions and economic forces. Yet in suggesting that a general moral change can redeem society (without change of social/economic institutions) Dickens is confusingly going back to a view of morality as independent of the environment more characteristic of his earlier fiction. The basic contradiction between a social environment in need of total change and the capacity of innocence to develop miraculously and survive in the midst of the universal corruption underlies the whole of the later fiction. It makes for confusions in the imaginative worlds of the novels and to varying degrees is a flawing element in Dickens's realism.

Many of these problems of unity and resolution of themes and insights - especially the tensions between the conservative and revolutionary responses to social change, and between moral optimism and social realism - will be encountered in the other novels. However, the next novel to be considered, Little Dorrit, embodies a particularly impressive degree of artistic control and overall structural coherence which makes it probably Dickens's most unified and successful mature work.

## CHAPTER 2

LITTLE DORRIT - THE PRISON AND THE MARKET

When Arthur Clennam, the lonely brooding hero of Little Dorrit returns to London in chapter 3 he contemplates the surrounding city on a depressing Sunday evening in a passage which is relevant to most of the chief concerns of the novel. Clennam's horror at the conditions under which the majority of urban dwellers live reflects not only Dickens's dominant novelistic attitude to the large and indifferent city but also touches on the public health issue of Bleak House. "Fifty thousand lairs surrounded him where people lived so unwholesomely that fair water put into their crowded rooms on Saturday night, would be corrupt on Sunday morning." (p. 68).<sup>(1)</sup> The Thames has been polluted and contaminated by its contact with urban London. "Through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river." (p. 68). Dickens is to return to this social fact of the Thames pollution as an emblem for the contamination of the industrial system in Our Mutual Friend. However, Dickens's concern here goes beyond contemporary anxiety over public health. In this passage the city is being used as a symbol for the corrupting effects of the whole industrial system. The quality of life experienced by the urban masses has a generalising significance for the world of the novel. The urban dwellers live in "miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped for air" (p. 68), suggesting that the pressure of the urban environment is constraining and suffocating. In fact the quality of life for the urban population is explicitly described as a prison sentence. Clennam "sat in the same place as the day

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1 All page references to the novel are to the Penguin Edition (Harmondsworth 1967), edited by John Holloway.

died, looking at the dull houses opposite, and thinking, if the disembodied spirits of former inhabitants were ever conscious of them, how they must pity themselves for their old places of imprisonment" (p.770).

The urban environment of London suggests the general condition in the wider social environment by describing life for its inhabitants as a prison existence from which there is "no escape between the cradle and the grave" (p. 68). It is important to grasp that Dickens's subject in this passage is not merely the failure of the traditional evangelical English Sunday to satisfy the imaginative needs of the working population. Certainly this feeling is unmistakeably present - "Nothing for the spent toiler to do, but to compare the monotony of his seventh day with the monotony of his six days, think what a weary life he led, and make the best of it - or the worst, according to the probabilities." (p. 68) - but a weekly dose of transitory comfort does not alter the basic terms of social life, and the chapter is quite explicit about the nature of those terms. It is the unfulfilling everyday existence of the urban population which is brought before the reader and critically evaluated in this passage - not merely its Sunday existence.

Of course, the image of the prison takes us to the organising crux of the novel. As most critics have emphasised the prison is one of the chief thematic concepts in Little Dorrit giving a unity and coherence to the total structure of the novel in a manner similar to Chancery in Bleak House. Such is the obvious resonance of the prison for the world of Little Dorrit that for many critics a reading of the novel takes on the character of a 'spot-the-prison' contest.

Without in any way exhausting the mine of verbal references to prison and imprisonment it is possible to point to the actual prisons in the landscape of the novel (Marseilles, and the Marshalsea), places described as if they were prisons (the quarantine quarters at Marseilles where Meagles refers to the passengers as 'jail-birds'; the "dreary red-brick dungeon at Hampton Court" (p. 359) where Mrs. Gowan lives; the Convent of St. Bernard in the Alps, which even Amy Dorrit regards as 'something like a prison') and tell-tale verbal associations of imprisonment (as in Merdle's characteristic gesture of 'clasping his wrists as if he were taking himself into custody' (p. 445)).

The prison imagery permeates every social world in the novel. It cannot be escaped from, e.g. prison imagery constantly attends the Dorrits on their travels through Europe, culminating in a developed analogy between life in the Marshalsea and the genteel society of the Anglo-Italians (Book II, Chapter 7) which starts, "It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea." (p. 565). Furthermore, the prison metaphor widens in scope throughout the novel. From the single room in which the paralysed Mrs. Clennam lives 'in prison, and in bonds here' it extends to the whole of life as men have made it in an industrial world. "Far aslant across the city, over its jumbled roofs, and through the open tracery of its church towers, struck the long bright rays, bars of the prison of this lower world." (p. 831). The novel is to explore the possibilities of living in this imprisoning social environment and yet, as an individual, escaping its taint and achieving authentic and fulfilling social relationships.

Yet to leave the discussion of the prison with the



bare assertion that in Little Dorrit Dickens portrays mid-Victorian England as a huge prison is to beg a series of important questions - both sociological and artistic. How meaningful is the remark that industrial society is a prison - a trite observation or a penetrating social insight? It is clearly part of the novel's concern to depict a social environment which constrains and suffocates personal will and individuality. Clennam's remark to Meagles at the beginning of the book, "I have no will. That is to say ... next to none that I can put in action now" (p. 59) could well be applied to the whole social world of the novel, for of all Dickens's books Little Dorrit is the one in which action is most passive and control of destiny most minimal. We see individuality stifled in all the social worlds of the novel - in business (Clennam's own history and Pancks's official life), in High Society (under the guidance of Mrs. General), Bleeding Heart Yard, the Circumlocution Office - and so on. However, the concept of society as a prison implies a completely deterministic structure and this is not true of the novel as a whole. The prison of the will is not complete. This is the whole point of Amy Dorrit's role. The prison tendencies of the system may be overwhelming but they never totally deny the will or freedom of the individual. If society is a prison then it appears that some people (admittedly very few) are not subject to its overmastering authority.

A sociological problem arising from the prison emblem is that when we think of mid-Victorian capitalism we think of a system burgeoning and expanding, confidently and aggressively. The last thing a social historian thinks of is a prison (see Part 1, Chapter 2). However, in the novel Dickens is not primarily concerned with the surface prosperity or material well-being of the system. He is concerned with the general quality of life, a general condition and

the possibilities for fulfilment within it - and this cannot be evaluated merely by statistics of economic growth. The prison emblem reflects the general quality of everyday social relations, then, and in particular it is an attempt to convey the spiritually impoverishing effects on the individual of the alienation and isolation artistically seen as characteristic of developing industrial society. In the social world of Little Dorrit individuals live within the system isolated and alienated in various ways as if they were in solitary confinement in prison. It could well be argued that the essential spirit of Little Dorrit resonates through much of modern literature.

Alienation is strongly linked in the novel to feelings of isolation and separateness. Critics have commented on the pervasive feeling of loneliness in the novel. Arthur Clennam is Dickens's most lonely, self-communing, and passive hero. On returning to London at the beginning of the novel he 'could not have felt more depressed and cast away if he had been in a wilderness.' (p. 203). A sense of isolation within a crowded city takes many forms in the novel, and is present even in the concluding paragraph of the qualified 'happy' ending. For most of the novel Amy Dorrit's condition parallels that of Clennam's - lonely in her unexpressed love for Clennam and resigned to its failure she travels unhappily throughout Europe in an unreal existence which offers no pleasure. Pancks's eccentricity cannot prevent him from being alienated by his work as Casby's Grinder, and Flora's bizarre, if individualistic, language cuts her off from meaningful communication with others so that she lives in her own solitary universe, like the pathetic Frederick Dorrit, who exists almost on the verge of non-being, and Affery in her separate world of waking dreams (she exists in a

'ghostly, dreamy, sleep-walking state'). Affery indeed is an interesting case. Her individuality is completely surrendered to 'the two clever ones' who form 'Mrs. Affery's perpetual reference, in whom her person was swallowed up.' (p. 94). She exhibits a helplessness and lack of understanding of her problems which parallels that of Plornish, typical inhabitant of Bleeding Heart Yard. In addition to Flora, Mr. F's aunt is another study in non-communication - 'Though she was always staring, she never acknowledged that she saw any individual.' (p. 199). Even in the midst of the feasts given in his honour Merdle walks his own separate and joyless way, obsessed with his 'medical' complaint and frightened by his Chief Butler. His role in this anonymous world, surrounded by unnamed persons with trade/professional titles is passive and solitary.

Perhaps the most interesting way in which Little Dorrit reflects a general alienation is through the manner in which almost all the characters in the novel wilfully assert myths and fictions about themselves, their social position, or about the nature of social reality itself in order to bring justification, meaning, or consolation to their life. The point is that people who are alienated from their environment need illusions (sometimes harmless, sometimes damaging) to live by. This need to turn away from painful reality into a self-created fiction is a direct response to the alienating and imprisoning nature of the system. (Life in a prison can only be acceptable if the prison nature of reality is obscured or distorted by a strategic use of fictions.) Thus the concept of the prison informs the experience of most of the individuals within the novel. The richness of the characterisation in Little Dorrit is one of the undisputed artistic benefits of the prison emblem.

The connection between character and social environment in the novel must be emphasized for this use of reassuring or comforting myths is a form of voluntary self-imprisonment. Thus in an impressive variety of ways the characters in the novel offer an image of their society. "The characters of Little Dorrit ... are a microcosm of their social world, for each carries his own prison within him. In the world of the novel, enslavement in some degraded relation or to some inhuman ideal almost seems to be man's inevitable fate."<sup>(1)</sup> Among the most obvious instances of imprisonment within a sustaining fantasy are Mrs. Clennam, Miss Wade, and Pancks. Mrs. Clennam asserts a world view in which she has a duty to be God's instrument of punishment for sin in order to legitimise her spite and vindictiveness. Flintwinch finally accuses her - "But that's the way you cheat yourself. Just as you cheat yourself into making out that you didn't do all this business because you were a rigorous woman, all slight, and spite, and power, and unforgiveness, but because you were a servant and a minister, and were appointed to do it." (p. 851). Pancks, alienated in his official life, needs his fiction of the 'Whole Duty of Man in a commercial country' which reduces all life to a mechanical performance of business tasks to justify his continued existence as Casby's Grinder. William Dorrit in the Marshalsea utilises 'the miserably ragged old fiction of the family gentility' and cannot live outside the protective walls of his self-image of being Father of the Marshalsea. Indeed the social outcasts of the Marshalsea Prison in general conspire to honour the myth that the Marshalsea is a place of rest and true freedom. Clennam believes his own suffocating conviction that he is too old for love, 'an older man, who had done with that tender part of life.' (p. 432).

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1 G. Smith, Dickens, Money and Society, p. 164.

Some forms of self-deception in the novel are comparatively harmless, like Meagles's image of himself as a 'practical man'. On the other hand, Miss Wade's neurotic suspicion that everybody wishes to patronisingly taunt her with knowledge of her illegitimacy, a defensive stance against the alienating Victorian conventions about illegitimacy, while necessary to liberate the "passion which for her is life"<sup>(1)</sup> is also perversely a source of pain and torment to herself. The paranoia of Miss Wade's 'History of a Self-Tormenter' is not merely an excellent case-book of an individual neurosis (psychological character analysis in the manner of George Eliot) but at the same time, and this is characteristic of Dickens, is organically related to the nature of the social system. She too cannot bear to see society as it is. The courage of Clennam's position at the end of the book - he sees society as it is without abandoning the search for authentic relations or capitulating to society's values - must be seen against the failure of other characters (almost universal in the novel, for even Amy Dorrit carries with her a false image of her 'father as he was') to confront the nature of social reality and their position in it with honesty and realism. (We are reminded of T.S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton'; "Human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality"). Little Dorrit's characteristic turning from reality into comforting fiction is not, however, a psychological insight of an abstract nature but is an integral part of Dickens's social criticism, a product of a general social alienation experienced in a historically specific environment (mid-Victorian industrial England). Thus within the total structure of Little Dorrit the social vision and the characterisation are organically related through the prison emblem.

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1 Q.D. & F.R. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, p. 305.

This must be remembered in view of criticism that the prison symbol in Little Dorrit is 'thinly intellectual, more obviously worked out'<sup>(1)</sup>, and offers an excessive evidence of authorial design (Barbara Hardy talks about the 'tiring explicitness')<sup>(2)</sup>. This element of explicit repetition is in a sense artistically counter-productive (it suffers from the law of diminishing returns in that after a time each new verbal association to imprisonment seems less important than the one before) but this is overruled by the gain in control - in unity, intensity, and the sharpening of the focus on essentials (virtually no episode or detail is superfluous) - which makes Little Dorrit a much more satisfactory work of literature than the less disciplined 'baggy monsters' of the earlier fiction.

The concentration of critical interest on the prison (for example, Christopher Ricks remarks "Not a very great deal about Little Dorrit has to be left unsaid if the prison is comprehensively discussed"<sup>(3)</sup>) is particularly unfortunate in that the strength and richness of the novel derive from the fact that the material is organised in a variety of ways which overlap. And in relation between these organising principles - the prison, surfaces, the Circumlocution Office, the market, manners, and mechanism - lies the key to the understanding of the novel's meaning and significance which is too complex and sociologically interesting to be conveniently reduced to the critical tag 'Society is a prison'.

The relation between the prison and the Circumlocution Office is particularly important. The Circumlocution Office

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1 and 2 B. Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens, p. 18.

3 C. Ricks, 'Great Expectations' in Dickens and the Twentieth Century (ed. Gross and Pearson), p. 199.

as was discussed in Part I, Chapter 1 is the institutional emblem for the nature of the system in the novel. The Circumlocution Office is an inhuman piece of machinery, hostile to the individuals, ("troublesome convicts who were under sentence to be broken alive on that wheel" (p. 596)), who apply to it for aid. Its running parts have been clogged up with red tape but it still grinds on, out of control. It is a Frankenstein monster with a mind of its own; an external social force which constrains the individuals who have created it to serve their interests. Unlike the rather vague concept of the prison the Circumlocution Office is given a lot of concrete detail. We see it provoking the anger of Meagles, frustrating the individual aspirations and talents of Doyce, resisting the attempts of Clennam to make sense of its structure and impose some control over its wayward machinery.

Indeed, the concept of mechanism is an important one in the novel. In 'Signs of the Times' (1829) Carlyle had asserted in a famous passage, "Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word ... Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and the spiritual also ... The same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind."<sup>(1)</sup>

Throughout his later novels a crucial point in Dickens's

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1 T. Carlyle, Selected Writings (ed. Alan Shelston), pp. 66-67.

social criticism and repudiation of the industrial system is his portrayal of life lapsing into mechanism. This is especially true of Little Dorrit. The Circumlocution Office, the representative social institution in the novel 'went on mechanically, every day'. Pancks's official identity is consistently described as that of 'a little labouring steam-engine', while Rugg refers to himself in conversation with Clennam as 'a professional machine'. Within fashionable, genteel society a mechanical life is induced by the operation of the inflexible code of manners, represented by Mrs. General, a lady 'whose manner was perfect, considered as a piece of machinery'. Within Mrs. Clennam's house Flintwinch's presence is brought to bear on its paralysed owner 'daily like some eccentric mechanical force'. Indeed, the quality of life within the house is that of a mechanical existence. "Morning, noon, and night, morning, noon, and night, each recurring with its accompanying monotony, always the same reluctant return of the same sequences of machinery, like a dragging piece of clockwork." (pp. 387-8). In the description of Casby's house the repetition of the word 'ticking' (applied to a clock, a songless bird, the parlour fire, and Casby's watch and eyebrows) suggests that the house is one large clockwork mechanism the component parts of which (both people and things) function in synchronised fashion. Even Baptist is regarded in Bleeding Heart Yard as if he was 'a mechanical toy'.

Robert Barnard's remarks - "Machinery is, after prison, the most insistent image in the novel, and the abundance of comparisons with mechanical things ... gives the best indication of how Dickens, at this period, was regarding his own life, the people around him and also many of the larger social organisms within which men worked"<sup>(1)</sup> - could

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1 R. Barnard, Imagery and Theme in the Novels of Dickens, p. 98.



legitimately be given greater weight. The encroachment of mechanism (of head and heart, as well as of hand) into everyday social life is an integral part of the social vision of the later novels. Another crucial element within Little Dorrit's critical evaluation of social life which has not received due emphasis because of academic obsession with the prison motif is the analogy between society and the market-place, which must be discussed at some length.

(ii)

Social relations in every sphere, including relations of friendship and marriage, are encompassed within the principle of economic marketing. Individuals characteristically try to promote a socially valued image of themselves in order to achieve a greater degree of material or status privilege (as if they were economic goods to be labelled, advertised, and profitably sold). Skimpole and Turveydrop did this in Bleak House but the theme is much more highly developed in Little Dorrit.

Gowan cynically admits to Arthur Clennam that in his painting he is an imposer ("Buy one of my pictures, and I assure you in confidence, it will not be worth the money" (p. 358)) but legitimises this by maintaining that it is the same throughout society. "They all do it ... Painters, writers, patriots, all the rest who have stands in the market." (p. 358). Though Dickens morally repudiates Gowan's cynicism, there is no doubt that this is an accurate representation of the social world of the novel, e.g. Gowan's belief "So great the success, so great the imposition" (p. 358) is true of Merdle, as well as Casby and William Dorrit. Rigaud openly admits his stand in the market and he too asserts that this is the general condition.

He tells Clennam in the Marshalsea, "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? ... Effectively, sir, ... Society sells itself and sells me: and I sell Society." (p. 818).

William Dorrit's stand in the market is an attempt (for the most part successful) to promote an image of himself as Patriarch or Father to the other Marshalsea prisoners whom he views in an implicitly mercenary light as potential sources of testimonials. He is even willing to pervert his relation with Amy into an economic proposition by encouraging her to receive John Chivery's amorous attentions in order that the special privileges and perks he enjoys from the Chief Turnkey, John's father, might not be lost. Of course, William Dorrit imposes upon himself too and partly believes his miserable fictions. This is not true of Casby, however.

Casby's stand in the market is defined by Pancks. "What do you Pretend to be? ... What's your moral game? What do you go in for? Benevolence, an't it?" (p. 869). Under his benevolent mask Casby's values are "Bargain and sale, bless you! Fixed Principles!" (p. 871). The nature of Casby's deceit is conveyed significantly through a metaphor of false advertiseing in a commercial or business enterprise. Arthur Clennam remembers rumours that 'Christopher Casby was a mere Inn signpost without any Inn - an invitation to rest and be thankful, when there was no place to put up at, and nothing whatever to be thankful for.' (p. 190). When Pancks unmasks Casby he takes up this analogy. "Why! The worst-looking cheat in all this town who gets the value of eighteenpence under false pretences, ain't half such a

cheat as this sign-post of The Casby's Head here! ... It's a mighty find sign-post, is The Casby's Head, ... but the real name of the House is the Sham's Arms." (pp. 870-1). This is related to the theme of surfaces, another important strand in the novel's fabric. Certainly as a representative signpost for the whole of Mid-Victorian England as presented in the novel the 'Sham's Arms' is as appropriate as the fact that the crime of Merdle, representative man of his time, is fraud.

If Gowan, Rigaud, William Dorrit, and Casby are individuals who have stands in the market, then the Barnacles as a family and representative aristocratic social group have a class stand in the market through their privileged monopoly of the Circumlocution Office positions. The Barnacles practise the art of government for what they can get out of it. On an individual level they gain sinecure positions, and as a class they use their political influence to help maintain the aristocracy's privileged social position. Ferdinand Barnacle 'fully understood the Department to be a political-diplomatic hocus pocus piece of machinery for the assistance of the nobs in keeping off the snobs.' (pp. 157-8). It is not too much to say that the Barnacles speculate in government for aristocratic survival. 'What the Barnacles had to do, was to stick on to the national ship as long as they could ... and that if the ship went down with them yet sticking to it, that was the ship's lookout, and not theirs.' (pp. 162-3). The Circumlocution Office is utilised as a means to this social end.

Mrs. Clennam has a stand in the market both as partner in the family business firm and through her religion. Her house is permeated by market values. In direct opposition to the Victorian middle class ideal her home is no refuge from the business world for her house is both a private

home and a business office, the centre from which the operations of the family firm are directed. Her harsh business orientation to life is reflected in the economic and materialistic spirit of her religion, which illustrates Weber's famous link between Protestantism and Capitalism. In a development of the case of Chadband (Bleak House) her religion is a form of profit and loss book-keeping. 'Thus was she always balancing her bargains with Majesty of heaven, posting up the entries to her credit, strictly keeping her set-off, and claiming her due.' (p. 89). As elsewhere in Dickens passages can be traced to Carlyle, who had referred to the characteristic form of Victorian religion, as early as Sign of the Times (1829), as 'a Matter ... of Expediency and Utility; whereby some smaller quantum of earthly enjoyment may be exchanged for a far larger quantum of celestial enjoyment. Thus Religion too is Profit, a working for wages.'<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed Clennam himself says of his parents, 'Their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies that were never their own, offered up as a part of a bargain for the security of their possessions.' (p. 59). In attacking Mrs. Clennam's brand of religion Dickens was pointing in particular to a middle class phenomenon. "By the 1850's the Economic Evangelicalism of 1830 has become essentially a middle class point of view."<sup>(2)</sup> However, Dickens probably felt that in a commercial society all types of religion will tend to this adulterated form, for he signposts the general relevance of Mrs. Clennam's religious book-keeping. 'Thousands upon thousands do it, according to their varying manner, every day.' (p. 89).

In a manner similar to Old Smallweed in Bleak House Pancks gives articulate expression to the business/money

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1 T. Carlyle, *Ibid.*, p. 79.

2 G.M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age, p. 87.

ethos which Mrs. Clennam has adhered to under the religious guise of evangelicalism, and its secularized embodiment in respectability. "Take all you can get, and keep back all you can't be forced to give up. That's business" (p. 324) asserts Pancks. Like Smallweed Pancks denies the imaginative life. When Clennam asks him if he reads, Pancks replies, "Never read anything but letters and accounts." (p. 202). The only taste or inclination Pancks will admit to would have been approved by Smallweed too. "I have an inclination to get money, sir ... if you will show me how." (p. 202). Pancks's commitment to such a view has left him a hollow man whose life is a stiff mechanical performance of a daily business round. "I am a man of business. What business have I in this present world, except to stick to business? No Business." (p. 322). A contemporary version of the celebrated Sev-enteenth Century devotional pamphlet 'The Whole Duty of Man' put forward unironically by the official Pancks in conversation with Clennam reveals the extent to which the quality of everyday life had been degraded in mid-Victorian industrial society.

"But I like business," said Pancks, betting on a little faster. 'What's a man made for?'

'For nothing else?' said Clennam.

Pancks put the counter question, 'What else? ... What else do you suppose I think I'm made for? Nothing. Rattle me out of bed, set me going, give me a short time as you like to bolt my meals in, and keep me at it. Keep me always at it, and I'll keep you always at it, you keep somebody else always at it. There you are with the Whole Duty of Man in a commercial country.'" (pp. 201-2).

Duty has become secularised. The primary aim in life is not individual salvation but business success. Work is seen not as a means of achieving grace but as a means of creating wealth and attaining social respectability. We are reminded of Carlyle's condemnation of the secularised

English contemporary view of Hell in Past and Present, (Book III, Chapter 2). "The terror of 'Not succeeding'; of not making money, fame, or some other figure in the world, - chiefly of not making money! Is not that a somewhat singular Hell?"<sup>(1)</sup> The philosophy of Pancks, Casby's Grinder, is representative. It corresponds to the real experience of the majority of the urban working population. While Pancks sadly admits, "What has my life been? Fag and grind, fag and grind, turn the wheel, turn the wheel" (pp. 870-1), the tenants of Bleeding Heart Yard appeal to Pancks on a different occasion, "Poor as you see us, master, we're always grinding, drudging, toiling, every minute we're awake." (p. 202). Clennam too admits that his whole business life abroad was 'always grinding in a mill I always hated' (p. 59). In addition, in Book II, chapter 10 in the description of the City by night (see Part 1, Chapter 2) the whole working population of the City is described as 'dispersed grinders in the vast mill' (p. 596). The majority of the working population, whether manual workers like Plornish or clerical officials like Pancks, are a species of toiler or 'grinder' in the social mill - creating wealth but being themselves ground in the process. The mill is one of Dickens's favourite images in the later novels for the indifferent and destructive machinery of the system. Pancks's humanity has been perverted in to a slavish, unfulfilling robot existence. The imagery of machinery is constantly applied to him, even his speech is a form of 'mechanical revolvancy'. Once again we see Dickens indicting the imposition of a form of social behaviour which contributes to the material prosperity of the system (Pancks's Whole Duty of Man in a commercial country is the individual philosophy which corresponds to the demands on labour in an

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1 T. Carlyle, *Ibid.*, p. 277.

expanding industrial economy) but which impoverishes the general quality of everyday social life.

However, though in his official capacity as Casby's grubber, Pancks gives explicit articulation to the business/money ethos, in his private life he attempts to realise his latent humanity by researching into unclaimed inheritances so that, in effect, he can give money away. "I belong body and soul to my proprietor ... But I do a little in the other way, sometimes; privately, very privately, Miss Dorrit." (p. 334). The individual endeavour and natural force which Carlyle saw trapped by mechanism is concentrated into Pancks's private existence. On the night when he has completed his case on the Dorrit inheritance we see Pancks playing leap-frog with Rugg (another 'professional machine' in his official life) in the Marshalsea yard, the first time Pancks breaks out of his straitjacket of mechanical behaviour and reveals the energy of natural, spontaneous life. Pancks is a first draft for Wemmick (Great Expectations). However, as we shall see, when discussing the ending of the novel, the spiritually denying opposition of Pancks's private and official selves is resolved in a rather artificial and unsatisfactory manner. Incidentally, an ironic reversal of Pancks's situation is provided by Frederick Dorrit, who can only humanly relate to his professional life as a musician ('in private life, where there was no part for the clarionet, he had no part at all' (p. 282)).

Of course, Pancks's advice to Casby, "What you want is a good investment and a quick return" (p. 198), is applicable in all of the social worlds in the novel, not just the business sphere. For example, in fashionable genteel society marriage is a form of speculation in people. Mrs. Merdle, who is described as if she were 'thinged' into her bosom, was purchased by Mr. Merdle as an object of

decorative value, for ostentatious display. 'It 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. 293).

Mrs. Merdle herself is regarded as the best authority on Society and its expectations. She knows that in genteel society marriage is an economic investment. "As to marriage on the part of a man, my dear, Society requires that he should retrieve his fortunes by marriage. Society requires that he should gain by marriage. Society requires that he should found a handsome establishment by marriage. Society does not see, otherwise, what he has to do with marriage." (p. 441). If the analogy with the market is implicit here it is later made explicit. Mrs. Merdle 'knew what Society's mothers were, and what Society's daughters were, and what Society's matrimonial market was, and how prices ruled in it, and what scheming and counter-scheming took place for the high buyers, and what bargaining and huckstering went on' (p. 444).

In considering the market nature of society we must return to Gowan. In Mid-Victorian England art has become, it would seem, merely another commercial activity like the buying and selling of Merdle's shares. Gowan only recognises the quantitative value of his work. "But what I do in my trade, I do to sell. What all we fellows do, we do to sell. If we didn't want to sell it for the most we can get for it, we shouldn't do it." (p. 453). To Gowan art is a commodity. Though in his treatment of Gowan Dickens implicitly proposes an exalted view of literature as a vocation it is well to remember that despite his elevated view of his own position as literary artist Dickens himself had a self-conscious stand in the literary market of the day (see Part 1, Chapter 3).

The concept of the market is tied up in the structure of



the novel with the prison emblem. It is through stock-market speculation that both William Dorrit and Clennam end up in the Marshalsea. Of course, the adulteration of everyday social relations by market values is one of the chief spiritually imprisoning forces in society. But the market and the prison are also linked through crime. The business dealings of both Mrs. Clennam and Merdle involve them in crime. Mrs. Clennam's suppression of the will involves her, in Rigaud's words, with 'the stolen money', while Merdle's whole business empire is founded on criminal fraud. Merdle is representative of the change in the economic climate which had taken place by the 1850's. The individual owner/manager of the small independent business had given away to the corporate capitalism (and the large-scale joint-stock companies) represented by Merdle. In the early novels (as House has pointed out) the representative 'bad businessman' tended to be the usurer, who was opposed by the ideal firm, representative of 'clean' capitalism, or capitalism with a heart - the small business firm where relations between employer and workers were personal and paternalistic (e.g. the Cheeryble brothers in Nicholas Nickleby). In the later novels, however, the representative bad businessman is the remotely directing capitalist or financier, and the speculator who plays the market. What is interesting is that he is still opposed by the ideal firm in the form of a small independent owner/manager concern, represented in Little Dorrit by the firm of Doyce and Clennam, a throwback to an earlier entrepreneurial stage of capitalism.

That Merdle's business success was founded on fraud was not artistically accidental. It touches directly on the theme of shams, myths, fictions, and surfaces. Neither is it historically accidental. "Even the vaunted financial probity of businessmen took some hard knocks during the

mid-Victorian age. The expansion of large-scale enterprise and joint-stock organisation increased the opportunity for negligent management, irresponsible accounting and actual fraud."<sup>(1)</sup> The famous crashes of Hudson and Sadleir no doubt inspired Merdle, but on a deeper level there is evidence of a connection between the wealthy, respectable, business classes and the world of crime which is to be comprehensively developed in Great Expectations. This suggestion is reinforced by the respectable criminal Rigaud.

(iii)

The novel's treatment of manners and class (like the creation of Merdle) is rooted in the Victorian social experience of the 1850's. Little Dorrit is drenched in manners, in one respect part of a wider discussion of surfaces and forms. The importance of the theme of manners in Little Dorrit is not merely a reflection of one of the traditional themes of the English novel (an observation of the surface behaviour of society), nor, in the last instance, is its presence related to the novelist's exploration of the way manners are utilised as an indication or symptom of individual morality (as in Jane Austen), though this is involved too (e.g. in the malicious, though proper and polite, conversational tone applied by Gowan to Clennam). But essentially the theme and the way in which it is explored is directly bound up in the significant changes within the Victorian class system in the 1850's. To most contemporaries the system appeared to be becoming more fluid and offering greater opportunities for individual upward mobility, though in a certain sense it was also

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1 H. Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880, p. 442.

hardening - the something which made a man a gentleman was more than ever sought after and more highly prized. Certainly the more settled and economically promising social climate of the 50's seemed to offer far greater numbers (especially amongst the middle classes) more favourable opportunities for social rising and material advancement than the tense and economically depressed '40's. Indeed Little Dorrit could not have been written in the '40's. Although Little Dorrit (like Bleak House) dramatises social contrasts (c.f. the 'Poverty' and 'Riches' opposition of the two parts of the novel), the tenor of the book reflects a self-confident economic climate in which social climbing was popularly seen as a more appropriate literary subject than the issue of urban poverty, which, through the Two Nations debate, cast its shadow over the literature of the '40's.

Asa Briggs has pointed out that during the mid-Victorian period the language of class and class conflict softened. "The stormiest political decade of early nineteenth-century English history, that which began with the financial crisis of 1836 and the economic crisis of 1837, was the decade when class terms were most generally used and 'middle classes' and 'working classes' alike did not hesitate to relate politics directly to class antagonisms."<sup>(1)</sup> But during the middle years of the century "the language of class was softened as much as social antagonisms themselves ... Attention was paid not to the broad contours of class divisions, but to an almost endless series of social gradations."<sup>(2)</sup> Briggs demonstrates that it was generally considered by contemporaries in the 1850's that the dividing lines between

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1 Asa Briggs, "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England" in Essays in Labour History (ed. Briggs and Saville), p. 49.

2 A. Briggs, *Ibid.*, p. 69.

classes were extremely difficult to draw, that there were significant divisions inside what were conventionally regarded as classes, and that these divisions were often more significant than divisions between the classes. The problem of social definition, and the difficulty of an individual being certain of where he stood in the class system (and of how others regarded him) is one of the chief imaginative motors in the later novels - from the gallery of characters concerned with social definition in Little Dorrit, through Pip's experience in Great Expectations, to Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam in Our Mutual Friend. Their predicament belongs peculiarly to the mid-Victorian period. It was during this time (and not in the '40's) that the great Victorian debate about gentility and snobbery was vigorously, and at times paranoically, engaged through journalism, novels, and general conversation. The question of gentility bubbles under most of Dickens's later novels, most obviously Little Dorrit and Great Expectations. It is not usually recognised that these novels are twins in an important sense. Little Dorrit through its gallery of social aspirers, discusses the significance of the genteel surfaces - of dress, appearance, manners, ostentatious objects of display, etc. - as a symptom of social status and acceptability in a manner similar to the later novel.

Of course, all social aspirers must understand the nuances of the surface manifestations of class if their claims for a higher status are to be successful. The satire on the High Society of the Merdles, Mrs. Gowan, and Mrs. General focusses on these surface manifestations of gentility, their value and their strategic use. The utilisation of manners in a time of widespread social mobility cuts both ways. Social climbing depends on the award of social acceptance from those above. Thus the would-be riser will adopt the mannered surfaces and consumption

patterns of the higher status group as a means to subsequent acceptance. An individual must appear to belong - to have the correct social credentials - before he will be generally accepted as belonging (Veneering's tactic in Our Mutual Friend). Dickens says of Casby 'in the great social Exhibition, accessories are often accepted in lieu of the internal character' (p. 191) and the application is general to the world of the novel. In contrast to this aggressive individualistic use, manners can also be utilised as a defensive mechanism by a higher status group to keep social climbers in their place. Manners and snobbery can be "an active device for preventing social inferiors from treading too closely upon one's heels"<sup>(1)</sup>. This was especially so in the different gradations of the middle class, middle class snobbery being the most notorious of the period (cf Meagles).

An individualistic example of both uses of manners is provided by Rigaud. He asserts his claim to gentility ("A gentleman I am! And a gentleman I'll live, and a gentleman I'll die! It's my intent to be a gentleman. It's my game. Death of my soul, I play it out wherever I go!" (p. 47) in order to mix on terms of social equality within fashionable society. He is a travelling companion of Henry Gowan and an associate of William Dorrit. But he also uses his gentlemanly surfaces to socially intimidate Baptist, and keep the latter in a place of deference. The power of genteel surfaces is illustrated in the opening scene. Rigaud's self-confident promotion of his gentlemanly status overcomes Baptist's natural repugnance and the latter acts as his servant. (In Bleak House remember, Turveydrop uses his self-advertised deportment to socially intimidate his son.)

The manipulation of genteel forms as a means of social

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1 Perkin, Ibid., p. 93.

acceptance is illustrated by a whole gallery of characters, none of whom can define his place in society with certainty or confidence. All aspire to gentility though they define this in different ways. Merdle 'had sprung from nothing, by no natural growth or process that anyone could account for'. He has money and business success, a reputation as a financier and speculator with the golden touch, but he lacks a smooth or varnished social surface. His appearance is described on various occasions as 'common'. His lack of urbane charm or sparkling manners is total. His response to this social situation is a typical bourgeois strategy. To counter aristocratic disdain for business as low and vulgar he makes a strategic marriage with the socially skilled Mrs. Merdle. Her contribution to her husband's acceptance by fashionable society is clear from his remark, "You supply manner, and I supply money." (p. 447).

Gowan's social position is also ambiguous. He stands uneasily on the borderline between two classes - a professional artist with a blood connection with the Barnacles. Though economically dependent on his income from painting his cynical devaluation of artistic merit and his disparagement of his fellow-professionals separates him from them. This separation is reinforced by his stress on his own birth and his mocking claim that he is more of an amateur than a professional, touching on the traditional aristocratic legitimisation of art as an amateur pastime but not as a necessary means to a living. In the aristocratic model a gentleman does not need to work, his inherited income from his estates being deemed sufficient to meet his leisure demands. Thus Gowan attempts to maintain an uneasy and contradictory social position by appealing to his fashionable patrons in a manner which conceals and distorts his essential relation of economic dependence. "I have not quite got all the Amateur out of me yet ... and can't fall on to order, in a hurry, for the mere sake of sixpences." (p. 562).

Rigaud is self-consciously orientated to the traditional aristocratic definition of gentility. To him a total refusal to sully himself by manual work of any kind, and an exaggerated gallantry towards women are the distinguishing marks of a gentleman. Though in fashionable society he is suspected of not being what he claims through the characteristic and tasteless excess of his protestations of chivalry towards women (he is a more sinister parody of Turveydrop's Regency stance towards women, "'But Wooman, lovely Wooman,' said Mr. Turveydrop with very disagreeable gallantry, 'what a sex you are!'" (Penguin, p. 247)), he is never directly challenged. The success of his tactic is also reflected in the willingness of social inferiors to defer to him. 'Swagger and an air of authorised condescension do so much, that Mr. Flintwinch had already begun to think this a highly gentlemanly personage.' (p. 400).

William Dorrit in the Marshalsea, not unlike Gowan, asserts his gentlemanly status in direct proportion to the extent that he is economically dependent on others. The Dorrits systematically produced 'the family skeleton for the overawing of the College' beginning 'at about the period when they began to dine on the College charity' (p. 277). Of course, when released Dorrit is able to emulate Merdle in gaining social acceptance through his money and his genteel acquisition of Mrs. General. Associating the family with Mrs. General's unimpeachable social qualifications as master of the proprieties is an equivalent bourgeois strategy to Merdle's marriage and takes the vulgar gloss off Dorrit's money.

Like Rigaud in fashionable society Casby is suspected in his sphere of middle-class respectability. His tactic is to use Pancks as a shield in a manner similar to that later employed by Fledgeby through Riah in Our Mutual Friend -

a means by which social respectability can be made consistent with extreme business rigour. The experience of the different social claimants is linked. Casby's Patriarchial claims in Bleeding Heart Yard are as hollow as William Dorrit's in the Marshalsea, and once shorn of his 'benign locks' Casby's appearance is as 'common' as that of Merdle, when he lies dead in the bath-house.

Before considering the defensive use of manners by fashionable society in Little Dorrit, we must first discuss the social make-up of this group. It has already been argued (Part I, Chapter 3) that the fusion of aristocratic birth and bourgeois money produced a messy, blurred, social grouping. However, although Merdle is lionised on account of his wealth, it is aristocratic values which are in the ascendance in this alliance. Once successful, the big businessman of the mid-Victorian period tended to be imitative and accept traditional aristocratic values and life-styles, abandoning those middle-class values by which he had risen. Merdle's relation to this group is particularly revealing.

In a sense his elevated position is a triumph for money power over birth and manners and illustrates the aristocratic compromise involved in the alliance with bourgeois wealth. But on the level of values aristocratic repugnance to business still operates. Mrs. Merdle tells her husband, "There is a positive vulgarity in carrying your business affairs about with you as you do" (p. 447), and the business origin of Merdle's wealth has to be distorted and elevated through a perverted patriotism into the character of a national benefit before it is acceptable. (Merdle's 'immense' undertakings 'bring him in such vast sums of money that they are regarded as - hum - national benefits' (p. 537).) That aristocratic values are uppermost



in this group is also indicated by Gowan's knowledge that he will gain favour from his patrons by stressing his amateur inclinations, thus appealing to traditional aristocratic prejudice against the vulgarity of business. The incident of Merdle's suicide is particularly revealing. It smacks too much of middle-class earnestness to be consistent with good taste. Earlier Mrs. Merdle had encouraged her husband to 'care about nothing - or seem to care about nothing - as everybody else does' (p. 447). The Chief Butler is so disgusted with Merdle's 'low' death, incompatible with aristocratic boredom and indifference, that he resigns his post, remarking significantly, "Sir, Mr. Merdle never was the gentleman, and no ungentlemanly act on Mr. Merdle's part would surprise me." (p. 774). It is interesting that in his satire on High Society Dickens attacks the group from the stance of entrepreneurial middle-class values. The alliance between the aristocracy and the upper middle class had resulted in a comprehensive abandonment of the traditional middle-class value position of the earlier entrepreneurial stage of English capitalism. The satire on fashionable society in Little Dorrit reflects Dickens's view, expressed in a letter of 1855, when he was beginning the task of writing the novel, that the mid-Victorian middle class was only "a poor fringe on the mantle of the upper". Thus his satire on this fusion of interests follows the traditional middle-class critique of aristocratic life, into which the mid-Victorian big business and financial speculators had been integrated - i.e. a castigation of indifference, disinterested boredom, idleness, etc.

In considering the function of manners in this group the representative character is Mrs. General. The satire on mannered behaviour carries on from the dandiacal body episodes in Bleak House, though an important source from contemporary writings is Carlyle's Sartor Resartus (1833-34).

"The beginning of all wisdom is to look fixedly on Clothes, or even with armed eyesight, till they become transparent."<sup>(1)</sup> Of course, the satire on manners is only one element in the theme of surfaces which is such an important strand in the total structure of the novel. (Mrs. General's manners are 'surface and varnish and show without substance' (p. 557).) It is only when their surface respectability is forcibly rendered transparent that the unpromising appearance of Merdle and Casby is recognised. Merdle lying naked and dead in his bath appears as 'a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features' (p. 771). Casby, hatless and shorn of his patriarchial locks, is nothing more than a 'bare-polled, goggle-eyed, big-headed lumbering personage ... not in the least impressive, not in the least venerable.' (p. 872).

The mannered code as applied in High Society both distorts the nature of reality and alienates individuals from their humanity, by inducing a frozen and fastidious indifference. When in the grip of Mrs. General's surfaces Amy Dorrit's capacity to be of use and help to others ceases to exist. It is incompatible with her new social position for Amy to run personally to help Pet when she faints in the Convent of St. Bernard, "rushing about with tumblers of cold water, like a menial!" (p. 506). The performance of this humane task should have been left to servants who are hired to do it for money. When Amy looks sympathetically at vagrants Mrs. General tells her, "They should not be looked at. Nothing disagreeable should every be looked at" (p. 530). Apart from the inhumanity of this advice, it reflects a wilful desire to distort the nature of the class realities of Victorian society. It is against this refusal to recognise the existence of Tom's or Bleeding Heart Yard

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1 T. Carlyle, *Ibid.*, p. 102.

that the social interconnections of the later novels are emphasised. The operation of the mannered code reduces people to useless objects of decoration and display. A mechanical reflection of received opinions is substituted for individual thought. "Mrs. General had no opinions. Her way of forming a mind was to prevent it from forming opinions." (p. 503). When sight-seeing in Rome 'Mrs. General was in her pure element. Nobody had an opinion. There was a formation of surface going on around her on an amazing scale, and it had not a flaw of courage or honest free speech in it.' (p. 566). It is significant that through Mrs. General 'whose manner was perfect, considered as a piece of machinery' (p. 486) the mannered code is associated with a mechanical form of life. This imaginative and intellectual imprisonment of thought and will in manners connects the world of High Society with the prison motif.

This organic relation is made explicit by Little Dorrit herself but her explicit articulation of the connection is superfluous. Quite apart from the fact that throughout the Dorrit's European sojourn in genteel society prison imagery surrounds them, recognition of an essential similarity between fashionable society and the Marshalsea is implicit in the presentation of the latter. The Marshalsea, like the greater society outside its walls, contains a class hierarchy within which snobbery and patronage operate. There is just as much concern for social definition within the prison as outside it. In the prison yard there is an 'aristocratic or Pump side' where Mr. Dorrit walks, occasionally crossing to the poor side (where there are no pretensions of gentility) to magnanimously bless the young children. Indeed Mr. Dorrit's relations to the other prisoners, and in particular old Nandy, are an ironic parody of aristocratic privilege and patronage in mid-Victorian

England. 'Mr. Dorrit was in the habit of receiving this old man (i.e. Nandy) as if the old man held of him in vassalage under some feudal tenure.' (p. 415). Within the Marshalsea, as in Mrs. General's world, manners are used by Mr. Dorrit to distort the nature of reality, in particular the economic obligations involved in the Testimonial question, which is made an opportunity for display of gentlemanly sensitivity and good breeding on the part of the giver (his breeding no doubt improving in direct proportion to the amount of money contributed). Clennam's refusal to give anything, following his promise to Little Dorrit, condemns him in point of gentlemanly delicacy. 'His (i.e. Clennam's) obtuseness on the great Testimonial question was ... regarded as a positive shortcoming in point of gentlemanly feeling.' (p. 300). Indeed so clear is the parallel between the social rituals embodied in Dorrit's role as Father of the Marshalsea and the equally empty rituals of fashionable society - so strong is the irony when Dorrit switches to his former role during Mrs. Merdle's dinner - that there is no need for the explicit underlining of the analogy in Book II, chapter 7.

If the surfaces and forms of good breeding are seen as an imprisoning code, and Mrs. General is (in Daleski's terms) "a Social jailer"<sup>(1)</sup> then it is important to recognise the particular social/historical basis of Mrs. General's power in mid-Victorian England - the more fluid class realities of the economically expanding 1850's. "Not only were the middle classes drawing apart from the poor, each stratum, in a steady competition, was drawing away from the stratum next below, accentuating its newly acquired refinements, and enforcing them with censorious vigilance. The capriciousness and over-emphasis of Victorian propriety betrays its

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1 H.M. Daleski, Dickens and the Art of Analogy, p. 207.

source."<sup>(1)</sup> In Little Dorrit we see the mannered code being used by the fashionable world as a group (and in particular its aristocratic elements) to maintain social distance. To handle and manipulate the code it is necessary to have a conscious state of initiation through informal socialisation and specialised education. Meagles, for example, representative of the respectable middle classes, admits to Mrs. Gowan that he cannot utilise the code of what he calls "genteel mystifications" with her skill and aplomb. Rigaud's exaggerated aping of genteel manners fails to convince the experienced observer because of its characteristic excess. It is not too much to argue that the aristocracy's success in maintaining the social valuation of these forms which as a class they were uniquely well qualified to utilise and in asserting these as a class was a crucial factor in aristocratic social survival as a privileged group. Ferdinand Barnacle explained Merdle's success to Clennam in these terms, "Pardon me, but I think you really have no idea how the human bees will swarm to the beating of any old tin kettle; in that fact lies the complete manual of governing them. When they can be got to believe that the kettle is made of the precious metals in that fact lies the whole power of men like our late lamented." (p. 806). He might as well have been talking of Rigaud, or William Dorrit in the Marshalsea, or Casby etc.. And certainly his words are relevant for aristocratic survival. Consider the case of the Barnacles. Society accepts their surfaces and forms at the aristocratic valuation of 'precious metals'. This is true, for example, of Meagles who as a retired businessman might be expected to assert a counter set of middle-class values in opposition to aristocratic manners. However, he is so far from doing that, that, despite his personal experience of the inefficiency of the Circumlocution Office, staffed by the Barnacle family, he glories in the grand

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1 G.M. Young, Victorian England; a Portrait, p. 24.

Barnacle company round his dinner table when he marries Pet to Gowan, a man he suspects of being a scoundrel. His snobbery is clearly meant to be read as representative of society as a whole and the middle classes in particular. Clennam observes, "But his good friend (i.e. Meagles) had a weakness which none of us need go into the next street to find." (p. 248). Little Dorrit presents snobbery as helping to prop up the ruined architecture of society. In Merdle's ambiguous relations with the Barnacle clan lies the key to the aristocracy's defensive mechanism against middle-class inroads into its traditional social and political privileges. Little Dorrit explores the theme of the class relations between middle class and aristocracy in mid-Victorian England with greater subtlety and insight, as well as greater historical accuracy, than the somewhat crude irreconcilable dichotomy of Sir Leicester and the Ironmaster in Bleak House.

Of course, the working class as a group is even less qualified through socialisation and education to manipulate the learnt forms of genteel society. Yet they too accept them at their aristocratic valuation. The inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard accept the values of fashionable society for all the world as if they were pupils of Mrs. General. It is worth remembering that the myth of William Dorrit's gentility originates within the Marshalsea in the turnkey's admiration of Dorrit's genteel accomplishments - he speaks foreign languages (a factor Magwitch was later to admire in Pip) and can play the piano. To Plornish it is a mark of William Dorrit's social greatness that his family must hide from him the knowledge that they work for a living. When news of Merdle's wealth penetrates Bleeding Heart Yard instead of inspiring social resentment or frustration, or even awareness of relative deprivation, it is enjoyed vicariously by the inhabitants who vie with each other to

exaggerate the size of his fortune. Indeed Merdle is lionised as much in Bleeding Heart Yard as in High Society, and his wealth is ironically a source of comfort to the grinders who live in the former. Indeed Bleeding Heart Yard is under the ideological control of the dominant social classes. There is no evidence of a separate working class social or political consciousness. The portrayal of Bleeding Heart Yard in Little Dorrit encourages comparison with Engels's remark in 1858, "The English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat as well as a bourgeoisie."

None of Dickens's good working-class characters ever threatens the political status quo. Plornish, for example, is politically passive and apathetic. His consciousness that something is wrong in society inspires only a dull puzzlement, in the best traditions of Stephen Blackpool. 'As to who was to blame for it, Mr. Plornish didn't know who was to blame for it. He could tell you who suffered, but he couldn't tell you whose fault it was. It wasn't his place to find out, and who'd mind what he said, if he did find out? He only know'd that it wasn't put right by them what undertook that line of business, and that it didn't come right of itself.' (p. 184). In place of a political response there is a cheerful stoicism - 'there was ups you see, and there was downs. It was in vain to ask why ups, why downs; there they was you know.' (p. 799). The social forces which pressurise him cannot be understood or controlled. They have to be accepted and borne. Even when Plornish growls he does so 'in a prolix, gently-growling, foolish way.'. And yet paradoxically this political passivity and apathy worried Dickens. In a letter to Austen Layard in 1855 he warned, "There is nothing in the present

time at once so galling to me as the alienation of the people from their own public affairs ... And I believe the discontent to be so much worse for smouldering, instead of blazing openly, that it is extremely like the general mind of France before the breaking out of the first Revolution, and is in danger of being turned by any one of a thousand accidents ... into such a devil of a conflagration as never has been beheld since." A social historian might protest that a general alienation from public affairs is not an historically accurate summary of working class political life during the period, and point to the development of trade unions and co-operative societies. He might also assert that Chartism had helped to forge a greater degree of working-class class consciousness than is evident in *Bleeding Heart Yard*. Indeed, these historical oversights are common to all of the later novels, with the exception of Hard Times where the trade unions are satirised. However, this inaccurate representation is less important for our purposes than the problematic identity of the working class as politically passive and yet a revolutionary danger.

With reference to the fear expressed to Layard, explicit warnings to act before it is too late, often authorial intrusions thrust into the narrative, are common to most of the later novels. For example, in Hard Times the fact-finding utilitarians had been sternly told 'in the day of your triumph, when romance is utterly driven out of their souls, and they (i.e. the Coketown hands) and a bare existence stand face to face, Reality will take a wolfish turn, and made an end of you.' (Penguin, p. 192). The only suggestion in *Little Dorrit* that the cap-doffing of the Plornishes might lead to stone-throwing is a description of destitute children in Covent Garden ('miserable children in rags ... like young rats, slunk and hid, fed on offal, huddled together for warmth, and were hunted about') which



carries the postscript, 'look to the rats young and old, all ye Barnacles, for before God they are eating away our foundations, and will bring the roofs on our heads!' (p. 208). This directly relates to the collapse of the rotten foundations of Mrs. Clennam's house (an episode which will be discussed later) as well as to Miss Wade's remark during quarantine conversation at Marseilles, "If I had been shut up in any place to pine and suffer, I should always hate that place and wish to burn it down, or raze it to the ground." (p. 61). The urban masses of the City of London had been explicitly described in Chapter 3 as living in an imprisoning environment from which there is 'no escape between the cradle and the grave'. But will the inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yeard ever fully recognise the imprisoning nature of their existence while they remain under the ideological control of genteel society? In the treatment of the working class in Little Dorrit there does seem a confusion and lack of resolution between their actual character (passive, docile, deferential, and non-political) and their latent character as destructive agents of revolution. The former corresponds to the historical reality of the period (the English mid-Victorian working class was not revolutionary - the Hyde Park demonstrations of 1866 were to provide a good test case for the revolutionary potential of the working class - there was political tension but no open class struggle) - while the latter corresponds to the great Victorian nightmare (most fully articulated by Carlyle).

Just as there is an ambiguity in the treatment of the working class, there is also an ambiguity on the novel's final position on the subject of manners. For while the way manners are utilised in High Society is attacked the novel does not deny that there is a value in the mannered code (in addition to, though not as a substitute for, the values of the heart) when the code is a symptom of real

courtesy, consideration, and respect, and not a tool to be manipulated as a weapon in class competition. Dickens's experiences in America had hardened his dislike of a social life without a respectful use of civilised forms and a right and proper concern for the proprieties. (See American Notes (1843) and Martin Chuzzlewit, (1843/4) for a satirical repudiation of the vulgarity and barbarism in American life.) This respect for the intrinsic qualities of manners is reflected in the sympathetic portrait of Clennam's concern with courtesy -

"'Not to deceive you, sir, I notice it,' said Mrs. Plornish, 'and I take it kind of you.' ... 'It ain't many that comes into a poor place, that deems it worth their while to move their hats,' said Mrs. Plornish. 'But people think more of it than people think.'

Clennam returned, with an uncomfortable feeling in so very slight a courtesy being unusual, Was that all!" (p. 178). The frank, open and polite charm of Ferdinand Barnacle is also sympathetically presented in a manner which anticipates Herbert Pocket, and contrasts with Gowan's use of frankness and openness to wound Clennam. Within the novel's scheme of values it is Clennam and not Rigaud, Gowan, Merdle, or William Dorrit who is the ideal gentleman.

There is some play on the concept of natural gentility in Little Dorrit. Amy Dorrit, writing to Arthur Clennam, remarks of her sister Fanny, "It is natural to her to be a lady." (p. 522). In Society's sense of the word this is true, for Fanny has always been selfish and indifferent to others. However, the novel implicitly suggests that it is Amy, who says of Society's expectations on the subject of gentility, "I find that I cannot learn", who is the 'natural lady'. Through Amy an alternative moral definition of gentility is proposed - a definition not incompatible with working-class origins or manual labour. (Amy tells Clennam

in the Marshalsea, "I would rather pass my life here with you, and go out daily, working for our bread, than I would have the greatest fortune that ever was told, and be the greatest lady that ever was honoured." (p. 886). She puts the values of both Merdle and Mrs. General in their place.) How cogent and substantial is this award of natural gentility? In fact, the utilisation of the concept puts a sentimental gloss on the class realities of mid-Victorian society. Just how empty and hollow this gesture is will be seen during the discussions of Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend - two novels in which natural gentility is an important structure within the novel. However, in Little Dorrit there is a good instance of Dickens's guard slipping to reveal the limitations of his radical pose. John Chivery shows such 'chivalrous feelings towards all that belongs to her (i.e. Amy)' that Clennam says, with cordial admiration, "You speak, John, ... like a Man." (pp. 795-6). The same tribute, with the addition of the adjectives 'gentle' and 'Christian', is to be paid to Joe Gargery in Great Expectations. But how much respect and dignity is John Chivery awarded throughout the novel? He is mercilessly exploited as a figure of fun, and in an earlier passage it would seem that his social origins condemn him despite this sentimental sop. Following his proposal to Amy Dorrit (despite his delicacy presented as something essentially comic and absurd) John Chivery breaks down - 'the heart that was under the waistcoat of sprigs - mere slop-work, if the truth must be known - swelled to the size of the heart of a gentleman; and the poor common little fellow, having no room to hold it, burst into tears.' (p. 263) (the italics are mine).

(iv)

The social vision of Little Dorrit then presents mid-Victorian capitalist England as an alienating and imprisoning

environment. It is worth examining the novel's treatment of the idea of environment. In its general treatment of character Little Dorrit gives literary dramatisation to what Owen himself called his "one fundamental principle" - that "the character of man is formed for and not by him." In contrast to other Victorian novels with a social purpose, "Dickens's writings convey a sense of the pressure of environment on the inner, as well as the outer, lives of the characters".<sup>(1)</sup> The moral failings within the Marshalsea prison are seen as a product of the environment. Always kept before us is the Marshalsea 'stain' and its 'shadow'. Dickens emphasises William Dorrit's spiritual 'jail-rot', and the Marshalsea 'taint' on Tip's love for Amy. Tip himself appeared 'to take the Prison walls with him' in his unsuccessful attempts to find stable employment. Even the innocent Maggy is corrupted, and when Arthur Clennam is imprisoned he admits to Amy, "I well know the taint of it clings to me" (p. 829). Only Amy escapes the corruption - the environment is not completely deterministic - but it testifies to its power that Amy's survival of innocence is associated with a unique continuation of childhood into adult life. This utilisation of the romantic concept of the child is another legacy in Dickens's attack on industrial society of the earlier romantic social critics, Wordsworth and Blake. Not only is Amy an exception to the general power of the environment to mould character but Rigaud, in a throwback to the villains of the earlier novels, is also presented as an embodiment of evil, which Iago-like, is independent of environment. In an interesting passage, which reflects an ambiguity in Dickens's personal attitude to environment when applied to the specific social problem of urban crime, the landlady of Chalons denies that Rigaud is 'a child of circumstances' and asserts that "there are

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1 E.D.H. Johnson, Charles Dickens: an Introduction to His Novels, p. 51.

people ... who have no good in them - none. That there are people whom it is necessary to detest without compromise. That there are people who must be dealt with as enemies of the human race. That there are people who have no human heart, and who must be crushed like savage beasts and cleared out of the way." (p. 169). This outburst can be directly connected to Dickens's hardening attitude towards penal and legal reform during this period. Dickens's early liberal and enlightened views on this subject (in advance of general opinion) were becoming progressively more conservative and his impatience with the would-be reformers more complete.<sup>(1)</sup> ('The landlady's lively speech was received with greater favour at the Break of Day, than it would have elicited from certain amiable whitewashers of the class she so unreasonably objected to, nearer Great Britain.' (p. 169).)

However, the imaginative treatment of the relation of character and environment emphasises that the case of Rigaud is a special one. At each end of the human scale (the extreme innocence of Amy, and the extreme malice and evil of Rigaud) character may be independent of environment. But for the vast majority of people within these extremes environment is the decisive influence on character. The original prospective title of the book was Nobody's Fault and indeed, in Little Dorrit moral failings are in the main presented as the product of the nature (and the failings) of the system. The fact that moral infection spreads from Merdle, an individual, might seem to contradict the association of moral corruption with a poisonous environment. However, Merdle is only successful because he appeals to the characteristic market principle for action in everyday social life - itself a product of the social/economic environment. Thus Merdle's success is not a cause of moral

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1 See Philip Collins, Dickens and Crime.

infection, but a symptom of the general condition. What is more, it could be argued that the real villain is not Merdle but the City as an institution (and the new social/economic relations which were characteristic of that stage of capitalist development). The concept of an institution as villain links Merdle with the Circumlocution Office satire (emphasising again how tight the structure of the novel is) and while it looks back to Chancery in Bleak House, directly anticipates the treatment of Shares in Our Mutual Friend.

Of course, if the social environment was regarded as totally deterministic there would be serious consequences for the novel, for in a corrupt society there could be no heroes. It is because struggle against the environment is possible that most nineteenth century novels are characterised (in Lukács's terms) by the presence of problematic heroes. Arthur Clennam is one of Dickens's most artistically successful heroes. While Amy's struggle loses some conviction because like Christ in Milton's Paradise Regained, given her nature her temptations are not really tempting, Clennam is both vulnerable and fallible, and on occasions succumbs to the power of the environment. He makes the moral compromise involved in accepting the speculation principle, and unlike Amy, when imprisoned in the Marshalsea he lapses into an untidy state of depression and lethargy. The difficulty of his struggle to free himself from his past and attain authentic relations makes it artistically convincing. In this struggle he is helped not only by Amy but also by Doyce, a very important character in the value scheme of the novel.

The virtues of both Amy and Doyce are located within a framework of traditional middle-class values. Amy's response to her Marshalsea situation is in terms of work, perseverance, thrift, and duty, while Doyce reflects the middle-class virtues of individualism, enterprise, perseverance and work, and his business career conforms to the middle-class

ideal of the self-made man. (See Part 1, Chapter 3.) Within Little Dorrit the traditional middle-class values of entrepreneurial capitalism are used to criticise not only the aristocratic Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office, but also the present mid-Victorian experience of the middle class - represented in Mrs. Clennam's form of religion (economic evangelicalism), Meagles snobbery (the middle-class as a fringe on the aristocratic mantle), Casby's hypocrisy, Merdle's speculation, and Pancks's worship of business. The traditional entrepreneurial values are no longer applicable to the middle-class social situation, which involves a social, moral, and ideological compromise.

Loyce's role in the criticism of the contemporary middle-class stance is particularly important. Clennam's rejection of his role in the family firm defined his essential moral position in opposition to the money/business ethos of his parents. His business partnership with Doyce does not involve moral compromise because the firm of Doyce and Clennam is explicitly presented as an ideal type of 'clean' capitalism, an historical throwback to an earlier state of entrepreneurial capitalist development. Doyce's business values are those of what Lukács would call the heroic phase of capitalist development. It is significant that Doyce, who represents working for profits, rejects the speculation principle, the means by which Merdle's profits materialise as if by magic. Doyce's objection to speculation ("If I have a prejudice connected with money and money figures ... it is against speculating" (p. 736)) is a moral one, but it helps to define his representative social role in the novel. He represents the heroic entrepreneurial capitalist values in opposition to Merdle, the passive financier and speculator, the representative capitalist hero of the mid-Victorian period.

Within the firm of Doyce and Clennam human, qualitative

relations can exist between employer and employee. There is a place in the firm for both Pancks and Baptist. In fact, the firm is a refuge, rather like Jarndyce's St. Albans home for moral victims of the system. Within the artistic scheme of the book Doyce's work stands in opposition to Pancks's alienating role as Casby's Grinder, and Gowan's purely quantitative, mediated valuation of his art. Doyce's work is fulfilling and creative, and it is valued qualitatively for its own sake. 'Daniel Doyce faced his condition with its pains and penalties attached to it, and soberly worked on for the work's sake.' (p. 569). Indeed, Doyce can be read as a paradigm for the creative artist in any field whose work transcends its status as a marketable object. Dickens would have been thinking in particular of the literary artist. As an ideal model of capitalism with a heart, Doyce's firm operates as a critique of the way things are in mid-Victorian England - consider Casby's business principles as described by Pancks, "If I was a shilling a week less useful in ten year's time, this imposter would give me a shilling a week less; if as useful a man could be got at sixpence cheaper, he would be taken in my place at sixpence cheaper. Bargain and sale, bless you! Fixed principles!" (p. 871). But it is important to recognise that Doyce's firm is not being offered optimistically as a microcosm for a practical and realisable better future. In its nature and values it looks back to the past and the economic clock cannot be reversed. Little Dorrit contains no optimism for a general social reform. It is a novel about the way things are in an industrial society, and implies that things aren't going to change.

It must also be pointed out that Doyce's role is not without its artistic problems. Doyce's business success abroad, necessary as a plot device for delivering Clennam from the Marshalsea, opposes the logic of the social vision of the novel. It has been emphasized, especially in the



experience of the Dorrits abroad, that the condition of life within the industrial system cannot be escaped from by a journey, a mere geographical movement from place to place. Doyce's European success after his years of frustration at the hands of the Circumlocution Office smacks of a fairy-tale resolution, out of place in the grimly realistic world of the novel. It is common to most of the later novels that money (elsewhere a chief agent of moral corruption) is necessary as a plot mechanism for the conventional happy ending - in this case Doyce's financial gain from working abroad which will put the firm back on its feet again and safeguard the future of Doyce, Clennam, Pancks, and Baptist. Also, while in conflict with the Circumlocution Office Doyce was a problematic social figure. The Circumlocution Office regraded his creative work as a crime and him as a public offender, whereas the fruits of Merdle's fraud were regarded as national benefits. However, at the end of the novel, following his business success abroad, Doyce appears less problematic. Although his values have not been compromised, Doyce appears to have been integrated back into Victorian society. A successful future for the firm of Doyce and Clennam is suggested, which will bring social respectability and economic comfort. The collapse of his old-fashioned firm, brought about by its contact with the characteristic new form of economic activity, stock-market speculation, could have been read as an appropriate metaphor for the historical development of Victorian capitalism - in which case, the firm's recovery and future success (like that of Sol Gill's firm in Dombey and Son) seems both inappropriate and artistically unfortunate.

Any discussion of the ending of Little Dorrit must engage the question of whether a general social significance should be taken from the apparent liberation of certain characters from their self-imposed spiritual prisons. In

the closing chapters Arthur Clennam is freed from the Marshalsea and rejects his own fiction that he is an older man whose opportunities for love and marriage are past and lost; Pancks rejects his spiritually impoverishing role as Casby's Grinder; Affery breaks out from the influence of 'the two clever ones' - "I have broken out now, and I can't go back"; Tattycoram breaks free from her suffocating (probably lesbian) relationship with Miss Wade; and perhaps most important of all Mrs. Clennam temporarily fights free from the physical paralysis of her domestic prison. The chapter headings of the last three chapters ('Going', 'Going!', and 'Gone') could be read as a pointer towards a general progression or liberation from society's prison. If the condition of individual characters is microcosmic then their individual releases might suggest that the prison nature of society is breaking down. The decisive action of Pancks and Mrs. Clennam might also be seen as a movement away from mechanism towards spontaneous life. However, this optimistic reading of the ending cannot be justified from a closer reading of the text.

The releases of Affery and Tattycoram are not problematic, but are much less important than the escapes of Pancks and Mrs. Clennam, both of which present problems of interpretation. Consider Pancks's release. To bring his private and official lives into line and resolve his crisis of identity he resigns from Casby's service. "'I have discharged myself from your service,' said Pancks, 'that I may tell you what you are.'" (p. 869). Momentarily he is no longer a split-man but only through the suicidal and ultimately self-defeating gesture of denying himself an official existence altogether. Because it is economically necessary for him to work, and because the values associated with Casby's business are presented as representative of the Victorian business world Pancks's resignation is only a very temporary reprieve for him before he seeks work in

another firm in conditions over which he can have little control, and which, in all probability, will reproduce the conditions of his official life under Casby (thus involving him once again in a split existence). However, at this point the firm of Doyce and Clennam is used as a convenient plot device to make good Pancks's escape from Casby. Dickens sets himself a problem but then artistically resolves it through the plot in a way which sidesteps its implications. Certainly this is no representative or general solution for the whole class of Grinders which Pancks represents for the firm of Doyce and Clennam is unique in the world of the novel - a highly idealised exception to the existing reality of mid-Victorian business. The problem of Pancks will later be re-examined via Wemmick, but for the split man of Great Expectations the plot offers no such artificial resolution of the private and official spheres. Furthermore, though he no longer lives within the reassuring walls of his old myth of the Whole Duty of Man in a commercial country, Pancks is unable to face the reality of Clennam's speculation loss without creating another comforting fiction, a new myth. He tells Mrs. Clennam, "I can prove by figures, ... that it ought to have been a good investment. I have gone over it since it failed, every day of my life, and it comes out - regarded as a question of figures - triumphant." (p. 833). We are told that "These incontrovertible figures had been the occupation of every moment of his leisure since he had lost his money, and were destined to afford him consolation to the end of his days." (p. 833).

Mrs. Clennam's escape is problematic too. It is presented with a sentimental, quasi-religious gloss which gives it a vague representative flavour. Following her confession to Amy, Mrs. Clennam and Little Dorrit cross the river at sunset and mingle with the crowds enjoying the summer evening. The London scene is described, for the only time in the novel, in tones of peace, calm, and serenity. 'From a radiant centre,

over the whole length and breadth of the tranquil firmament great shoots of light streamed among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that change the crown of thorns into a glory.' (p. 862). This description is clearly intended to be compared with the earlier description of the Marshalsea that same morning when the sun 'struck the long bright rays, bars of the prison of this lower world' (p. 831). Does the association with the classic case of imprisonment being turned to triumph - Christ at Easter - imply that a general resurrection is imminent for the prison inhabitants of London, and industrial England? Such an impression would clash with the whole force, mood, and tone of the book, not least the sober, qualified ending of Arthur and Amy's marriage, which will be considered in a moment. It is not surprising that Dickens should reach for religious sentimental language to convey cheaply a reassuring impression which has not been artistically worked for. Generally when we encounter religious imagery in the later novels it is a sign that Dickens is in artistic trouble, and wishes to achieve an emotional, unthinking response from his readers. The above passage is best read as a concession to the reading public, as well as a measure of some imaginative confusion on Dickens's own part.

What's more, using Mrs. Clennam as a representative figure for this spiritual liberation seems inappropriate, in view of the fact that the nature of her 'escape' from her spiritual prison is very limited and incomplete. Certainly, she does admit her past deception to Amy ("You know, now, what I have done"), and asks forgiveness ("Forgive me. Can you forgive me?"). But to the last she still deceives herself that her past motivation was religious duty not vindictively personal spite. She still insists to Amy, "I have set myself against evil; not against good. I have been an instrument of severity against sin."

(p. 860). She is still willing to deceive Arthur about his birth, and to buy off Rigaud. That her spiritual liberation is incomplete makes it appropriate that she should set off to return to her old domestic prison of her invalid years and though it collapses before she returns, Mrs. Clennam herself reverts back to her mechanical existence. Paralysed and dumb, for three more years 'she lived and died a statue' (p. 863).

Most modern critics read the collapse of Mrs. Clennam's house as an important emblematic episode, not an arbitrary plot resolution conveniently killing off Rigaud as some contemporary critics suggested. Indeed, Mrs. Clennam's house can be read as a social microcosm - all the concepts and images which interrelate to produce the novel's social vision are concentrated in Mrs. Clennam's house and its inhabitants (prison, crime, market, alienation, etc.). Like Dickens's best emblems it is given a rich variety of surface detail. It is described as a 'debilitated old house in the city, wrapped in its mantle of soot, and leaning heavily on the crutches that had partaken of its decay and worn out with it' (p. 220). If the house's collapse is to be given a general social suggestiveness, it is not as a symbol for the crashing down of society's surfaces and forms once truth and self-knowledge is admitted (as some critics have suggested) though it is connected with the existence of these surfaces and forms, in particular the mannered code. The vision of society in Little Dorrit is of a corrupt system being propped up in its present form by the operation of snobbery and ideological deference. Meagles's snobbery reinforces the Barnacle position, as Bleeding Heart Yard's habitual admiration and deference does for the fashionable world as a whole. Both together make a crucial contribution to the survival of the system, albeit in a corrupt and degraded form. If an analogy is accepted between the rotting crutches which prop up the ruined

architecture of Mrs. Clennam's house and the degraded social forms embodied in snobbery which work to support the social/political status quo, then the collapse of the house takes on an ominous general suggestiveness. Sweep away the genteel surfaces of Mrs. General and the result would be the collapse of the whole social structure, for it is only the continued valued recognition of Mrs. General's forms in Bleeding Heart Yard that stands between society and the revolutionary fate associated with the children in Covent Garden. Daleski has remarked that the collapse of the house "is meant to have the same kind of ominous force as the crashing down of houses ... in Tom-all-Alone's in Bleak House"<sup>(1)</sup>, and one might add that as an imaginative emblem for social collapse it resembles Krook's spontaneous combustion. Thus there is a basic ambiguity in the novel's treatment of the use of manners. Though the social/political utilisation of manners is seen as a social and moral evil, in a sense it is a necessary evil if revolutionary collapse is to be indefinitely postponed. Clearly this depressing perspective is far removed from the vague optimism conveyed in the description of the London evening which preceded the house's collapse. The throwaway glimmer of social hope is also out of tune with the reserved, sober, and qualified marriage resolution of the Clennam and Amy romance which closes the novel.

The ending of Little Dorrit is altogether less cosy and reassuring than Esther and Allan's country cottage conclusion to Bleak House. It is also a more open ending, and hence more appropriate to the tragic vision of society contained in the novel, which imaginatively demands a relatively open ending. Little Dorrit is a novel about the way things are in an industrial society, and does not offer the hope that change for the better in the near future is possible.

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1 H.M. Daleski, *Ibid.*, p. 231.

The Marshalsea is still standing and the Circumlocution Office is still grinding on at the novel's conclusion. In Little Dorrit there is no equivalent to the attempt in Bleak House to suggest, however artistically unconvincingly, through Jarndyce's transformation of Bleak House that a hopeful change for the whole social system is possible. Yet we must not exaggerate the pessimism of Little Dorrit. John Wain has argued that the novel portrays Victorian England as "a place where genuine happiness is impossible"<sup>(1)</sup>. He is wrong. The social environment is not presented as completely deterministic. If the novel offers no hope for the redemption of the system, there is still, in a qualified but important sense, hope for the individual life. Clennam and Amy achieve a real and authentic level of happiness at the close of the novel. However, this type of fulfilling, qualitative relationship is only possible in opposition to the dominant market morality of Victorian society, and Clennam's relationship with Amy is given no general or representative social significance. The uniqueness of their bond, its vulnerability, and the difficulties of the path which lies ahead are all suggested in the novel's closing paragraph. The newly married pair "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, and the arrogant and the forward and the vain, fretted and chaffed, and made their usual uproar." (p. 895).

What is striking here is the qualification and reservation contained in this tribute. There is the minimum of concession to contemporary taste. Critics are agreed in finding the close of Little Dorrit Dickens's most tactful and artistically successful ending, totally consistent

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1 J. Wain, 'Little Dorrit' in Dickens and the Twentieth Century (ed. Gross and Pearson), p. 176.

with the dominant mood of the book. There is a sense of balance and proportion which is missing from the conclusion of the other novels. "Here too the ending is triumphant only in a muted way, and has a rational sobriety and lack of crescendo",<sup>(1)</sup> and "when in the end they do come together, symbolically under the shadow of the Marshalsea, it is with a very qualified blessing that Dickens sends them out into the world"<sup>(2)</sup>.

On the one hand, Clennam and Amy choose a life of self-limitation ('a modest life'), and yet on the other hand, they are bravely affirming self at the expense of the community. They go down into the streets where in the midst of the jostling crowd they live a separate and isolated existence. The urban community is presented as fragmented in the novel, anyway. A sense of loneliness, separateness, and non-communication pervades the book. It is significant that the last image in the book is of the city crowd as a stream of separate and solitary units.

What is important about Clennam's final position is that he stands upright without benefit of supporting myths (in contrast to most of the characters in the novel) and sees society for what it is. Tragic man, according to Lucien Goldmann, confronts the world without illusions as to its nature. He accepts the world as it is in order to fight on for authentic values as an individual. This corresponds to Clennam's position at the close of Little Dorrit. He doesn't attempt to retreat into a private world, like Jarndyce, but goes down into the streets. Jarndyce, too, had accepted society (i.e. Chancery) for what it was, but had then retreated from this confrontation into a private world where, through his east-wind fiction, he distorts the

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1 B. Hardy, Charles Dickens: The Later Novels, p. 25.

2 P. Hobsbaum, A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens, p. 211.



nature of his immediate reality. Clennam's final stance in the novel involves less compromise than that of any other Dickens hero. If Clennam is Dickens's most successful tragic hero, there is no doubt that the novel as a whole embodies a unified and coherent tragic vision of mid-Victorian English capitalism. The world will not be changed and authentic values realised on a general level. Clennam's struggle with the Circumlocution Office had provided an emblem for the individual's unsuccessful attempt to change his environment. But though Clennam is resigned to the condition of society at the novel's close, he does not capitulate to its dominant market values, and through his relationship with Amy maintains his struggle for authentic relationships. At the end of Little Dorrit we don't feel that Clennam has achieved a spurious integration within his society. The conflict between the individual and the system has not been artificially resolved.

## CHAPTER 3

A TALE OF TWO CITIES -  
REVOLUTIONARY MADNESS AND MORAL REBIRTH

A Tale of Two Cities (1859) is usually regarded by critics as being a curiosity, lacking the social vision and social themes common to the other completed later novels, a sport or holiday fiction outside Dickens's main novelistic line of development. One critic has called it "superficially ... the least Dickensian of all the novels Dickens wrote"<sup>(1)</sup>, and most critics in attempting to marry it into the Dickens canon stress the links with Barnaby Rudge, (1841) the earlier tale of London mob violence during the 'No Popery' Gordon riots, rather than A Tale's relation to those novels which precede and follow it.

However, without denying the link with Barnaby Rudge, this reading will emphasise the common areas of interest and the essential similarities in the way in which society is seen in A Tale and the other later novels. It is best not to read A Tale of Two Cities as a historical romance in the traditions of Scott, or simply as an adventure tale of individual heroism and self-sacrifice, but primarily as a novel which through the distancing medium of a historical melodrama, focuses critical insight on the condition of contemporary mid-Victorian society and imaginatively explores one of the possible consequences of that condition. Though the novel opens in 1775 the imaginative world Dickens creates in the scenes set in England is, in the essential characteristics (rather than surface detail), that of England in the 1850's. English society is presented

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1 G. Woodcock, A Tale of Two Cities (Penguin Edition, Harmondsworth, 1970) - introduction, p. 9.

in terms of the by now familiar concepts and images of prison and death, secrecy and crime. Dickens's imaginative response to his society in A Tale is at one with those later novels which have more obvious or explicit social themes.

However, before examining the structure of the novel and the relation between the scenes in England and France, some points should be made about the earlier novel of mob violence, Barbary Rudge.

(ii)

Though Barnaby Rudge self-consciously looks back to the historical novels of Scott, the dominant influence in the book is that of Carlyle, whose French Revolution appeared in 1837, and Chartism in 1839. Both made a profound impression on the young Dickens, who is said to have carried the French Revolution everywhere with him on the book's first appearance. It is no surprise that Barnaby Rudge (1841), should bear the unmistakeable imprint of Carlyle at a time when the dangers from Chartism were most real. 1838-1842 were the years of greatest support for Chartism, and it is impossible not to see the description of the mob in Barnaby Rudge as a pointed comment on the social evil latent in "physical force" Chartism.

What is interesting is that when he wrote A Tale of Two Cities in 1859, Carlyle's book still had such a strong hold on Dickens's imagination. He says in the preface to A Tale, "It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr. Carlyle's wonderful book." The imagery applied to the Paris revolutionaries in the later book is remarkably similar to the earlier description of the Gordon rioters.

In Barnaby Rudge the rioters are seen as beasts, madmen, savages and devils. The rioters are "hideous madmen", their appearance "a dream of demon heads and savage eyes". At the Maypole Inn the rioters are "shouting and whooping like savages". At the burning of the Warren they were "stark mad", becoming increasingly cruel "as though moving in that element they became fiends, and changed their earthly nature for the qualities that give delight in hell", while if "Bedlam gates had been flung open wide there would not have issued forth such maniacs as the frenzy of that night had made."

The cruelty and unpredictability of the mob is contagious, which makes it the more to be feared. "We are told that "sober workmen going home from their day's labour, were seen to cast down their baskets of tools and become rioters in an instant; mere boys on errands did the like. In a word, a moral plague ran through the city ... The contagion spread like a dread fever: an infectious madness, as yet not near its height, seized on new victims every hour, and society began to tremble at their ravings." (p. 484)<sup>(1)</sup>. The infectious madness of mob violence can in an instant turn a Joe Gargery into an Orlick.

And yet even in this earlier novel the violence of the rioters is not simply put down to a malicious desire for mischief and destruction on the part of the London ne'er-do-wells, given full reign by Gordon's false cry of "No Popery". The rioters are seen as being, to a considerable extent, the victims of oppressive laws and a governmental abuse of authority. The mob may be "composed for the most part of the very scum and refuse of London", but we are told that the growth of this body "was fostered by bad criminal

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1 All page references to the Penguin Edition (Harmondsworth 1973), Barnaby Rudge (edited by Gordon Spence).

laws, bad prison regulations, and the worst conceivable police" (p. 453). The point is developed through an analogy between the relations of parent and child on the one hand, and those of government and subject on the other.

The abuse of parental authority by John Chester and old John Willet leads to the rebellion of their sons, while Hugh's life of violence and crime is in part a surly and spiteful reaction to his rejection and abandonment by his father. The rebellion of the Gordon rioters must be read as in part a reaction to, and symptom of, a severe and corrupt exercise of authority by the system's official representatives. John Willet, the bullying father, is verbally linked with two corrupt representatives of the authority of the state, the country Justice of the Peace, and Dennis the Hangman.

Old John is regarded as "a father of the good old English sort" by his Maypole cronies who approvingly add "there were no new-fangled notions or modern ways in him". The brutalised Country Justice, encountered by Barnaby, is praised by his friends in language which recalls John Willet. "By some he was called 'a country gentleman of the true school,' by some 'a fine old country gentleman,' by some 'a sporting gentleman,' by some 'a thoroughbred Englishman,' by some 'a genuine John Bull;' but they all agreed in one respect, and that was, that it was a pity that there were not more like him, and that because there were not, the country was going to rack and ruin every day." (p. 435). We are told that Mr. Dennis, the Hangman "had been bred and nurtured in the good old school, and had administered the good old laws on the good old plan, always once and sometimes twice, every six weeks for a long time." (p. 590). Much of Dennis's brutality of outlook is transferred by association to the social system which allows the Tyburn hangings to serve as public entertainment, and maintains the multitude of often petty offences punishable with the death penalty.

Dennis associates his work with the traditional ruling order. - "My work is sound, Protestant, constitutional English Work."

However, at the time of writing Barnaby Rudge, Dickens didn't regard the whole system of Victorian society as corrupt. Its evils were specific abuses which could be dealt with as self-contained problems by piecemeal reform - of criminal laws, prison regulations, the police etc... Those who oppose a measure of local reform on the grounds that this will bring about a greater change in the nature of the system than intended, have their views discredited by association through being put into the mouth of Mr. Dennis, who argues, "If they touch my work that's a part of so many laws, what becomes of the laws in general, what becomes of the religion, what becomes of the country!" (p. 355). Of course, by the time of A Tale of Two Cities, Dickens was seeing society whole, and no longer regarded piecemeal social reform as viable solution to the problems of the system, especially the dissatisfactions of the urban poor.

(iii)

By the date of A Tale, the threat of Chartism or any other collective working class political movement had subsided. The late '50's and '60's was a period of relative social calm and freedom from the fears which had seemed so real in the hungry '40s. But Dickens's insistent imaginative analysis of society throughout the mid-Victorian period saw a revolutionary danger - not in surface political agitation, but as the inevitable consequence of a general corruption throughout the system. In the revolutionary image of Krook's spontaneous combustion Dickens proposed a crude social/historical cause and effect relation, i.e. a general unrelieved corruption within a system will lead

inevitably to the explosive destruction of that system. This is developed in A Tale of Two Cities, where Dickens puts forward an honest, if unsophisticated theory of historical dynamics to account for the outbreak of the French Revolution. The emphasis is similar. Any social explosion like the French Revolution has social causes engendered in the corrupt nature of the system itself.

The novel firmly rejects any explanation based on the unique capacity for evil and depravity amongst the French proletariat. Returning from the death of Foulon the individual members of the Paris mob behave in a manner which testifies to their common humanity, not to a historically unique barbarity. "Fathers and Mothers who had their full share in the worst of the day, played gently with their meagre children; and lovers with such a world around them and before them, loved and hoped." (p. 256)<sup>(1)</sup>.

Throughout the novel, aristocratic culpability for the revolution is emphasised repeatedly. Charles Darnay admits to his uncle, "Sir, - we have done wrong, and are reaping the fruits of wrong.". The Revolution was not a freak or historical accident - Dickens has contempt for those who "talk of this terrible revolution as if it were the one only harvest every known under the skies that had not been sown - as if nothing had ever been done, or omitted to be done, that led to it" (p. 267) - but the inevitable result of an inhuman and oppressive set of relations within a corrupt system. It is "a moral disorder, born of unspeakable suffering, intolerable oppression, and heartless indifference." (p. 376). It is precisely because the Revolution was the inescapable product of definite social facts that Dickens sees the experience as relevant

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1 All references for A Tale of Two Cities are to the Penguin Edition (Harmondsworth 1970), ed. George Woodcock.

for mid-Victorian England. It too is a corrupt structure within which much is "omitted to be done". The poverty of the Paris proletariat on the eve of revolution, reflected in the tenement building in a room of which Defarge kept Dr. Manette, (a "great foul nest", filthy and polluted, stinking from decomposing refuse on every landing as well as the "intangible impurities" of "poverty and deprivation" ) - is not dissimilar to the plight of the London slum-dwellers in the 1850's. Indeed the tenement building is if anything a better dwelling than Tom-all-Alone's. Thus the revolutionary scenes in Paris offer an imaginative exploration of a possible future awaiting Victorian England. The message is driven home. "Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. Sow the same seed of rapacious licence and oppression all over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind." (p. 399).

The relevance of the Revolution experience for mid-Victorian England would not be lost on contemporary readers - but Dickens underlines the point by emphasising similarities between the character and the quality of life in the two capitals referred to in the title.

It's true that to Dr. Manette and Charles Darnay London seems a refuge from the dangers of France, but Darnay, seeking a new start, is imprisoned and put on trial for his life. The first political trial we see in the novel is in the Old Bailey, not revolutionary Paris, and the first example of mob violence is the London mob rioting after Cly's funeral. The connection between experience in the two cities is forged by many parallel incidents. Cly, realising his unpopularity, fakes his death to avoid the anticipated wrath of the crowd. Foulon fakes his death and holds a mock funeral to avoid the anger of the Paris mob.



The sentence which the British government recommended for treason (hanging and quartering graphically described to Jerry before the Darnay trial) is paralleled by the barbarous sentence passed on Damiens, would-be murderer of Louis XV, retold by Defarge during questioning of the roadmaker etc.. As we shall see, scenes in London and Paris share common patterns of imagery.

Of the scenes set in England, it must be emphasised again that despite the historical period tag of the last quarter of the 18th century they reflect Dickens's views of the nature of the system at the time when he was writing.

Consider the opening scene. A coach is travelling down the Dover Road on a cold November night. Following the remarks associating separateness, secrecy and death with the nature of life in a great city, quoted in Part I, Chapter 2, we are asked to take an interest in one of the passengers - Jarvis Lorry, a clerk in Tellson's Bank, who is on his own secret mission to Paris. As he sits dozing, his thoughts confusedly slide between his official existence at Tellson's ("Tellson's Bank had a run upon it in the mail"), and a train of thought provoked by the "business" task which takes him to Paris - to help liberate Dr. Manette from the spiritual and mental effects of his long physical imprisonment. "But though the bank was almost always with him, and though the coach (in a confused way, like the presence of pain under an opiate) was always with him, there was another current of impression that never ceased to run, all through the night. He was on his way to dig some one out of a grave ...

Dig - dig - dig - until an impatient movement from one of the two passengers would admonish him to pull up the window, until his mind lost its hold of them and they

again slid away into the bank and the grave." (pp. 46-7). In this passage (too long to quote completely) images of business (the bank), death (the grave), and imprisonment (the victim buried alive), are significantly related in a manner typical of the later novels, the association suggestive of both the spiritual quality of life which is a function of the 'business ethos', and the nature of Lorry's official existence at Tellson's.

This pattern of imagery is continued in the scene where Lorry meets Lucie Manette in Dover. They talk in a "large, dark room, furnished in a funereal manner with black horsehair". Candles standing in the centre of the room are reflected "as if they were buried, in deep graves of black mahogany, and no light so to speak of could be expected from them until they were dug out." (p. 52). The images of death and imprisonment are not merely appropriate to the plot but contribute to a way of seeing society in the novel which is essentially similar to that of the other major novels of the late period.

We see A Tale's contribution to the developing social awareness of the later novels in two imaginatively weighted descriptions of the London scene - one of the city as an urban wasteland, and the other of Tellson's Bank.

The former occurs when Sydney Carton walks out of Stryver's house in the early morning. "When he got out of the house, the air was cold and sad, the dull sky overcast, the river dark and dim, the whole scene like a lifeless desert, and wreaths of dust were spinning round and round before the morning blast, as if the desert-sand had risen far away, and the first spray of it in its advance had begun to overwhelm the city.

Waste forces within him, and a desert all around, this

man stood still on his way across a silent terrace, and saw for a moment, lying in the wilderness before him, a mirage of honourable ambition, self-denial, and perseverance." (p. 121).

Carton's loneliness and isolation in a blighted scene, the total absence of contact with other people, are all strongly reminiscent of Clennam's night walk through a deserted London towards his mother's home in Little Dorrit. Of course, the whirling dust and the image of the city as an urban wilderness or wasteland looks forward to Our Mutual Friend, as well as much modern literature.

Tellson's Bank has a role in this novel not unlike Chancery and the Circumlocution Office in theirs. It is the representative national institution - a respected and long established bank which, like the somewhat different firm of Dombey and Son, reflects essential things about the national life.

Dickens signposts the representative significance of Tellson's. "Any one of these partners would have disinherited his son on the question of rebuilding Tellson's. In this respect the House was much on a par with the Country; which did very often disinherit its sons for suggesting improvements in laws and customs that had long been highly objectionable, but were only the more respectable." (p. 83). But the analogy goes much further than this. Tellson's is a microcosm of the whole system, and the description of the Tellson's building works to suggest the operation of a complex and ominous set of social forces beneath the prosperous surface of mid-Victorian society.

Tellson's is "very small, very dark, very ugly, very

incommodious." It contains "the dingiest of windows, which were always under a shower-bath of mud from Fleet Street, and which were made the dingier by their own iron bars proper, and the heavy shadow of Temple Bar. If your business necessitated your seeing 'the House', you were put into a species of Condemned Hold at the back, where you meditated on a misspent life, until the House came with its hands in its pockets, and you could hardly blink at it in the dismal twilight. Your money came out of, or went into, wormy old wooden drawers, particles of which flew up your nose and down your throat when they were opened and shut. Your bank-notes had a musty odour, as if they were fast decomposing into rags again. Your plate was stowed away among the neighbouring cesspools, and evil communications corrupted its good polish in a day or two. Your deeds got into extemporised strong-rooms made of kitchens and sculleries, and fretted all the fat out of their parchments into the banking-house air. Your lighter boxes of family papers went upstairs into a Barmecide room, ... where ... the first letters written to you by your old love, or by your little children, were but newly released from the horror of being ogled through the windows, by the heads exposed on Temple Bar with an insensate brutality and ferocity worthy of Abyssinia or Ashantee ...

Cramped in all kinds of dim cupboards and hutches at Tellson's, the oldest of men carried on the business gravely. When they took a young man into Tellson's London house, they hid him somewhere till he was old. They kept him in a dark place, like a cheese, until he had the full Tellson flavour and blue-mould upon him" (pp. 83-5).

It is characteristic of Dickens's method that important criticisms of society can be made through the medium of comedy without losing any of their bite. Tellson's is

both prosperous and respectable - like mid-Victorian England - but the imagery relentlessly attacks and undermines this prosperity.

Tellson's respectability is tainted by the imagery of crime and prisons - the 'iron bars', the 'Condemned Hold', the heads of executed prisoners on Temple Bar. Merdle's business respectability was founded on crime, and the association is a key element in the design of Dickens's next novel, Great Expectations. The French scenes in the novel warn that barbaric abuse of authority results in a barbaric backlash. Thus, it is significant that Tellson's, pillar of English respectability, expressly approves of the heads on Temple Bar. "But indeed, at that time, putting to death was a recipe much in vogue with all trades and professions, and not least of all with Tellson's." (p. 84). Jerry, Tellson's odd job man, provided another link between business, crime, and death. In his private life (in contrast to his official position at Tellson's) he sets up as a 'businessman', selling dead bodies to the surgeons. Yet he refers to this illegal traffic in death as 'business' and to himself as an 'honest tradesman'. Like Tellson's the respectability he lays claim to is tainted.

The various items of wealth - money and bank-notes, deeds etc. - hoarded in Tellson's are consistently given unpleasant, sinister, and provocative associations, which suggest that this wealth is based on repugnant, contaminated social sources which the respectable world would recoil even from mentioning (another anticipation of Great Expectations). This is especially so of the plate, associated with the neighbouring cesspools, obscene source of disease and contamination. Other sources of wealth are verbally associated with worms, rags and kitchen smells.

Furthermore, the description also suggests that all this imposing wealth, material evidence of a bourgeoning society, has an existence paradoxically insecure and vulnerable. As evidence for the flourishing health of the system it is false and misleading. The money is held in parasite-ridden drawers slowly being eaten away. In a day or two the cesspools have tarnished the plate. The bank-notes are described as if fast decomposing into waste and refuse (the anticipation here of Our Mutual Friend with its identification of money and rubbish is striking.) The multiple degrading associations of wealth in the passage, not only work to tarnish the much warranted respectability of the house, but also extend to the wider social system. The suggestion that the material wealth of the prosperous classes is based on unsavoury and insecure foundations is directly relevant to the scenes in revolutionary Paris which reveal the methods by which this insecurity could most strikingly be demonstrated. Thus John Gross is wrong to say that "Tellson's, musty and cramped and antiquated, makes an excellent Dickensian set-piece, but is scarcely followed up."<sup>(1)</sup> The description of Tellson's is organically related to the scenes in France and suggests more subtly than the direct authorial intrusions how pressing is the need for contemporary society to learn and apply the lessons of the French Revolution.

There is another representative way in which Tellson's is associated with death. The bureaucratic mentality which shrinks a man to an official role is literally a denial of life. Esther's comment that Chancery is a "dry, official place" could equally be applied to Tellson's. It is significant that the chief representative of the House is described as if he was an object ("the House came with its

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1 John Gross, 'A Tale of Two Cities' in Dickens and the Twentieth Century (ed. Gross and Pearson), p. 196.

hands in its pockets, and you could hardly blink at it"), the "speaking machine" Lorry talks of with reference to himself. The official life of the clerks in Tellson's is an enforced imprisonment of vitality and youth in "dim cupboards and hutches". The novel comments further on the official nature of the system through the representative character of Jarvis Lorry.

Lorry is not only a representative "man of business" but also another study in Dickens's gallery of split men, though in his case, overruling reference to his official self is the result of a sense of duty and an affectionate loyalty to the firm of Tellson's. However, this does not mean that his wilful identification of self with social role has not involved an alienating loss.

There is clear evidence of this in the scene where Lorry reveals to Lucie Manette that her father, whom she always believes dead, is in fact alive, though very ill and wasted. In this scene Lorry behaves as a comic oddity but his deprecatory references to himself, though they are only true of his own official self, reflect an essential truth about his society. Embarrassed and confused by Lucie's natural agitation, Lorry tries to calm both her and himself by emphasising his original claim that his news was merely a matter of business. "You confuse me, and how can I transact business if I am confused? Let us be clear-headed. If you could kindly mention now for instance what nine times ninepence are, or how many shillings in twenty guineas, it would be so encouraging. I should be so much more at my ease about your state of mind." (p. 56). Though this is kindly meant, as well as being comically absurd, it is also a frightening revelation of Lorry's limitations and lack of control in an emotional situation.

His similarly motivated remarks to Lucie about his character as a man of business may be incomplete as a definitive description of Lorry himself, but they are revealing insights into the spiritually imprisoning ethos so prevalent in the business world. "Miss Manette, I am a man of business. I have a business charge to acquit myself of. In your reception of it, don't heed me any more than if I was a speaking machine - truly, I am not much else. ... These are mere business relations, Miss; there is no friendship in them, no particular interest, nothing like sentiment. I have passed from one to another in the course of my business life, just as I pass from one of our customers to another in the course of my business day; in short, I have no feelings; I am a mere machine. ... Feelings! I have no time for them, no chance for them. I pass my whole life, Miss, in turning an immense pecuniary mangle." (pp. 54-5).

And yet Lorry does not mourn the emotional strait-jacket imposed on him by his official business life, but believes, as a loyal representative of Tellson's should, that business is "a very good thing, and a very respectable thing". In modern terms Lorry is the complete company man. He tells Carton in the Old Bailey, "We men of business, who serve a House, are not our own masters. We have to think of the House more than ourselves." (p. 113). Even in shaking hands with a customer self is abdicated. "He shook in a self abnegating-way, as one who shook for Tellson and Co." (p. 172).

Though he still has the potential to realise emotional relations outside the office (when he watches the reunion of Lucie and Dr. Manette there is a "moisture that was not of business, shining on his cheek") when the novel opens, that potential has been habitually ignored for so long that Lorry's official self dominates the private sphere too. It



is not usually realised that in this sense Lorry too is 'buried alive' - by the emotionally suffocating effects of surrendering his complete self to a social role.

It is only through his developing friendship with Dr. Manette that Lorry comes to assert a separate self in his private life (though his reaction is much less extreme than Wemmick's). But this recall to a warm emotional private relationship is not easy for Lorry. The friendship is only forged "after several relapses into business absorption". As his new found private dignity and sympathy increases Lorry becomes less of a Dickensian oddity. However, on certain occasions in revolutionary Paris when private and official interests overlap Lorry's reaction makes the reader uneasy. We feel that his decision "that he had no right to imperil Tellson's by sheltering the wife of an emigrant prisoner under the bank roof "is too nice a distinction in a time of crisis. What's more, he objects to Jerry's body-snatching not primarily on moral or legal grounds, but because "you have used the respectable and great house of Tellson's as a blind ... If you have, don't expect me to keep your secret. Tellson's shall not be imposed upon." (pp. 335-6). Even his awakened private life never completely escapes the shadow of his official role.

Thus through the atmosphere and imagery of the English scenes; the generalising significance of the description of Tellson's Bank; and the representative use of Jarvis Lorry, we see Dickens engaging his society in the novel on those aspects of social life which characteristically charge his social vision in the later fiction. Having argued that A Tale of Two Cities is an integral part in Dickens's main line of novelistic development (and not a sport or holiday fiction) it's place in that line must be defined more clearly. The novels prior to A Tale had condemned Victorian Capitalism

as a morally corrupt structure on the verge of collapse. A Tale explores both what would be involved in the nature of that (revolutionary) collapse and whether it is possible for individuals within such an environment to be spiritually reborn as a means of redeeming the total structure - a theme reworked in greater detail in Our Mutual Friend.

The seriousness of these concerns is reflected in the general atmosphere of the novel, the scenes set in England as well as those in France. John Gross remarks that "for the most part the atmosphere is every bit as stifling as that of Little Dorrit."<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed an ominous threat of imminent danger permeates most of the scenes in England. We open with a small company in mortal fear of highwaymen. Later we wonder if Darnay will be convicted at the Old Bailey trial and if Dr. Manette will suffer a relapse into his former mechanical existence. His comfortable retreat in Soho, a seemingly secure refuge from an inhuman but distant society, is shown to be dangerously vulnerable to outside forces - forces represented by the echoing footsteps which Lucy fancifully claims are "the echoes of all the footsteps that are coming by-and-by into our lives", and which are later identified somewhat superfluously by Dickens as "footsteps not easily made clean again if once stained red, the footsteps raging in St. Antoine afar off." (p. 243). Indeed the way in which the cosy family scene in Soho is shattered by social currents which bring all the members close to death is part two of the Jarndyce lesson. The respectable world cannot isolate itself in private retreats from the social forces of disease/revolution breeding in the urban slums.

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1 J. Gross, *ibid*, p. 187.

(iv)

In turning to the scenes in revolutionary France one point must be emphasised at the outset. It's true that Dickens unequivocally presents revolution as the inevitable consequence of aristocratic oppression within a diseased social system. However, as John Gross points out "to grasp a patient's medical history is not to condone his disease, and Dickens is unyielding in his hostility to the crowd."<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed the portrait of the Paris mob during the Terror is the best evidence that even in his later fiction Dickens completely rejected revolutionary means to a social end. When examining the description of the mob in A Tale we immediately notice the similarity of the metaphors to those used of the Gordon rioters in Barnaby Rudge - the Paris mob is likened to devils, madmen, wild beasts, and savages.

During the storming of the Bastille there is a "deafening and maniacal bewilderment". The women who rush out to revenge themselves on Foulon, urge "one another, and themselves, to madness with the wildest cries and actions". On the night of the prison massacres the two men working the grindstone which sharpens the weapons have faces "more horrible and cruel than the visages of the wildest savages in their most barbarous disguise". It would be tedious to list all the examples, but special attention should be paid to the Carmagnole dance, which is given the generalising significance of what in Dickens's mind constituted the essence of revolution in the abstract. The dancers are described as "dancing like five thousand demons". At first the dance appears wild and formless, but then "some ghastly apparition of a dance figure gone raving mad arose among them. ... No fight could have been half so terrible as this

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1 John Gross, *ibid*, p. 193.

dance. It was so emphatically a fallen sport - a something, once innocent, delivered over to all devilry - a healthy pastime changed into a means of angering the blood, bewildering the senses, and steeling the heart. Such grace as was visible in it, made it the uglier, showing how warped and perverted all things good by nature were becoming. The maidenly bosom bared to this, the pretty almost-child's head thus distracted, the delicate foot mincing this slough of blood and dirt, were types of the disjointed time." (pp. 307-8). The details of the dance are types of revolution in the abstract - a nightmarish reversal of all things natural, innocent and good.

In the novel, revolution is presented as a classless inferno lacking social or moral law; a bestial level of anarchy and arbitrary violence; a form of social cannibalism. The representative figures of revolution, of course, are the Defarges, the Vengeance and perhaps most of all Jacques III, of St. Antoine, a "life-thirsty, cannibal-looking, bloody-minded juryman." (p. 345).

There is not one word about the mob that might suggest that revolution is either constructive or beneficial. To fail to recognise this it is necessary to wear political blinkers like T.A. Jackson who in Charles Dickens: The Progress of a Radical (1937) incredibly claims that the novel reflects "a complete and wholehearted sympathy with the revolutionaries; and, up to a point, an entire agreement with, and admiration for, their methods of setting to work."

In an important sense A Tale exposes the Revolution as futile and self-defeating. The destruction of a prison, the Bastille, was the spark for a revolution to create social justice, and yet the conditions and quality of life

it produced are those of the prison. La Force is the symbolic home of revolutionary France - a prison for all generations and classes. "Two score and twelve were told off. From the farmer-general of seventy, whose riches couldn't buy his life, to the seamstress of twenty, whose poverty and obscurity could not save her." (p. 376). The Revolution might have been seen as a symbolic end to prisons, but instead it has repopulated them, and exchanged one type of general prison existence (a slavish reference to the inflexible social category of obedient serf) for another (an equally slavish reference to the social category of good party man). We see this in the experience of the road mender, later woodcutter. He has gained little from the Revolution, either materially or spiritually. Indeed he suffers from a constant mental lack of security. Proclaiming how ardent a republican he was (mechanical demonstration of which infiltrates all areas of his life) he "was so very demonstrative herein, that he might have been suspected ... of having his small individual fears for his own personal safety, every hour in the day." (p. 389).

(v)

Of course this depressing picture of Revolutionary France prompts the question of whether the corruption within the system of mid-Victorian England will inevitably produce the same revolutionary holocaust. In a somewhat problematic fashion, A Tale optimistically suggests that a general process of individual rebirth or resurrection can provide a preventative social counter to revolutionary hatred and violence. It is worth noting that social redemption through love and spiritual rebirth is not offered as a solution to revolutionary France, but as a preventative cure for mid-Victorian England in the tradition of Jarndyce's "hopeful change". The physical struggle between Miss Pross

and Madame Defarge is thus not only an opposition of moral values but a contrast between alternative methods of social change - moral redemption through love, and revolutionary change of the system. One wonders if it was chiefly wishful thinking, or a sentimental concession to the 'happy ending' that prompts Dickens to add, "It was in vain for Madame Defarge to struggle and to strike; Miss Pross, with the vigorous tenacity of love, always so much stronger than hate, clasped her tight, and even lifted her from the floor in the struggle that they had." (p. 397).

The theme of rebirth (and the words "recall to life") are kept before the reader insistently. There is the somewhat unstable resurrection of Dr. Manette, as well as Darnay's two close escapes from imminent death. Jerry Cruncher's nocturnal profession of "Resurrection-Man" keeps the theme before us on a comic level, while an ironic twist is supplied by the twin recalls to 'life' of Foulon and Cly, each from a faked death.

The best known example of individual rebirth through self-sacrificing love is provided by Sydney Carton. Interestingly, his moral rebirth is charted by means of his orientation to conventional middle class values. The mirage which Carton momentarily sees before him in the London wilderness is very much a middle class creation - "a mirage of honourable ambition, self-denial, and perseverance". However ambiguous Dickens's ideas about social rising were at this time (and we see the ambiguity and complexity in his next novel, Great Expectations), and although the successful social climber, Stryver, is presented unsympathetically as an aggressive bully, there is no doubt that Carton is criticised for not making his way in the world and lacking the ambition and perseverance to match his talents. His degradation is directly connected with not heeding the

"whispers from old voices impelling me upward". He lacks moral earnestness, another chief middle-class virtue ("Earnestness in you, is anything but alarming to me" (p. 236), Darnay tells him), and is fond of bitterly blaming his failure on bad luck. Significantly, his double and moral opposite, Charles Darnay, is a paragon of middle-class virtues, despite his aristocratic birth. His moderate prosperity is self-made and the result of hard work. ("He had expected labour and he found it, and did it, and made the best of it" (p. 160), and diligent perseverance ("So with great perseverance and untiring industry, he prospered." (p. 160)).

Carton's rebirth involves a positive response to middle-class values. Although his sacrifice is given a general social significance, in Carton's own mind it is localised and domestic in scope - the honouring of an individual promise, preserving the integrity of a small family group, and preventing the destruction of a domestic household which is presented in terms of the middle-class Victorian ideal. Thus his sacrifice reflects a positive orientation to middle-class values - honour, truth, duty and the home. Though he dies, he is in a sense morally integrated back into Victorian society. Like most of Dickens's heroes he is made to appear at the close of the novel, no longer a problematic person. Thus in A Tale we again see the operation of an interpretive framework of middle-class values. Scenes of anxiety in England and social nightmare in France make up the social backcloth of the novel. In the foreground are the reassuring figures of Lorry, who thinks that business is good and respectable, and Carton and his twin Darnay, two figures whose human value lies in proportion to their positive orientation to middle-class values. Of course, in addition, the novel reflects an interpretation of the French Revolution general

amongst the Victorian middle-class, whose spokesman on the subject, Carlyle, was Dickens's chief literary inspiration for the novel.

Yet Carton is artistically problematic. His debauched life of unfulfilled longing is seen as a spiritual imprisonment. Looking at the wasted air of Carton's face and "having the expression of prisoner's faces fresh in his mind, he (i.e. Lorry) was strongly reminded of that expression." (p. 339). Yet if this is so, Carton's death would be a liberation, and where would be the element of sacrifice? Even admitting that most men hang on to life itself greedily, Carton, from the moment he comes to Paris, appears as a man courting death and on his last walk round the city is preoccupied more with death than resurrection despite his mind running on the text, "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord.". We feel that had Carton been consistently developed as a character he would have died in the very spirit of the revolution - in a frustrated rage at a world which indifferently regarded the gap between his talents and expectations, and his unsatisfying achievement - and not at peace, looking "sublime and prophetic".

The details of Carton's prophecy direct us to an even greater problem in both the themes of revolution and resurrection. Carton's prophetic thoughts run, "I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and in their struggles to be truly free in their triumphs and defeats, through long years to come, I see the evil of this time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out." (p. 404).

Now if revolution is a state of madness and moral disease etc. then there is no reason why the destructive



process shouldn't go on forever, until nothing is left. But history forces Dickens to recognise that the revolutionary madness did end, and a hopeful future was born out of the revolutionary disorder. Once again we have the problem of the open or closed nature of the ending. In this novel the situation is somewhat different. History forces Dickens to add a historical footnote to what otherwise would have been an open ending - the novel closing pessimistically with a fundamental and unresolved opposition between the rampaging mob and the necessary demands of an ordered and peaceful social condition, represented by the moral qualities of Lucie, Miss Pross, etc.. Were it not for the assurances of Carton's prophecy, the domestic, private theme would have been left relatively open too - Lucie, Dr. Manette, and Darnay presumably safe but their futures left unknown. Of course the historical nature of the material forces Dickens to come to terms on some level with the problem of historical dynamics. The very fact that the novel views the revolution as the inevitable result of aristocratic oppression and indifference involves Dickens with a theory of history, however primitive. In Carton's prophecy the revolutionary condition is the "natural birth" of aristocratic mismanagement. The implication of this cause/effect relation is to suggest a similar historical relation in which revolution is seen as the historically necessary means to achieve the "beautiful city and a brilliant people", (the latter being the "natural birth" of revolution). Such a suggestion would oppose Dickens's conscious intent, for he clearly wishes to repudiate revolution as a means to an end and certainly not legitimate or justify it through consideration of a wider historical context.

Of course, recognising the social progress made in post-revolutionary France, in effect, is an admission that the whole society was recalled to life. Yet the prison nature of revolutionary France could only be broken down by the

operation of forces which the novel represents as having no place in such a society - another contradiction. Thus at the heart of the novel there is a failure to resolve the awareness of historical dynamics with the imaginative portrayal of the revolutionaries which renders the novel disappointingly flawed. If revolution is a sick and cruel madness (if the Defarges and Jacques III are typical revolutionaries) then it is inconceivable that it could result in any ordered form of society, let alone the social progress Dickens is inescapably forced to concede. Thus Dickens's attempt at an objective view of historical change compromises the imaginative truth of his very subjective description of the mob. However, these scenes of revolutionary violence still retain a far greater imaginative force than those dealing with the alternative means of changing a sick society - by individual moral rebirth. In A Tale as elsewhere in Dickens, the dark side of the picture is rendered with greater imaginative conviction than its optimistic counterpart.

## CHAPTER 4

GREAT EXPECTATIONS -

## TAINTED RESPECTABILITY AND TRUE GENTILITY

Having just visited Newgate with Wemmick to kill time while waiting for Estella, Pip reflects, "how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime, that in my childhood out on our lonely marshes on a winter evening I should have first encountered it; that, it should have reappeared on two occasions, starting out like a stain that was faded but not gone; that, it should in this way pervade my fortune and advancement." (p. 284)<sup>(1)</sup>.

Pip's whole life had been mysteriously connected and tainted with "prison and crime" - his fatal meeting with Magwitch who forces him to rob Joe; his part in the chase and recapture of Magwitch and Compeyson; the two meetings with the convict entrusted with Magwitch's first gift (in *The Three Jolly Bargemen*, and on the stagecoach); the convict's leg-iron used as a weapon against his sister; his London association with Jaggers, whose office stands under the shadow of Newgate and his visits to the latter with Wemmick - all prefigure the momentous discovery that his 'expectations' to live a gentlemanly life of idle luxury were founded on the labour and money of the convict Magwitch. The connection between Pip's complacently held, if newly gained, respectability and the world of convicts and crime (even though Magwitch's labour in Australia is honest) takes us to the very heart of Great Expectations (1860-61). As Ross Dabney remarks, "That Pip's money comes

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1 All references to the novel to the Penguin Edition (Harmondsworth 1965), ed. Angus Calder.

from Magwitch is a discovery fertile in class ironies and in reflections on the source of unearned incomes"<sup>(1)</sup>, as well as an ironic reversal of the power relations between respectable society and the working class.

In fact it goes further than this. During the narrative, Pip remarks that in each individual life there is a "long chain of iron or gold" which from the forging of the first link binds one to a certain and unique course. The applicability to Pip himself later becomes clear - his chains of gold (the money which constitutes his expectations) are irretrievably bound up with chains of iron (and the criminal world). The novel strongly suggests that this is also true for the whole society, bound together by chains of gold (material wealth - enjoyed by some and founded on the labour of others) and chains of iron (crime). Indeed crime is the link between the Two Nations in this novel as disease is in Bleak House, prison in Little Dorrit, and revolution in A Tale of Two Cities. Similarly, the plot spells out that the separation of respectable self-righteous society from the criminal underworld is as mythical as its separation from the slums of Tom-all-Alone's in Bleak House.

Thus the systematic nature of society is implicit in the plot (just about all the characters in Great Expectations have direct associations with crime), which also reinforces a familiar message in the later fiction - the existence of the respectable and prosperous 'nation' within society is dependent on the existence of the other miserable or disreputable one. One can't have Miss Havisham without Magwitch. This gives a thematic justification to what may appear at first to be an exaggerated set of coincidences, even by comparison with Dickens's usual reliance on accident and coincidence.

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1 R. Dabney, Love and Property in the Novels of Dickens, p. 140.

Like Lady Dedlock and Jo, Miss Havisham and Magwitch are linked in various reinforcing ways - one is regarded by Pip as his benefactor, the other is the real founder of his fortunes; one is a voluntary prisoner within space and time, the other is a literal convict; Compeyson is an agent in both their fates; and of course, Estella connects them most dramatically of all. The relation between Magwitch and Estella is particularly weighted with social implication. To Estella, the Newgate prisoners are "Wretches". Pip "thought with absolute abhorrence of the contrast between the jail and her" (p. 284) and later "reflected on the abyss between Estella in her pride and beauty, and the returned transport whom I harboured", (p. 367). Not only is the gulf between them illusory but Magwitch is Estella's father. This last detail is possibly unnecessary. As it is, it closes the case for a systematic and corporate society in a conclusive, if heavy-handed fashion.

(ii)

Pip's 'expectations' are crucial to all the major themes of the novel. They form - rather like the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce or the Marshalsea prison - a corrupting social environment, and like them its effects on the individual are in essence analogous to the effects of the wider social system. Pip's 'expectations' are representative in another sense too - they embody the whole power of money and class in mid-Victorian England (two forces which make major contributions to the degraded quality of moral/social life within the system, but which despite that, are the 'expectations' worshipped by that society).

The presentation of these expectations in the novel illustrates Dickens's technique of portraying abstract social forces as if they were impersonal objects or concrete

things. The effect on Pip of his 'great expectations' is that of an external thing-like force which alienates him from his humanity.

This dehumanisation is prefigured when Pip is appropriated as an object of patronage by Pumblechook who, following Miss Havisham's gift to Pip at the time of his apprenticeship, proceeded "to take me into custody, with a right of patronage that left all his former criminality far behind." (p. 132).

From the moment of Jaggers's announcement of Pip's expectations the tendency towards dehumanisation is exasperated. The town's tradesman regard him as a valuable piece of merchandise. "Mr. Trabb measured and calculated me, in the parlour, as if I were an estate and he the finest species of surveyor." (p. 178). Earlier, by setting Pip up to love the unattainable Estella, Miss Havisham had utilised him as an object to be broken as revenge for what she had suffered at the hands of the male sex. Now she uses his expectations (and the popular belief that they originated with her) to goad her parasitic relatives. Once again Pip is a mere object of convenience. He comes to realise that he was "only suffered in Satis House as a convenience, a sting for the greedy relations, a model with a mechanical heart to practise on when no other practice was at hand." (p. 341).

(Indeed Miss Havisham on a personal level reproduces the destructive social processes which elsewhere in the novel (for example in the experience of Magwitch and Wemmick) are seen as the alienating pressure of the social system on the individual. Miss Havisham stands in classic opposition to Jarndyce. She pulls selected individuals into her private world not to protect or fulfil them but to dehumanise

them. Satis House unlike Bleak House is not a haven from the system, but microcosmically reproduces its evils, a fact strongly anticipated by its description. The windows are either "walled up" or "rustily barred" associating the house with a tomb or prison; the neglected garden "was quite a wilderness"; the brewery is no longer functional or useful. Within the private world, Pip and Estella are manipulated as instruments of personal revenge, dolls forced to play leading roles in a cruel drama directed by Miss Havisham for her own perverted satisfaction. "Estella was set to wreak Miss Havisham's revenge on men" in general, and on Pip as an individual. As a result both Pip and Estella become passive objects, devoid of personal will and initiative. Estella tells Pip, "We have no choice, you and I, but to obey our instructions. We are not free to follow our own devices, you and I." (p. 285). Later Pip accuses Estella, "You speak of yourself as if you were someone else." (p. 286). As a doll's identity is a projection of its dress, so it is not surprising for Estella to be associated in Pip's mind with the jewels Miss Havisham adorns her with. The jewels and her are inseparable, her identity incomplete without them. She reports to Miss Havisham when in London, "Now I go on - I and the jewels.").

The most significant way in which Pip's expectations dehumanise him is by reducing him to an ostentatious object, bought over by Magwitch for display as a supreme act of class one-upmanship over his fellow colonists. "The blood horses of them colonists might fling up the dust over me as I was walking; what do I say? I says to myself "I'm making a better gentleman nor ever you'll be!" When one of 'em says to another, "He was a convict, a few year ago, and is an ignorant common fellow now, for all he's lucky," what do I say? I says to myself, "If I ain't a gentleman, nor yet ain't got no learning, I'm the owner of such. All on

you owns stock and land; Which on you owns a brought-up London gentleman?" (p. 339).

From the moment of his return Magwitch asserts ownership of Pip. His characteristic gesture is revealing. "Once more, he took me by both hands and surveyed me with an air of admiring proprietorship." (p. 348). When Pip reads to Magwitch in a foreign language "he, not comprehending a single word, would stand before the fire surveying me with the air of an Exhibitor." (p. 353).

Thus Pip's essential condition since falling a prey to the alienating social forces embodied in his expectations is that of an impersonal object, albeit with a high market price. This condition is reflected in his nightmare visions when in the grip of fever - a description similar to Esther Summerson's fevered dreams when she lay dangerously ill at St. Albans. Like it, it reflects the essential condition of the individual caught up in the machinery of a corrupt industrial system. "I confounded impossible existences with my own identity; ... I was a brick in the house wall, and yet entreating to be released from the giddy place where the builders had set me; ... I was a steel beam of a vast engine, crashing and whirling over a gulf, and yet ... I implored in my own person to have the engine stopped, and my part in it hammered off." (pp. 471-2). The individual is a mechanical object within a greater machine. It is interesting that it is only in the unconscious or semi-conscious state of a dream or illness that a typical Dickens hero can grasp the essence of relations within the system with the same degree of insight his creator achieves artistically, and even then an Esther or Pip cannot evaluate or understand the full significance of their vision. It is a fatal mistake to limit Dickens's social vision to the boundaries of his heroes' social awareness.



If Pip's expectations embody the dehumanising and alienating characteristics of the system then we see the same effects in the experience of the convicts. The convicts who share Pip's coach drive from London are fastidiously labelled objects of general disgust. "The great numbers on their backs, as if they were street doors; their coarse, mangy, ungainly outer surface, as if they were lower animals; their iron legs, apologetically garlanded with pocket-handkerchiefs; and the way in which all present looked at them and kept from them; made them ... a most disagreeable and degraded spectacle." (p. 249). The reference to "lower animals" reminds us of another degraded social victim, Jo in Bleak House. The representative criminal casebook in the novel is that of Magwitch - and he is seen not only as a victim, but like the general case of the convicts on the stagecoach he is described via the imagery of animals (in particular, a wild dog) and mechanical life. ("Something clicked in his throat, as if he had works in him like a clock, and was going to strike." (p. 50).) It is a measure of how Dickens's views of environment have matured that while Bill Sikes in Oliver Twist is 'a bad one' and his murder of Nancy the result of his innate cruelty and depravity, the beast seen fighting on the marshes comes to be recognised by Pip (and the reader) as a man capable of love and loyalty, whose life of crime, starting with an instinctive reaction to poverty and want, is clearly seen as the product of an unjust and indifferent system.

Indeed the world of Great Expectations is characterised generally by a proliferation of animal and mechanical imagery. Pip is fed by Estella "as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace" and after fighting Herbert Pocket he regards himself "as a species of savage young wolf or other wild beast." Indeed in the scene where Orlick threatens his life, Pip is addressed consistently as "wolf" by his attacker who is himself

described as a tiger. Orlick's room at Satis House was "like a cage for a human dormouse". Bentley Drummle is nicknamed the Spider and Miss Havisham is associated with the various animals, insects, and "speckled-legged spiders with blotchy bodies" which parasitically live off her wedding feast. If Estella's identity is merged with her jewels the identity of Wemmick during his official life in Little Britain is a rigid and mechanical existence. He has "a square wooden face, whose expression seemed to have been imperfectly chipped out with a dull edged chisel" and his mouth "was such a post-office of a mouth that he had a mechanical appearance of smiling." (pp. 195-6). To a discussion of the social conditions for this mechanical existence of Wemmick we now turn.

(iii)

One of the chief social concerns of Great Expectations is the alienation of a bureaucratised official life as it affects Wemmick and Jaggers. The case of Wemmick will be considered first.

He is probably the best known example of Dickens's split-men, and this theme is more fully articulated in Great Expectations than in any other novel. The opposition between private and official life is both clear to Wemmick and accepted by him. "No, the office is one thing, and private life is another. When I go into the office, I leave the Castle behind me, and when I come into the Castle, I leave the office behind me." (p. 231). And he later declares, "Walworth is one place and this office is another. ... My Walworth sentiments must be taken at Walworth; none but my official sentiments can be taken in this office." (p. 310). Such is his crisis of identity that Pip regards him as if he was two men - the Right and Wrong Twin. Of course the

Wrong Twin is the official Wemmick, whose boast, "my guiding star always is 'Get hold of portable property'" (p. 224), is in contrast to the humanistic, qualitative principles with which he organises his private life. On the one hand we have the office in Little Britain (where Jaggers dismisses the unfortunate Mike with "Get out of this office, I'll have no feelings here. Get out." (p. 427)), on the other hand is the Castle in Walworth, which confirms to the Victorian middle-class ideals of the home as a haven from the business world. (Pip comments on "all the innocent, cheerful, playful ways with which you refresh your business life" (p. 423).)

In the official, bureaucratised sphere, Wemmick's behaviour is unfeeling and inflexible, merely mechanical - the man is encompassed in a couple of thing-like physical attributes, particularly his post-office mouth. This physical likeness softens at Walworth but is accentuated again as he nears his official place of business. On his way to Little Britain "By degrees, Wemmick got dryer and harder as we went along, and his mouth tightened into a post-office again." (p. 232). The only time he can assert a human identity is in the private sphere of the Castle.

The Castle represents an attempt by Wemmick to fulfil himself as a whole or complete man in his private life, and shake off the alienating effects of his official division of labour. He boasts, "I am my own engineer, and my own carpenter, and my own plumber, and my own gardener, and my own Jack of all Trades ... Well; it's a good thing, you know. It brushes the Newgate cobwebs away." (p. 230).

Though Grahame Smith describes Wemmick as "the embodiment of the utterly alienated man of modern capitalist civilisation"<sup>(1)</sup>, and Q.D. Leavis feels it necessary to point out that the theme reflects "a grimly realistic fact

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1 G. Smith, Dickens, Money and Society, p. 207.

of Victorian life rather than a whimsicality as it may seem in the private life of Wemmick"<sup>(1)</sup> some critics still regard Wemmick's double life as a happy compromise, and the details of his private life as part of Dickens's attempt to include more comedy in this novel than in its immediate predecessors. In fact within the context of Dickens's developing novelistic treatment of the theme Wemmick represents a tragic realisation that the separation of the private and official spheres cannot as a general phenomenon be resolved in the manner of Pancks's fortuitous employment in the firm of Doyce and Clennam.

Comparison with Pancks is useful. Pancks's official dictum about the 'Whole Duty of man in a commercial country' is similar to Wemmick's official philosophy that "Everyman's business ... is portable property." (p. 421). While Pancks labours to give away fortunes to other people in his private life, Wemmick is glad to organise Pip's gift to Herbert in his, thanking Pip for this opportunity to brush away the Newgate cobwebs. Yet the plot offers Wemmick no way out of his double-life as it does for Pancks. There is no artificial deliverance. Wemmick must live with this separation and reconcile himself to the identity problems attendant on his twin existence. Wemmick represents a sober and unsentimental conclusion to the novelistic problems set by Pancks.

How successful is Wemmick's private retreat from the office anyway? As House points out, Wemmick's "whole private life is a piece of fantastic escapism from work, and is therefore thoroughly controlled by it"<sup>(2)</sup>. The details of the Castle are given with affectionate comedy. They also offer a satire on Gothic imitation. Yet some of these comic details

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1 Q.D. Leavis, 'How we Must Read Great Expectations' in Dickens the Novelist - Q.D. & F.R. Leavis; p. 403.

2 H. House, The Dickens World, p. 50.

strongly suggest the vulnerability of Wemmick's whole strategy. He fires his cannon "with a bang that shook the crazy little box of a cottage as if it must fall to pieces, and made every glass and tea cup in it ring." (p. 231). Grahame Smith has argued that Wemmick's strategy is self-defeating. The pleasures of private life are paid for through the accumulation of portable property gained in the official sphere. Wemmick "has worked out a strategy for defeating the system of which he is a part, but the strategy operates by means of the existing social values and these cannot possibly lead to the end Wemmick has in view."<sup>(1)</sup> Wemmick doesn't in fact defeat the system. No matter what high jinks he enjoys at the Castle he is doomed to return the following morning to Little Britain where he plunges into Jaggers's dirty business and continues the pursuit of portable property. Even the means of his 'escape' are a product of the nature of the system. Wemmick doesn't defeat the system, he merely makes his peace with it at considerable human cost and accepts the alienation of his work situation.

He is a victim of the division of labour in another representative sense. Marx wrote in German Ideology, "The division of labour within a nation brings about, in the first place, the separation of industry and commercial from agricultural labour, and hence the separation of town and country and the opposition of their interests."<sup>(2)</sup>

Wemmick's comment on introducing Pip to the rotten, delapidated, dingy buildings of Barnard's Inn - "Ah ... the retirement reminds you of the country. So it does me." - serves to underline the complete breakdown of Wemmick's experience and memory of the country and nature. Though Wemmick's dilemma is well-known it is not realised by many that Jaggers is an even

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1 G. Smith, *ibid*, p. 207.

2 Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy (ed. Bottomore & Rubel) p. 112.

worse case of alienation by the official-nature of the system.

Jaggers's experience is suggestively wedded into the chief social themes of the novel. Q.D. Leavis sees him as the "representative figure-head of London"<sup>(1)</sup>, and he also embodies the whole English legal system. His behaviour in court is described by Pip in language which recalls the description of Chancery in Bleak House as a man-eating machine. Jaggers "seemed to me to be grinding the whole place in a mill." (p. 225). Wemmick also testifies to Jaggers's man-hunting legal techniques - "Always seems to me ... as if he had set a mantrap and was watching it. Suddenly - click - you're caught!" (p. 221). But the 'dismal atmosphere' of Jaggers's office has wider social implications than relevance for the legal system. The office is situated in Little Britain and (the name is significant) behaviour within it comments on the moral quality of life within the whole social system. Jaggers "washed his clients off, as if he were a surgeon or a dentist" (p. 233) and this Pilate-like washing and scenting of his hands prompts Edgar Johnson to ask "Could there be a clearer symbolic suggestion that much of the business of such a society is dirty business?"<sup>(2)</sup>.

Jaggers is a totally official man. His private residence in Soho is an extension of his office (in marked contrast to Wemmick). "The furniture was all very solid and good, like his watch-chain. It had an official look, however, and there was nothing merely ornamental to be seen. In a corner, was a little table of papers with a shaded lamp: so that he seemed to bring the office home with him in that respect too, and to wheel it out of an evening and fall to

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1 Q.D. Leavis, *ibid*, p. 401.

2 E. Johnson, Charles Dickens; His Tragedy and Triumph, p. 990.

work." (p. 234). For Wemmick dining at Jaggers's private residence is a purely official occasion and though out of office hours no moment for him to reveal the Walworth twin. "Wemmick drew his wine when it came round, quite as a matter of business - just as he might have drawn his salary when that came round - and with his eyes on his chief, sat in a state of perpetual readiness for cross-examination." (p. 404).

Indeed, Jaggers has extended his official mode of address in court - cross-examination - into private life. His every conversation is an interrogation, in which he bullies and appropriates his listeners, for example "taking possession of Mr. Wopsle, as if he had a right to him" in the Three Jolly Bargemen. Even when dining at Miss Havisham's, Jaggers "cross-examined his very wine when he had nothing else in hand." (p. 263).

His office chair "of deadly black horse-hair, with rows of brass nails round it, like a coffin" obviously suggests the spiritual condition attendant on an unrelieved official mentality, while, though Jaggers is not described (like Pancks or Wemmick) in mechanical terms, we increasingly identify him with his physical gesture of biting his forefinger before throwing it at his listener so that (as Dorothy Van Ghent points out)<sup>(1)</sup> he appears to become "thinged" into that physical part of his being (appropriately in an official, bullying attitude).

Though, as we would expect, his method is more extreme (even grotesque) Dickens offers in Wemmick and Jaggers as important a study of the power of the bureaucratic division of labour to create what Lukács calls "malignant robots" of the human beings which it has enmeshed as the celebrated protrait of Karenin in Tolstoy's Anna Karenin.

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1 See Part I, Chapter 2.

(iv)

Pip's "expectations" are central to all the major themes of the novel, and are crucial to the theme of class and gentility. Great Expectations makes significant comment on the Victorian middle-class value of social aspiration, and the ideal of the self-made man. (See Part 1, Chapter 3.)

Smiles himself saw individualistic aspiration and advancement as the best means by which the material future of the working class as a whole could be assured. Yet in Great Expectations a general aspiration for upward social mobility amongst the working class is seen as more likely to bring wretchedness and frustration to the individual than either material well-being or spiritual fulfilment.

Dickens had celebrated the ideal of the self-made man as a model for the middle-class youth in David Copperfield (1849/50). Now he attacks it as a viable social ideal for the whole community. His moral is contained in the implied positive answers to two questions. Joe wonders "Whether common ones as to callings and earnings ... mightn't be the better of continuing for to keep company with common ones, instead of going out to play with uncommon ones", (p. 100) and in reply to Pip's confidence that "I have particular reasons for wanting to be a gentleman", Biddy immediately asks, "don't you think you are happier as you are?" (p. 155).

It is important to recognise that Pip's aspirations for gentility and his dissatisfaction with his prospective life as Joe's apprentice originate not with Jaggers's announcement of his expectations but years before as a reaction to Estella's snobbery and scorn for Pip's "coarse hands and my common boots". Pip's reflections that "They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now, as



vulgar appendages" immediately leads to a wish that "Joe had been rather more genteelly brought up, and then I should have been so too." (pp. 91-2).

Had Jaggers's unexpected announcement not dramatically extended the social/economic boundaries of Pip's life he would almost certainly have spent a whole lifetime of hopeless, frustrated longing which would have made his present occupation hateful to him. From the moment of his longings for the socially improbable, Pip describes himself as "restlessly aspiring discontented me" and admits "I used to think ... That I should have been happier and better if I had never seen Miss Havisham's face and had risen to manhood content to be partners with Joe in the honest old forge." (p. 291). Note the significance of "better". Thwarted aspiration and consciousness of relative deprivation can morally corrupt and breed anti-social anger and jealousy. It is the murderous Orlick who accuses Pip of being in his way and keeping him down. Orlick's anti-social behaviour is not merely the result of 'natural evil' but is also a product of thwarted aspiration. Smiles held it to be every man's duty to aspire to a higher social station, but the whole brunt of Great Expectations argues that the working class as a whole would be both happier and better to accept and work conscientiously within the station to which they were born - in short to behave like Joe and Biddy.

However, if the novel's attack on the myth of the self-made man as an ideal for all society is unequivocal when Dickens explores the vexed contemporary issue of what constitutes gentility, and how a gentleman shall be defined and recognised, the development of his theme becomes muddled and problematic. Some critics see the implied recognition that Joe Gargery is a real or true gentleman (or one of nature's gentlemen) as a radical social response by Dickens,

a moral (classless) definition being proposed as an alternative to the traditional (aristocratic) definition of gentility in terms of birth, ownership of a landed estate, and a life-style of leisured idleness. In fact, as we discussed in Part I, Chapter 3, using Stephen Blackpool as a model, Dickens's characteristic use of the concept of natural gentility is little more than a sop to his reading-public with conservative (not radical) social/political implications.

Consider the role of Joe Gargery. He represents the "virtue of industry" and is an "honest-hearted, duty-doing man" - thus despite his social origins his virtues are located within the framework of middle-class values. Indeed he represents a middle-class view of what the ideal worker should be like. His forge represents the necessity of work (to be contrasted not only with Pip's life in London but probably also with the non-functional brewery at Miss Havisham's) while the dirty hands which follow from his honest manual labour (and which can be cleansed with washing) stand in opposition to Jaggers's clean and scented hands (which no amount of washing can cleanse of the taint of his morally dirty business).

However, like all the good workers in Dickens's fiction, Joe's presentation is flawed by elements which prevent Pip's forgetfulness of him from seeming a tragic injustice. First, he is exploited as a figure of fun to a degree incompatible with the dignity he is elsewhere intended to bear. Dickens's original concept of Joe, was that of "a good natured foolish man" and when, for example, he breakfasts at Pip's chambers Joe appears in the role (no doubt intended as entertaining) of being simply foolish. Secondly, throughout the novel Joe's intellectual powers are presented as being those of an adult half-wit, or a not very advanced

child. At the opening of the novel Pip, aged about seven, says of Joe, "I always treated him as a larger species of child, and as no more than my equal." (p. 40). Finally, as a counterpart to these elements Joe is, on certain occasions, strategically shrouded in a sentimentality which particularly involves the use of religious imagery. For example, "O dear good faithful tender Joe, I feel the loving tremble of your hand upon my arm, as solemnly this day as if it had been the rustle of an angel's wing!" (p. 168).

Of course it is no surprise that Joe is politically conservative. He knows his place (like all good workers from Stephen Blackpool to Betty Higden) and tells Pip, "You and me is not two figures to be together in London.". Thus he accepts the conventional views of what constitutes gentility, in a manner similar to Magwitch (with his hatred of being low). To Magwitch, gentility is merely money and the ostentatious articles of dress, appearance, and display it can buy. On his return, Magwitch approvingly notes Pip's linen, clothes and books and fingers his watch and ring not merely as signs or symptoms of gentility but as the very thing itself. (We are reminded of the satire on the surfaces of gentility in Little Dorrit). The novel might use Magwitch to make a radical social connection between the criminal world and the wealth of respectable society, but Magwitch himself is not a conscious social rebel against conventional class values.

Whenever a social idea is put in the mouth of a working class character in Dickens's fiction (like Stephen Blackpool's admission of the need for paternalistic, and not representative democratic government) the political implications are inevitably conservative. Joe is given an important speech to legitimise Pip and himself going their separate ways - and significantly it is an uncanny anticipation of a consensus, functionalist model of society.

"Pip, dear old chap, life is made of ever so many partings welded together, as I may say, and one man's a blacksmith and one's a whitesmith and one's a goldsmith, and one's a coppersmith. Divisions among such must come, and must be met as they come." (p. 246). What is implicitly recognised is not merely a difference of social/economic functions but the organisation of these into a hierarchy of differentiated social statuses. Joe goes on to revealingly define the social image he has of himself. "I'm wrong in these clothes. I'm wrong out of the forge, the kitchen, or off th' meshes. You won't find half so much fault in me if you think of me in my forge dress, with my hammer in my hand, or even my pipe. You won't find half so much fault in me if, supposing as you should ever wish to see me, you come and put your head in at the forge window and see Joe the blacksmith there, at the old anvil, in the old burnt apron, sticking to the old work. I'm awful dull, but I hope I've beat out something nigh the rights of this at last." (p. 246).

Joe wilfully subordinates himself to a social role - "Joe the blacksmith". Even his language reflects this - he uses the specialised vocabulary of his job in general conversation (e.g. "welded together" and "beat out"). This is true of most of Dickens's working class characters - e.g. Cuttle and Toodles (in Dombey and Son), and Bagnet and Mr. George (in Bleak House). They express themselves in the specialised vocabulary of their trade or social role, and this works against Dickens's insistence that their humanity transcends their specialised function, often shown in the novels to be a mere question of wages and hire.

Joe has no conscious identity outside his job. In this sense he is an unconscious victim of the division of labour. However, this reduction of man to a social role does not alienate him. While others in the novel try to

assert a fulfilling private identity, Joe looks to his skilled and useful job as a means of transcending his lack of a mature adult personality in private life. In his need of a useful official role to give him dignity, Joe is a mirror opposite of Wemmick. Of course this reduction of man to function is only liberating for Joe because of his retarded intellectual development - though as the opposite side of the same coin, Joe's position does not have equal weight in the novel as the official alienation of Wemmick.

Thus Joe is a problematic character. On the one hand he minimises his humanity by relegating himself to a social/economic function to be identified in terms of the objects associated with it - his forge dress, hammer, anvil - and yet on the other hand the novel asserts his general humanity (which is meant to transcend his specialised role) by implying that he is one of nature's gentlemen. Yet Dickens does not explicitly call Joe a true gentleman. He refers to him as "this gentle Christian man" (p. 472) which, as Q.D. Leavis recognises, is a problematic status, "neither a gentleman nor even a wholly satisfactory practical character; it seems to represent an uneasy gesture of the novelist's towards making a special status for Joe, to get over the difficulty Joe now presents in having outgrown the original role of "a good natured foolish man"<sup>(1)</sup>. Even if we accept that by implication Joe is one of nature's gentlemen then this does not make him Dickens's ideal gentleman. This will become clearer if we examine the moral changes experienced by Pip and consider especially the ending of the novel.

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Pip's moral changes are signposted by his different

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1 Q.D. Leavis, *ibid*, p. 422.

attitudes to the significance of money and the use it can be put to. When Joe announces his intention to visit Pip at Barnard's Inn Pip admits "If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money." (p. 240). That is, he was willing to use money to buy off a friend. Later he is to realise that money alone is inadequate to repay a human debt. He tells Joe who had settled his debts in London, "And when I say that ... I shall never rest until I have worked for the money with which you have kept me out of prison, and have sent it to you, don't think, dear Joe and Biddy, that if I could repay it a thousand times over, I suppose I could cancel a farthing of the debt I owe you, or that I would do so if I could!" (p. 488). Money is now subordinated to the life-values of human fellowship and generosity. Pip is now aware of the existence of authentic values which cannot be translated into equivalent money terms.

It takes Pip a considerable time to make this moral journey. On Magwitch's return, Pip's tone is very much that of bourgeois respectability, even pomposity. "If you are grateful to me for what I did when I was a little child, I hope you have shown your gratitude by mending your way of life " (p. 334) and a moment later, "I am glad to believe you have repented and recovered yourself. I am glad to tell you so." Later when Pip comes to recognise the humanity of Magwitch and understand his career in crime his language towards him becomes direct, simple, sincere (with no implied moral judgements). Finally by openly associating himself with Magwitch at the trial, holding his hand in the dock, Pip for the first time rejects conventional views of class, i.e. that gentlemen have nothing to do with criminals. (Of course, the whole plot of the novel undermines this complacent notion.)

Pip's instinctive desire to reject the fortune Magwitch had offered him was indicative not just of the repugnance and disgust excited in him by Magwitch - his imagined crimes as well as his table manners - but also of his belief that Magwitch's money was dirtier and more tainted than Miss Havisham's would have been. The money Pip had received from Magwitch's convict messenger was "two fat sweltering one pound notes that seemed to have been on terms of the warmest intimacy with all the cattle markets in the country." (p. 107). When the now respectable Pip repays Magwitch for the 'loan' he does so in notes which 'were clean and new'. The novel implies that this distinction between clean and dirty money is spurious. However, Pip doesn't explicitly state this - which would have removed the chief obstacle to accepting Magwitch's money. The plot intervenes to simplify the resolution of this theme. Magwitch's money is confiscated by the crown. Thus Pip makes "not a grand renunciation of the money, but a firm resignation to losing it."<sup>(1)</sup> - "I had no claim, and I finally resolved, and ever afterwards abided by the resolution, that my heart should never be sickened with the hopeless task of attempting to establish one." (p. 458). The point about Pip's 'refusal' of Magwitch's money is not that he hasn't learnt the implied lesson that no money is somehow cleaner than other money, but that he also positively refused to accept money from Miss Havisham when he knew whom his patron was. The implication born out by Pip's business career with Herbert, is that Pip no longer felt that he had a right to accept something for nothing. In the future he must work for his own money.

But he does not work for it back at the forge, despite his original feeling that it would be right for him to return

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1 C. Ricks, Great Expectations in Dickens and the Twentieth Century (ed. Gross and Pearson), p. 207.

to the village and marry Biddy. While journeying back to propose to Biddy Pip enjoys "many pleasant pictures of the life that I would lead there.". Yet though Pip is no longer ashamed of the forge, the country environment which in the past was shown to be so limiting - where Wopsle could pose as a great orator, and where intellectual stimulus and companionship began and ended round the fire in The Three Jolly Bargemen - hasn't changed. The presentation of village life in the novel shows no regret for the passing of the old rural order. It is a sentimental falsification that Pip is untroubled and happy in contemplating exchanging the company of Herbert for that of the Jolly Bargemen. However, Dickens doesn't take up the point that having been educated into appreciating intelligent, urbane, literate society Pip would now be imprisoned by returning to live in his old claustrophobic environment. The plot resolution (Biddy is already married to Joe, leaving Pip free to join Herbert overseas) sidesteps the problem completely. However, the fact that Pip returns to Herbert not Joe, has important implications for the novel's treatment of the gentility theme.

Herbert Pocket earlier in the novel said of his father, "it is a principle of his that no man who was not a true gentleman at heart, ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner. He says no varnish can hide the grain of the wood; and that the more varnish you put on, the more the grain will express itself." (p. 204). Compeyson's advantage over Magwitch at their trial was the result of this manner and varnish only. Yet though the novel asserts that gentility at heart (the grain not the varnish) is what really matters - hence Joe is one of nature's gentlemen - the ideal gentleman to Dickens (represented in this novel by Herbert Pocket and his father, in Bleak House by Jarndyce, "a gentleman of a humane heart", and in Little Dorrit by Clennam) is a gentleman in both



heart and manner. Thus Joe falls short of the ideal in that he lacks varnish, manner and polish - qualities not sufficient in themselves to confer true gentlemanly status on the bearer but not to be dismissed as unimportant. They have a positive value and are held to be desirable in addition to (though they are no substitute for) gentility of the heart (i.e. moral gentility).

Humphrey House has said of Great Expectations, "The book is the clearest artistic triumph of the Victorian Bourgeoisie on its own special grounds. The expectations lose their greatness, and Pip is saved from the grosser dangers of wealth; but by the end he has gained a wider and deeper knowledge of life, he is less rough, better spoken, better read, better mannered ... who is to say that these are not advantages?"<sup>(1)</sup>. House's remarks bring us once again to the relation between the social vision of a Dickens novel and what we have called the interpretive code or index, couched mainly in middle-class terms.

In its chief themes and social vision the novel is critical and oppositional to mid-Victorian society. Fastidious bourgeois respectability and an ostentatious complacency born of wealth are chief social targets in the novel. However, the middle-class value index certainly comes into play at the conclusion of the novel, with important consequences for the gentility theme.

The company of Herbert is preferable to that of Joe and his village cronies. Joe may be a natural gentleman but it is the frank and open, urbane, socially skilled Herbert (who can give Pip his lesson in table manners with tact and cheerful delicacy) who approaches Dickens's ideal of gentility. And despite his moral equality Joe would be

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1 H. House, The Dickens World, p. 156.

expected to defer socially to Herbert, and have the good sense (as he does) to see this deference as natural and inevitable. Of course moral equality without corresponding social equality is an easy and empty gesture on the novelist's part. Thus the gentility theme is concluded in a manner consistent with many of the conventional assumptions about class current in mid-Victorian society. It is in no way an attack by Dickens on class as an institution. An unequal distribution of wealth and the material prizes of society is not being attacked in itself.

It is necessary in exploring this issue to discuss what the conventional views of class were during the mid-Victorian period. It was argued when examining Little Dorrit that during the mid-Victorian period the language of class softened and attention was paid "not to the broad contours of class division" (i.e. the conflict between the middle-class and the aristocracy) "but to an almost endless series of social gradations"<sup>(1)</sup>. Asa Briggs has outlined three main points about the class system which were generally believed at the time, and which dominate the views of contemporaries about class. Great Expectations was written within a value framework which tacitly accepts all of them.

First, contemporary commentators asserted that the marked degree of individual mobility made class divisions tolerable. It is clear from Pip's history as well as Lizzie Hexam's marriage in Our Mutual Friend that Dickens felt that in certain cases it was right for particular individuals to cross class lines but that these class divisions should still remain. The common contemporary view of the class system was of a ladder (a social hierarchy) in which the rungs did not move but individuals did. Briggs quotes the

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1 Asa Briggs, 'The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England' in Essays in Labour History (ed. Briggs and Saville), p. 69.

public school headmaster, the Rev. E. Thring as claiming in his book Education and the School (1864) that "Individuals may rise and fall by special excellence or defects but the classes cannot change places.". This is reflected in the social distance which remains at the end of the novel between Pip and Herbert on the one hand, and Joe and Biddy on the other. The treatment of class in the novel implicitly reflects a middle-class view of the class system in individualistic terms.

One could say of the later novels generally that within them the implied view of the class system is of a hierarchy of differentiated functions. At certain points in the novels (e.g. Lizzie Hexam's social mobility consequent on her marriage) the element of hierarchy will be emphasised (this is usually so when dealing with the 'natural' social aspiration of middle-class characters); while on other occasions the element of functional divisions will be stressed (e.g. when Joe expresses why it is right that his future paths should be kept separate from Pip's). Indeed the functional element is usually stressed when dealing with the experience of working class characters. In both cases, however, it is the same social model which is being used, and this is a ladder view of society.

That the ladder theory of society is essentially a product of a middle-class consciousness is generally accepted by social historians (e.g. "the ladder is a perfect symbol of the bourgeois idea of society, because, while undoubtedly it offers the opportunity to clime, it is a device which can only be used individually: You go up the ladder alone.")<sup>(1)</sup>.

Secondly, it was emphasised that the dividing lines between classes were extremely difficult to draw. The novel explores the way in which factors other than money

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1 R. Williams, Culture and Society, p. 317.

or birth (e.g. education, manners, clothes, accent) can influence class placing. Pip's embarrassment in front of Trabb's boy and his concern lest his relations with Joe are observed by Drummle testify to his own uncertainty about his class position and put him firmly in the line of characters in the later novels neurotically concerned with their image and class definition in the eyes of society - e.g. the Dorrits and Gowan (Little Dorrit), and Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam (Our Mutual Friend).

Thirdly, it was believed that the significant divisions inside what were conventionally regarded as the classes were often more important than the divisions between the classes. The differences within classes are explored via the whole gentility issue, e.g. the significant differences in social position between Drummle, Compeyson, and Matthew Pocket, all members of the broad social category of middle-class gentlemen.

Thus all the chief assumptions and conventional beliefs about class and the class system in mid-Victorian society were tacitly accepted in the development of the theme in Great Expectations. "The case for inequality was as much a part of social orthodoxy (in mid-Victorian England) as it had been a hundred years before"<sup>(1)</sup>, and despite sentimental concessions to the human, moral status of Joe (translated into rather vague social terms) this fact is reflected in the dual operation of the plot resolution and the conclusion of the gentility theme. Dickens is less concerned with the existence of class differences as with the moral failings of those who occupy the privileged social/political positions. In Great Expectations Dickens's assumption would appear to be that if the positions of social/economic privilege were occupied by people like

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1 Asa Briggs, *ibid*, p. 69.

Herbert then all would be well, (even though it is recognised that it was poverty and destitution which drove Magwitch to a life of crime). Presumably, (though the novel is vague about this) if the Herberts could bring their influence to bear on the political world the Magwitchs and Jos would be looked to. Their level of material comfort would rise though as a group they would still be kept in their place. This implied suggestion that a class of moral gentlemen who were social gentlemen too might provide the best safeguard for the future well-being of society as a whole is perhaps a Dickensian variation of Carlyle's concept of a moral aristocracy, though it must be admitted that Dickens's ideal gentlemen are defined in non-political terms and are usually given a passive social role to play.

It is worth looking more closely at the way in which the middle-class value index operates in the novel's plot resolution. By associating himself openly with Magwitch at the trial Pip had put himself outside the pale of conventional class values. His business career in the East, however, serves to integrate him back into bourgeois society. What's more the qualified but not inconsiderable material success which Pip gains abroad is won in the best traditions of the middle-class myth of self-help, earlier criticised in its general applicability to the whole of society. "Many a year went round, before I was a partner in the House; but, I lived happily with Herbert and his wife, and I lived frugally, and I paid my debts ... I must not leave it to be supposed that we were ever a great House, or that we made mints of money. We were not in a grand way of business, but we had a good name and worked for our profits, and did very well." (p. 489). Pip's business career involves a parade of middle-class virtues - thrift, earnestness, duty (he repays his debts), industry, perseverance and patience (his deserved promotion). The profits of the firm are thus a symptom of moral application, consistent with the entrepreneurial ideal.

The effect of this is that Pip no longer appears a problematic person when he meets with Estella on revisiting Satis House. His final stance in the novel is not a subversive one - like Arthur Clennam he settles into a life of modest usefulness as a partner in a small, individual business firm. Though Pip's material success is qualified it is comfortable. He may have rejected society (i.e. its false social values) but Pip still remains socially acceptable. However, his final position is given no general or future significance for society as a whole.

Of course, in addition to Biddy's marriage the fact that Herbert was established in a business career within an expanding firm is the crucial plot means by which Pip is provided with an alternative to going back to the forge, and hence a satisfactory closed plot ending is achieved. Thus again in a Dickens novel a satisfactory resolution to the experience of the hero is the result (albeit indirect) of a money gift from an individual benefactor - in this case Pip's secret gift to Herbert, completed by Miss Havisham, which creates a situation from which Pip himself is to benefit. This emphasises the amount of luck involved in the eventual integration of a characteristic Dickens hero within his society (Esther, Pip or John Harmon), usually due as much to the generosity of others as to individual achievement. Dickens tries to play down this fact by having Pip remark, "We owed so much to Herbert's ever cheerful industry and readiness, that I often wondered how I had conceived that old idea of his inaptitude, until I was one day enlightened by the reflection, that perhaps the inaptitude had never been in him at all, but had been in me." (p. 489). Unfortunately this only draws extra attention to the artificiality of this crucial plot device, for clearly the 'inaptitude' was not Pip's, whose 'old idea' was founded on a realistic assessment of Herbert's dreamy, fanciful character, which leaves an unearned gift as the only means by which Herbert's toe-hold

in the business world could be achieved.

Of course, any discussion of the open or closed nature of the ending in Great Expectations is complicated by Dickens's rewriting of the original ending. Biddy's marriage and Pip's business career were both in the original too but the romantic relation between Pip and Estella was closed happily only in the second version. The reasons for the change show Dickens's continued stake in the literary market, (see Part I, Chapter 3) which here works against the unity and coherence of his text.

The first version of the ending by keeping Pip and Estella apart (they briefly meet by accident years later and then continue in their separate paths, Pip as a bachelor and Estella remarried to a country doctor) is a more open and muted ending. It is not happy but there is a modicum of comfort in Pip's business success. It seems artistically right compared with the rewritten, preferred ending which united Pip and Estella at the expense of artistic consistency. Their imminent marriage makes nonsense of Pip's frequently repeated remarks that his love for Estella was hopeless and doomed, and how much better it would have been for him had he never seen her. The happy ending clashes with the whole tone and mood of the narrative. As Angus Calder remarks "the remorseful, probing, brooding tone of disillusionment which pervades the first person narrative of the novel, most noticeably in the passages dealing with Estella, is rendered more than slightly nonsensical if the supposed author is both successful and happily married."<sup>(1)</sup> Thus once again we see the mutually reinforcing operation of a closed happy ending, and the middle-class value index working to make acceptable to a middle-class reading public a novel with a critical and oppositional social vision.

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1      Angus Calder, Great Expectations (Penguin Edition, 1965), Appendix A, p. 496.

## CHAPTER 5

OUR MUTUAL FRIEND -  
THE DUST - MOUNDS AND SPECULATION

Dickens's social vision in this, his last completed novel, embraces familiar ideas and themes. This is suggested by one of those loaded descriptions of London which characterise his later work. "A grey dusty withered evening in London city has not a hopeful aspect. The closed warehouses and offices have an air of death about them, and the national dread of colour has an air of mourning. The towers and steeples of the many house-encompassed churches, dark and dingy as the sky that seems descending on them, are no relief to the general gloom; a sun-dial on a church-wall has the look, in its useless black shade, of having failed in its business enterprise and stopped payment forever ... The set of humanity outward from the city is as a set of prisoners departing from gaol, and dismal Newgate seems quite as fit a stronghold for the mighty Lord Mayor as his own state-dwelling." (p. 450)<sup>(1)</sup>.

Here encapsulated in one passage are most of the themes and relationships which form the artistic capital for Dickens's social vision in his later novels - the suggestive relations of the warehouse and offices with death; of the City and prison; of the socially respectable (Lord Mayor) and the criminal (Newgate). Equally familiar is the failure of the church to influence the quality of everyday life, and the pervasive influence of market-place relations and values (even the workings of a sun-dial are seen as a failed business relation). Indeed this last theme - the market nature of the social relations of everyday life -

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1 All page references to the novel are to the Penguin Edition (Harmondsworth 1971), edited by Stephen Gill.



is probably the most insistent and important idea in the later fiction and it plays a characteristically central role in Our Mutual Friend, (1864-5).

As we have seen before, the discussion of the use of emblems or repeated images offers a particularly rewarding point of entry into the imaginative world of Dickens's novels. However, the two emblems invested with a general social significance in Our Mutual Friend - the river and the dust-mounds - both present problems of interpretation.

We will consider the river first. It is a common literary metaphor which takes the movement of a river from source to sea as suggestive of the passage of life, its ebb and flow, its movement and mystery. There is a similar connotation in the image of the waves in Dombey and Son. This traditional literary use of the river is relevant to certain passages in Our Mutual Friend - as, for example, when old Betty Higden dies beside the river she has heard calling her, "Come to me, come to me! ... I am the Relieving Officer appointed by eternal ordinance to do my work" (p. 567), and when Lizzie Hexam stands by the river pondering on her father's future life "unable to see into the vast blank misery of a life suspected, and fallen away from by good and bad, but knowing that it lay there dim before her, stretching away to the great ocean, Death." (p. 115). However, this is not the river's main significance for the novel's social vision - nor, it seems to me, is the idea of immersion in the river as a form of ritual baptism or cleansing (which will be considered later when discussing Eugene Wrayburn's rebirth) crucial to the river's suggestiveness for society as a whole. Of course Dickens's characteristic touch with his symbols is the open (not mutually exclusive) relation between realistic and figurative interpretations, and in analysis we must try to preserve the balance between the river as an emblem and its realistic

or topographical identity. To this end, when we consider the river as social fact what was most striking about it to contemporaries (and what is given most emphasis in the novel) is its pollution.

In a letter to Cerjat (July, 1858) Dickens declared, "The Thames in London is most horrible. I have to cross Waterloo or London Bridge to get to the railroad when I come here, and I can certify that the offensive smells, even in that short whiff, have been of a most head-and-stomach distending nature.". It is to be expected that the visual image of the polluted river would be associated with the industrial process which had produced the comparatively recent change in its appearance. "Small wonder that the Thames in 1849 was more impure at Battersea Fields than it had been in 1832 at London Bridge; the fact is significant of what dreadful things had been going forward on its banks."<sup>(1)</sup>. To contemporaries the river was one of the most sensuously arresting symbols of the contamination of social life by the industrial process and in Our Mutual Friend Dickens artistically exploits this fact. The pollution of the Thames is imaginatively emphasised. Near its source the river is pure. "In those pleasant little towns on Thames, you may hear the fall of the water over the weirs, or even, in still weather, the rustle of the rushes; and from the bridge you may see the young river, dimpled like a young child, playfully gliding away among the trees, unpolluted by the defilements that lie in wait for it on it's course, and as yet out of hearing of the deep summons of the sea." (p. 567). In its contact with the city (and industrial society) the once-pure river becomes defiled and contaminated. It flows through the corrupt and corrupting riverside areas ("where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be

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1 G. Kitson Clark, The Making of Victorian England, p. 82.

pausing until it's own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river" (p. 63)) and past the wharves and warehouses (with their lettering which "looked ... like inscriptions over the graves of dead businesses" (p. 219)) and the change in it's character and appearance is so marked "that the after-consequences of being crushed, sucked under, and drawn down, looked as ugly to the imagination as the main event." (pp. 219-20).

Thus in the novel the river's pollution becomes a concrete physical sign that something is wrong in mid-Victorian society - a visible symptom or emblem of a corrupt society.<sup>(1)</sup> This corruption related not just to the industrial process in general but to the stage of capitalist development characteristic of the mid-Victorian period. It is worth noting that near the source of the river stands the paper mill where Lizzie Hexam finds work after fleeing London. The paper mill is a throwback to an earlier form of entrepreneurial capitalism - a small independent business where relations with employees are personal and kindly. The mill is associated, through its Upper Thames location with the optimistic beginning of the river's journey. This journey to the city (and an economic climate dominated by Shares) could be read as a metaphor for the historical development of Victorian capitalism.

Even if this is rejected as too fanciful there is no doubt that the answer to the question what has gone wrong with mid-Victorian England is suggested by the other major symbol of the novel, the dust-mounds. The relation between the river and the mounds is crucial to the meaning of the novel. Their common element of filth relates them

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1 A similar effect is intended by the description of the pollution of the City atmosphere which means that the London fog becomes increasingly black as one moves from the outskirts towards the centre of the city. (See p. 479.)

to the social processes which defile the system as a whole.

Many critics are satisfied with the simple association of the mounds with money or wealth, and thus assert that the chief insight of the novel is that money is dirt and rubbish. Their argument for this interpretation is that the mounds are known to have contained dust, dirt, waste-paper, and rubbish of various sorts - and yet this amalgam was valuable, fetching a high market price, and of course the dust-mounds constitute the bulk of Harmon's fortune on which the plot of the novel centres. The value of the mounds resulted, claims House, from the use of ashes (in brickmaking) and soot (for manure) as well as from articles of value accidentally thrown away in the rubbish. Thus in society's market possession of dirt and rubbish was literally equivalent to the possession of money (in an article in Household Words in 1850 Dickens stated that the Marylebone dust-heap produced between four and five thousand pounds).

That some sort of equation between the mounds and wealth is intended is clear from a series of verbal associations between wealth and various of the chief ingredients of the mounds. For example, waste-paper and rubbish blown around the city streets on a windy day is referred to as "That mysterious paper currency which circulates in London when the wind blows" (p. 191), and when Riderhood informs on Gaffer Hexam in Lightwood's office the silence was "broken only by the fall of the ashes in the grate, which attracted the informer's attention as if it were the clinking of money" (p. 202).

However, the function of the mounds in the novel involves certain problems. One is that unlike Dickens's most successful symbols, the mounds are given only a vague,

shadowy existence in the realistic scenery of the novel. What we know about them is due more to House's research than to Dickens's own descriptions. It has been argued that a sensuous particularisation of detail is needed if an emblem or symbol is to satisfactorily sustain its symbolic function, and yet Robert Barnard is right in claiming of the mounds "We are certainly not made to feel their intimidating size; and we certainly never smell them."<sup>(1)</sup> Dickens's reticence on just what was contained in the mounds is important. House has argued that one of their chief ingredients was human excrement (which as a fertiliser would be a chief contributor to their overall value) - "One of the main jobs of a dust-contractor in Early Victorian London was to collect the contents of the privies and the piles of mixed dung and ashes which were made in the poorer streets."<sup>(2)</sup> House argues that Dickens euphemistically referred to human dung through the polite term 'dust'. It is, of course, likely that contemporary readers would be alive to what Dickens delicately refrained from articulating, in order not "to offend the young person", in a manner which modern readers are not. We come back to the problems of artistic tact, which need not prevent the novelist from communicating his desired idea or effect. Certainly it adds a new dimension to Dickens's attack if we interpret his meaning as being that money is equivalent to dirt and excrement. There is support for this in the 'merdre' lurking in the name of Mr. Merdle ('merdre' is demotic French for excrement) which might anticipate the moral of Our Mutual Friend - wealth as filth.

There is another problem, however. If a crude identification of money with dirt is accepted then the symbolic force of the mounds will clash with the plot resolution in which Harmon comes into Boffin's money, in a manner serious

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1 R. Barnard, Imagery and Theme in the Novels of Dickens, p. 122.

2 H. House, The Dickens World, p. 167.

for the coherence of the total structure of the novel. It would appear that the figurative suggestiveness of the mounds operates at certain times in the plot and not at others. (Presumably when Harmon inherits his money the connection between money and filth does not apply.) This is why it is better to refer to the mounds as an emblem rather than as a symbol. But this adjustment of terms does not solve the problem of a lack of integration between the mounds as symbol and the plot, a point to be returned to when considering the closed ending of the novel. However, it will make for greater precision in the analysis if the identification of the mounds with money is qualified.

Arnold Kettle has argued that the real issue involved in the mounds and the novel as a whole is not money but values. "The corrupting force in Our Mutual Friend is not money but bourgeois attitudes to it."<sup>(1)</sup> Certainly it makes more sense for the unity of the text if we emphasise that it is an attitude to money which is embodied in the mounds. However, unlike Kettle, I identify this attitude with the set of values which constitutes what throughout this thesis has been called the market mentality - and this is current in all society, not just one class. Of course, this market-orientated philosophy of life involves at its very core, an attitude to human beings, but as a way of judging and valuing it is perhaps most clearly recognised in an attitude to money as the primary and absolute value in social life.

It is worth exploring the differences between this point of view and Kettle's. The market philosophy is certainly embodied in Podsnap's stance and in the Voice of Society - however, in two important senses this is presented in the novel as being not specifically a bourgeois ideology,

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1      A. Kettle, Our Mutual Friend in Dickens and the Twentieth Century, (ed. Gross and Pearson), p. 216.

although Podsnap's values and social position show what was happening to the bourgeoisie at this time. Although Podsnap's code involves a perversion of traditional middle-class values - money, property, etc. - his belief in the proprieties and characteristic refusal to believe in the existence of anything disagreeable to him is not simply bourgeois complacency and prudery but is related to Mrs. General's brand of delicacy and manners and is thus also a manifestation of the values of the aristocratic code. In Podsnap's relations with Veneering and Lady Tippins we see the fusion of bourgeois and aristocratic stances and the beginnings of the plutocracy of the late century.

In another sense the Voice of Society is not simply a class voice. In its reduction of all aspects of life to a market valuation it is presented as a symptom of the degraded quality of everyday social relations throughout the whole system - in the lower and lower-middle regions of society as well as the upper. (Wegg, Riderhood, Mr. Dolls; Charley Hexam, the unreformed Bella.) The Voice of Society crystallises this general social phenomenon on the plane of values (as a way of thinking, feeling and judging) just as the mounds gives it a concrete visual realisation. Thus the image of the mounds comments on the general quality of life within mid-Victorian capitalism. (That is why it is particularly unfortunate that the novel does not give more details of the nature of the mounds. If we accept House's point about excrement, then the force of Dickens' whole imaginative disgust at his society is strikingly encompassed in the image of the mounds - Life in our society is like this!)

Thus the significance of the mounds - the suggestion of the quality of everyday social relations and the market-mentality which permeates these - is organically bound up within the novel's structure with the Voice of Society, Shares and Boffin's miserly persona (which expresses the

generalising significance of the mounds on the level of individual character).

Reducing the mounds to a simple equivalent is a false level of precision for not only is the suggestive power of the mounds not limited to one moral or message, but it is a flexible, adaptable image. For example, from describing the slow process of clearing the mounds ("The train of carts and horses came and went all day from dawn to nightfall, making little or no daily impression on the heap of ashes" (p. 565)) Dickens suddenly changes the direction of his emblem's relation to the world of the novel and uses the mounds to launch into an attack on the political system "My Lords and gentlemen and honourable boards, when you in the course of your dust-shovelling and cinder-raking have piled up a mountain of pretentious failure, you must off with your honourable coats for the removal of it, and fall to the work with the power of all the queen's horses and all the queen's men, or it will come rushing down and bury us alive ...

We must mend it, lords and gentlemen and honourable boards, or in it's own evil hour it will mar every one of us." (pp. 565-6).

The warning is familiar (cf. the children huddled in Covent Garden in Little Dorrit) as is the image of impending collapse. Of course, Dickens signposted this change in his use of the mounds quite clearly, and it in no way invalidates the argument that the mounds represent the money-values of the market mentality to admit that their use is flexible and multi-functional. However, even in this instance where they suggest the mountain of misdirected political effort the mounds still retain associations of the market mentality, for the values of the political governors of England emanating from the Honourable Boards from which Betty Higden flees are identified as those of Podsnappery, which involves an



implicit orientation to an economic frame of reference. Latent in Dickens's treatment of Podsnappery and the Honourable Boards is the insight of a passage of Carlyle's. "For, as indeed was very natural in such case, all government of the Poor by the Rich has long ago been given over to Supply-and-Demand, Laissez-faire and such like, and universally declared to be 'impossible'. "You are no sister of ours; what shadow of proof is there? Here are our parchments, our padlocks, proving indisputably our money safes to be ours, and you have no business with them. Depart! It is impossible!"<sup>(1)</sup>.

Finally, before leaving the mounds, their relation with another important image in the novel, that of Shares, should be pointed out. Between them the images of the mounds and Shares assert what it is about Victorian capitalism in the 1860's which corrupts everyday social relations in a manner analogous to London's corruption of the Thames. The novel connects living off rubbish and living off shares. The waste-products of the mounds offer a handsome living to their owner; the "melancholy waifs and strays" who scavenge through the London rubbish "searching and stooping and poking for anything to sell" (p. 450) try to eke out a living through society's waste. Fledgeby fattens off stock-market bills which he buys in bulk so so much waste paper. "Half the lump will be waste-paper one knows beforehand ... Can you get it at waste-paper price? That's the question." (p. 483). The implication is that the stock-market speculators are merely more respectable, and more glittering scavengers.

(ii)

The familiar theme of society as a market place is given a particular relation to the economic climate of the

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1 Carlyle, Past and Present, Bk. III, Ch. II, 'Gospel of Mammonism' in Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings ed. Alan Shelton, p. 280.

60's, for the implicit market-orientated frame of reference for everyday life manifests itself in Our Mutual Friend as a form of speculation. Stock-market speculation of course was characteristic of economic activity throughout the mid-Victorian period, and had produced by the mid-sixties a whole class of nouveaux riches, represented in the novel by Veneering, a man who sprung from nowhere and in a typical strategy attempted to legitimise his social position by investing in the required ostentatious surfaces of High Society (everything is "bran-new") and forging a link with the aristocracy through Lady Tippins (and indirectly through Twemlow).

Veneering's career is organically related to the mounds - for his success is the most striking testimony in the novel to the power of money. With money he buys his way into Society and from that springboard money buys him a place in Parliament. Money is the absolute reference within Veneering's world (even the Boffins are granted admission when they inherit Harmon's fortune) but it is significant that Veneering appeals for social recognition on aristocratic terms by flaunting a family crest and cultivating aristocratic social connections. Once again the novels reflect the fusion and social alliance of the mid-Victorian English aristocracy and bourgeoisie.

In developing the theme of speculation as a general principle for social behaviour let us first examine the novel's explicit condemnation of Shares. "As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have Shares. Have Shares enough to be on Boards of Direction in capital letters, oscillate on mysterious business between London and Paris, and be great. Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares. What

are his tastes? Shares. Has he any principles? Shares. What squeezes him into Parliament? Shares. Perhaps he never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything? Sufficient answer to all; Shares. O mighty Shares! To set those blaring images so high, and to cause us smaller vermin, as under the influence of herbane or opium, to cry out, night and day, "Relieve us of our money, scatter it for us, buy us and sell us, ruin us, only we beseech ye take rank among the powers of the earth, and fatten on us!" (pp. 159-60).

Raymond Williams has commented usefully on this passage. He sees "this power of making an abstraction into a dramatic force ... as ... a major element in all Dickens's social vision."<sup>(1)</sup>, thus pointing out that Dickens's use of Shares in this novel is similar to his use of Chancery, and the Circumlocution Office, and the 'Great Expectations' of Pip. Like them it is an external force, related to the humans who created it in a hostile and alienating manner. Thus Dickens's attack here is that Shares embody "a free-acting force, separated from man, though of course created by him" and "are replacing men as the active creators of the world."<sup>(2)</sup>.

This passage on Shares points towards two important and related patterns of imagery (both familiar from earlier novels) and each organically bound up with the directing artistic principle of speculation. Through the operation of Shares, speculators 'fatten' on the 'smaller vermin' of the rest of society. This directs us to the repeated imagery of birds or animals of prey, suggesting a general individualistic and competitive scavenging throughout society. (The image was used in similar fashion of Chancery in Bleak House). We

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1 R. Williams, The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence, p. 47.

2 R. Williams, *ibid*, pp. 47,48.

are told that Lammle's friends and fellow speculators "seemed to divide the world into two classes of people-people who were making enormous fortunes and people who were being enormously ruined" (p. 313). Boffin's new found wealth turns his house into an alligator infested swamp where he becomes the intended prey of "all manner of crawling, creeping, fluttering and buzzing creatures, attracted by the gold dust of the Golden Dustman!" (p. 257). In particular Boffin is preyed upon by Wegg. (After agreeing terms with Boffin, "Wegg rose, and balancing himself on his wooden leg, fluttered over his prey with extended hand." (p. 237).) The heading for Bk. II, Chapter 12, "More Birds of Prey" refers to Rogue Riderhood and his daughter Pleasant, who "had it in the blood or had been trained, to regard seamen, within certain limits as her prey." (p. 406). Even death is no release from this condition of potential prey, for Gaffer Hexam, who "was a hook-nosed man, and with that and his bright eyes and his ruffled head, bore a certain likeness to a roused bird of prey" (p. 45), fastens on the dead bodies floating down the Thames as a source of income. Thus the forces involved in the operations of Shares direct us to the general social condition. The theme is given a plot twist when Headstone literally preys upon and attacks Wrayburn who in his turn is pursuing Lizzie, who as a working girl is the socially acceptable prey of a gentleman.

Secondly, these forces can have the effect of dehumanising the individuals involved in their operation (cf. Raymond Williams's point that things not people have become the active creators of the world). This dehumanisation also relates to a general condition, which is revealed in the second pattern of imagery - one which reflects alienation and dehumanisation in terms of two familiar themes - the idea of mechanical behaviour and humans objectified into things. Both of these are to be seen in the description of Silas Wegg. His face "had just as much play of expression as a watchman's

rattle" (p. 89), and "he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally, and rather suggested to the fanciful observer that he might be expected ... to be completely set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months." (p. 89). The code of Podsnappery reduces life to a sterile mechanical routine. For example, Podsnap's view of the arts sees literature, music and painting as all being expressions of "getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the city at ten, coming home at half past five, and dining at seven." (pp. 174-5). Podsnap's life is that of a mechanically functioning robot, while Bradley Headstone's methods of assimilating and maintaining knowledge are those of the machine. "He had acquired mechanically a great store of teacher's knowledge. He could do mental arithmetic mechanically, sing at sight mechanically, blow various instruments mechanically, even play the great church organ mechanically. From his early childhood up, his mind had been a place of mechanical stowage." (p. 266). The similarities between Podsnap's organisation of his life and Headstone's organisation of his mind has prompted one critic to see Headstone labouring under "the dead-weight of an intellectual Podsnappery."<sup>(1)</sup>

Within the world of the novel generally people seem objectified into things which appear to supplant the identity of the whole man. When we think of Podsnap we think of his plate, of Veneering his varnish, of Lammle his sparkling dress and teeth, while to the Veneering world Twemlow is merely a "piece of dinner-furniture" (p. 48). Throughout the Veneering episodes Dickens uses an exaggerated reportage style which functions as a depersonalising literary technique to increase the sense of a human world objectified into mechanical things. But this impression is not confined to fashionable society. Wegg's whole being is made an extension

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1 H.M. Daleski, Dickens and the Art of Analogy, p. 291.

of his wooden leg, while Headstone's identity during his working hours shrinks to be encompassed in his watch and chain, symbols of respectability.

The novel's chief argument that the principle of speculation is not confined to the limits of the stock-exchange but infiltrates all areas of society as a social frame of reference (cf. Marx in German Sociology - "in modern civil society all relations are in practice subordinated to the single abstract relation of money and speculation."<sup>(1)</sup>) is reinforced by parallel means. In this example, worth quoting at length, disturbing implications are suggested in a manner which transcends the comic and ironic context. It has always been characteristic of Dickens's method to make serious social comments in a comic or playful context, which does not, however, remove their sting or relevance.

Discussing Mrs. Boffin's plan to adopt an orphan the Rev. Milvey and his wife "spoke, as if they kept some profitable orphan warehouse and were personally patronised" (p. 151). The Rev. Milvey outlines the position - "We have orphans, I know, pursued Mr. Milvey, quite with the air as if he might have added, 'in stock', and quite as anxiously as if there were great competition in the business and he were afraid of losing an order, 'over at the clay-pits; but they are employed by relations or friends, and I am afraid it would come at last to a transaction in the way of barter.'" (p. 151).

Later, (Book I, Chapter 16) this concept of people being treated as commodities is developed in an explicit analogy with the stock-market. We are told that "it was

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1      Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy, p. 169 (ed. Bottomore and Rubel).

found impossible to complete the philanthropic transaction without buying the orphans. For, the instant it became known that anybody wanted the orphan, up started some affectionate relative of the orphan who put a price upon the orphan's head. The suddenness of an orphan's rise in the market was not to be paralleled by the maddest records of the Stock Exchange. He would be at five thousand per cent discount out at nurse making a mud pie at nine in the morning, and (being inquired for) would go up to five thousand per cent premium before noon. The market was 'rigged' in various artful ways. Counterfeit stock got into circulation. Parents boldly represented themselves as dead, and brought their orphans with them. Genuine orphan stock was surreptitiously withdrawn from the market. It being announced by emissaries posted for the purpose, that Mr. and Mrs. Milvey were coming down the court, orphan scrip would be instantly concealed, and production refused, save on a condition usually stated by the brokers as 'a gallon of beer'. Likewise, fluctuations of a wild and South-Sea nature were occasioned, by orphan-holders keeping back, and then rushing into the market a dozen together. But, the uniform principle at the root of all these various operations was bargain and sale; and that principle could not be recognised by Mr. and Mrs. Milvey." (p. 244). The tone is light and humorous but the underlying concept of trafficking in people as commodities reflects family ties as unnatural and perverted as those of Mr. Dolls and Jenny Wren.

The point about the orphan stock-market is reinforced by Veneering's dinners, which have nothing at all to do with generosity, fellowship or true hospitality. Instead they are a necessary means to a social end, economic investments in which friendship is to be cultivated in order to strengthen the foundations of Veneering's newly asserted (and hence uncertain) social position. In effect Veneering speculates in his 'friends'. Twemlow being "cousin to Lord Snigsworth,

of Snigsworthy Park" is much in demand as a status asset. It is appropriate, in view of his being reduced by Veneering to an object of convenience, that Twemlow is introduced in this fashion - "There was an innocent piece of dinner-furniture that went upon easy castors and was kept over a livery stable-yard in Duke Street, St. James's, when not in use ... Being first cousin to Lord Snigsworth, he was in frequent requisition" (p. 48). Twemlow is a good investment. His social connections impress Boots and Brewer and thus "Veneering is clear that he (i.e. Twemlow) is a remunerative article." (p. 52). The same is true of Podsnap. "Perhaps, after all - who knows? - Veneering may find this dining, though expensive, remunerative, in the sense that it makes champions. Mr. Podsnap, as a representative man, is not alone in caring very particularly for his own dignity, if not for that of his acquaintances, and therefore in angrily supporting the acquaintances who have taken out his Permit, lest in their being lessened, he should be." (pp. 683-4). It is an appropriate comment on the mercenary principle behind Veneering's hospitality that when he hosts the reception following Lammle's wedding "nobody seems to think more of the Veneerings than if they were a tolerable landlord and landlady doing the thing in the way of business at so much a head." (p. 166).

Dickens continually reinforces his argument with significant details. The irony is obvious when Venus says of Wegg's amputated leg "I bought you in open contract" and Wegg replies, "you can't buy human flesh and blood in this country, sir; not alive you can't" (p. 351). Of course, throughout the world of the novel people are being treated as commodities to be bought and sold. Even the criminal inhabitants of Mr. Inspector's police-office are seen as objects in a business transaction. The police station itself, with its "methodical book-keeping" is described as a business firm. "The sanctuary was not a permanent abiding-place, but



a kind of criminal Pickford's. The lower passions and wills were regularly ticked off in the books, warehoused in the cells, carted away as per accompanying invoice, and left little mark upon it." (p. 833).

It has been argued that the speculative principle is present in all areas of society. Fledgeby "was sensible of the value of appearances as an investment" (p. 324), while, at the other end of the social scale, Wegg's thoughts as he sees Boffin approach his stall neatly summarise a way of thinking and valuing general in society. "Are you in independent circumstances, or is it wasting the motions of a bow on you? Come! I'll speculate! I'll invest a bow in you." (p. 90). Between these social extremes lies the more interesting case of Bradley Headstone.

Headstone invested in education and the social role of the schoolmaster in order to free himself from a working class environment and gain the social return of respectability. He wears his 'decent' clothes as a badge or uniform of his achieved respectability, the uncertainty of the schoolmaster's social position at the time being all the more reason for him to emphasise his respectable surface. His learning was a means to an end and his retention of it is as business-like as Podsnap's organisation of his working day. "From his early childhood up, his mind had been a place of mechanical stowage. The arrangement of his wholesale warehouse, so that it might be always ready to meet the demands of retail dealers - history here, geography there, astronomy to the right, political economy to the left - natural history, the physical sciences, figures, music, the lower mathematics, and what not, all in their several places - this care had imparted to his countenance a look of care ... He always seemed to be uneasy lest anything should be missing from his mental warehouse, and taking stock to assure himself." (pp. 266-7).

Arnold Kettle has said of this passage, "Not only is the educational system as such here linked with the processes of capitalist economy, but Headstone's own personal neuroses are connected organically with the socio-intellectual system of which he is a cog."<sup>(1)</sup> The first of Kettle's points draws our attention to the fact that Headstone is as much a product of a factory system for teachers as Mr. M'Choakumchild in Hard Times who has been "turned out" with "some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters ... in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs." (Penguin, pp. 52-3) Indeed not only is Headstone in his official life a depersonalised part of a destructive machine, but his psychology (like that other interesting case, Miss Wade in Little Dorrit) is presented as a product of his environment. Headstone suffers by his self-denial of the life force within him. In his history we see not only the tragic absurdity of the Gradgrind system as applied to education but also the human loss involved.

In their different ways Fledgeby, Wegg and Headstone all adhere to the Voice of Society. In exploring the nature of this concept it is necessary to return to the Veneering dinner table. The values of Veneering and his guests are best represented in the character of Podsnap, and his values and philosophy are crystallised in the image of his plate. "Hideous solidity was the characteristic of the Podsnap plate. Everything was made to look as heavy as it could, and to take up as much room as possible. Everything said boastfully, "Here you have as much of me in my ugliness as if I were only lead; but I am so many ounces of precious metal worth so much an ounce; - wouldn't you like to melt me down?" (p. 177). Podsnap values people in the same quantitative and mediated terms. It is appropriate that at Podsnap's own party "The majority of guests were like the plate, and included several

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1 A. Kettle, *ibid*, p. 217.

heavy articles weighing ever so much." (p. 177). He even values his daughter in the same fashion, denying her humanity in the process - "nothing would have astonished him more than an intimation that Miss Podsnap, or any other young person properly born and bred, could not be exactly put away like the plate, polished like the plate, counted, weighed and valued like the plate." (pp. 189-90). A similar means of valuation is expressed by Lady Tippins at Lammle's marriage. She gives a brief precis of each of the chief actors in the marriage show in terms of current market prices. "Bride; five and forty if a day, thirty shillings a yard, veil fifteen pound, pocket-handkerchief a present" (p. 165) and so on. Each individual is reduced to a series of objects which are then rated on the Podsnap scale. Predictably marriage within this group is viewed as a mere money investment. To the Lammles it reaps a bad return and both partners agree to join forces, in effect turning a family into a business partnership, which will promote "any scheme which will bring us money" (p. 173). The vulnerable Georgiana Podsnap is picked out as a victim and terms are reached to procure her for Fledgeby. Mrs. Lammle finally confides in Twemlow that Georgiana "Will be sacrificed, she will be inveigled, and married to that connexion of yours. It is a partnership affair, a money-speculation." (p. 476).

The marriage expectations of this group are most clearly articulated in the final chapter of the novel when Veneering's dinner-table is the setting for a general discussion of Eugene's marriage to Lizzie Hexam. Twemlow's opinion and the effectiveness of his stand against the dominant view will be considered when discussing the closed ending of the novel. With the exception of Twemlow all the guests view the marriage in purely market terms, a nice problem in economic rationale. This is the view of the Contractor - "It appears to this potentate, that what the man in question should have done, would have been, to buy

the young woman a boat and a small annuity, and set her up for herself. These things are a question of beefsteaks and porter. You buy the young woman a boat. Very good. You buy her, at the same time a small annuity. You speak of that annuity in pounds sterling, but it is in reality so many pounds of beefsteak and so many pints of porter. On the one hand, the young woman has the boat. On the other hand, she consumes so many pounds of beefsteaks and so many pints of porter. Those beefsteaks and that porter are the fuel to that young woman's engine. She derives therefrom a certain amount of power to row the boat; that power will produce so much money; You add that to the small annuity; and thus you get at the young woman's income. That (it seems to the Contractor) is the way of looking at it." (p. 890).

This is quoted at length because it is not only another good example of Dickens's use of a light or ironic tone to make a serious moral indictment of his society (cf. the orphan stock-market) but because it takes us to the core of those values which are expressed in the *Voice of Society*. (This very term is significantly the title of the chapter, the last one of the novel). The 'Voice of Society' has a dual significance. It is not merely the value reference for High Society, but is the dominant moral frame of reference within the whole system, - a degraded market ethos which reduces all things to a quantitative, money dimension. It is not a voice emanating from any one class (High or fashionable society is a messy amalgam of classes anyway, while it is equally the model for down and outs like Riderhood and Mr. Dollis) as much as it is a symptom of a general condition throughout society. Of course, this general condition is directly related to the mounds, which imply a pejorative moral comment on the money-value as a guiding principle for life, a view expressed by another of Veneering's guests, the financial Genius, "Madness and Moonshine ... A man may do anything lawful, for money. But for no money! - Bosh!" (p. 891).

Probably the most articulate and coherent expression of the Voice of Society is provided by Boffin in his miserly persona. Though an act, his cynicism, like Gowan's, is an accurate reflection of the general condition. For example, here is Boffin the miser lecturing Rokesmith - "A man of property, like me, is bound to consider the market-price ... I've got acquainted with the duties of property. I mustn't go putting the market-price up, because money may happen not to be an object with me. A sheep is worth so much in the market, and I ought to give it and no more. A secretary is worth so much in the market, and I ought to give it and no more." (p. 523). His support for the investment principle ("and we have to recollect that money makes money, as well as makes everything else") is appropriate, for the Voice of Society embodies and legitimises the speculation principle inherent in the operation of Shares as an institution.

Thus the mounds, Shares, the Voice of Society, Boffin the miser, and Podsnap's plate are all organically bound together to produce a coherent and unified social vision - an indictment of the quality of everyday social relations in all areas of the system. Our Mutual Friend offers little hope for the regeneration of society as a whole but there is hope for happiness and fulfilment on an individual level. However, to gain the chance of this it is necessary to 'be dead' to the values of the social world, and to be deaf to the Voice of Society.

(iii)

When, in Book 2, Chapter 5, Fledgeby visits the premises of Pubsey and Co., he finds Rish not in the shop but up on his private roof garden talking with Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren. The text which follows is pregnant with suggestion, the opposition between the downstairs shop where the business is carried on and the roof garden signifying

the difference between the official sphere and the private, the prison and the garden, the spiritual death of a life governed by the market-ethos and the possibility of happiness and fulfilment outside the influence of the mounds and the Voice of Society. All this is embodied in the text which centres on an ironic reversal of the concepts of life and death.

Fledgeby calls Riah down into the shop and when they return to the roof-garden Jenny Wren exclaims, "'Why it was only just now ... that I fancied I saw him come out of his grave! He toiled out at that low door so bent and worn, and then he took his breath and stood upright, and looked all round him at the sky, and the wind blew upon him, and his life down in the dark was over! - Till he was called back to life,' she added, looking round at Fledgeby with that lower look of sharpness. 'Why did you call him back?'" (p. 334). Jenny Wren's invitation to Riah ("Come up and be dead!") is paradoxically an invitation to free himself from the alienation of his official life as Fledgeby's front - to attain fulfilment as a human being. But this can only happen if Riah dies to (i.e. rejects as a proper or viable frame of reference) the values of the world (those social values embodied in the Voice of Society). As elsewhere in the later novels humane and fulfilling social relationships are seen as being possible only in opposition to the dominant moral code of society, and attainable in the private sphere (hence the roof-garden).

Jenny tells Fledgeby what it is like to be dead, "'Oh, so peaceful and so thankful! And you hear the people who are alive, crying, and working, and calling to one another down in the close dark streets, and you seem to pity them so! And such a chain has fallen from you, and such a strange good sorrowful happiness comes upon you!'" (p. 334). The quality of 'death to the world' is best understood by

comparison with the values of 'life' in "the close dark streets". In a later scene Fledgeby tells Jenny Wren, "Instead of coming up and being dead, let's come out and look alive. It'll pay better, I assure you " (p. 785), and on Jenny's reply that "it's always well worth my while to make money" Fledgeby approvingly adds "Now, you're coming out and looking alive!" (p. 786). The values of 'life' as it is lived in mid-Victorian England are those of the market, thus the values of 'death' are authentic values which repudiate the market ethos.

By becoming 'dead' Riah achieves a rebirth which sets a pattern for all the spiritual rebirths in the novel (in all cases involving a death to the dominant social values of money, property, respectability, etc. - the values embodied in the Voice of Society). However, Riah's rebirth, involving his resignation from his official post as Fledgeby's stooge, is problematic in a similar fashion to Pancks's withdrawal of labour from Casby. Like Pancks, Riah "perceived that the obligation was upon me to leave this service." (p. 796). But Riah's resignation does not involve the economic deprivation which would put pressure on him to come 'alive' again. The existence of the model factory run by his fellow countrymen beside the 'pure' upper Thames (an idealistic alternative to his occupation under Fledgeby) is as convenient a plot device to have it both ways as the firm of Doyce and Clennam was to Pancks. In both cases the plot resolution simplifies and falsifies the problem set by the novelist. Indeed, following the more realistic acceptance of his condition by Wemmick, the freeing of Riah by artificial plot means appears as a somewhat sentimental relapse. As we shall see this is typical of the artificially induced optimism of the ending of Our Mutual Friend.

Just as Riah's rebirth involves a denial of his old self (the social image of the grasping Jewish moneylender

which Fledgeby exploited), so Eugene Wrayburn's conversion involves a rejection of his old social self. He is presented at first as a type of the aristocratic dandy (a more rounded development of Harthouse in Hard Times). The badges of his social position are boredom ("In susceptibility to boredom ... I assure you I am the most consistent of mankind" (p. 194)) and self-possession (which he demonstrates in his clash with Headstone, where Eugene's easy indifference and languid pose are contrasted with Headstone's visible (and hence vulgar) display of emotion).

Indeed the opposition of rival lovers Wrayburn and Headstone is presented as a study in class relations - the problem (central to Little Dorrit and Great Expectations) of social definition. Eugene's position is unambiguous. His birth, public school education, profession and life-style all proclaim him to be a gentleman. His self-assurance is the product of the ease with which he can define his social position and the certainty that his self-image will be accepted by society. However, Bradley Headstone's social situation is the very reverse. Headstone, like Gowan, is between two classes, not an accepted member of either. His social position is ambiguous and general acceptance of his claim to respectability not at all certain. While all gentlemen are respectable, not all who were granted respectability were considered to be gentlemen. Headstone's respectability is vulnerable, and he certainly lays no claim to gentility. The position Headstone finds himself in was typical of a whole class of newly-qualified teachers. Philip Collins has well documented the claims of this group for social acceptance; "This, they felt, was their right, as men of superior education engaged in an important and respectable job, and they were the more bitterly insistent on this because generally they had risen from poor families, and wanted reassurance that they were accepted into middle-class society; and they had risen by their own wits and by



the long grind as pupil-teacher and training college student, and they were jealous of their self-styled 'betters' who held an assured position without having had to prove themselves so strenuously."<sup>(1)</sup>.

It is interesting that while Eugene is attacked as a type of aristocratic gentleman from the traditional middle-class view (he is bored, indifferent, idle), Headstone (who embodies all the reverse qualities of work, perseverance, earnestness, etc.) is portrayed unsympathetically. The clue to this problem lies in his working-class origins. He invested in education to free himself from his working-class environment (as Charley Hexam was to do later with his sister's encouragement). His career comments on the dangers of a general aspiration amongst the working class for upward social mobility. Headstone's strategy is to be contrasted with the patience and content of Joe Gargery and Dickens's other good working-class characters. It is interesting that both Headstone and Charley Hexam (working-class malcontents) who are striving to gain social respectability are in the crucial scene when they confront Eugene in his chambers "seen much more from Eugene's point of view than from their own."<sup>(2)</sup>.

In this scene the self-assured Wrayburn uses manners viciously to keep Headstone in his place as social inferior. Not referring to Headstone by name but by his professional title ("I can say Schoolmaster, which is a most respectable title" (p. 341)), is the cruellest cut of all. He is taking Headstone's hard-earned social position and flaunting it in the latter's face as of little consequence. Headstone's lack of mastery over the required social surfaces of respectable society exposes him to Wrayburn's easy, slighting contempt.

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1 P. Collins, Dickens and Education, p. 160-1.

2 P. Collins, *ibid*, p. 167.

Headstone, like most of the characters of Little Dorrit, is playing the social game of surfaces (his 'decent' clothes and watch-chain advertise his respectability) but he does not play the game well enough. ("He was never seen in any other dress, and yet there was a certain stiffness in his manner of wearing this, as if there were a want of adaptation between him and it, recalling some mechanics in their holiday clothes." (p. 226).) We are reminded of Joe in his best Sunday suit. Ironically the clothes of Riderhood which Headstone uses as his disguise when pursuing Wrayburn seem to suit him much better than his 'decent' surface.

Though Wrayburn uses his social assurance to goad Headstone, elsewhere his social position, privileged as it is, appears to offer him little pleasure or satisfaction. It is even suggested at one point that his pose of aristocratic dandy is an act, maintained through apathy and habit. "But now, that his part was played out for the evening, and when in turning his back upon the Jew he came off the stage, he was thoughtful himself." (p. 465). His passion for Lizzie shakes Eugene's sense of social identity and forces him to re-examine his unthinking acceptance of society's dominant values. In marrying Lizzie he wilfully violates Society's expectations of how a gentleman should act (like Pip's association with Magwitch at the trial). Predictably the Voice of Society condemns him out of hand. His 'death' to the values of the world is seen by Lady Tippins, the Contractor, and the financial Genius as absurd, incomprehensible behaviour. However, the artistic presentation of his rebirth is less than totally convincing. It appears as a desired rather than achieved conversion, (cf. Barbara Hardy - "Eugene has to be helped over the tricky area of decision by symbolic action."<sup>(1)</sup>). The only hint of this potential for change in the unreformed Eugene is his refusal to accept the marriage arrangement set up for him by his father. "Could I possibly go down there, labelled 'ELIGIBLE. ON VIEW' and meet the lady, similarly labelled?" (p. 194).

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1 B. Hardy, The Moral Art of Dickens, p. 24.

Of course, his rebirth is signalled by his immersion in the Thames and rescue from drowning by Lizzie. The extent to which symbolic overtones of baptism or ritual cleansing of sin should be attached to this immersion in the river has sparked off a sometimes angry and impatient debate amongst critics. When Pleasant Riderhood watches her father recovering from apparent drowning she reflects on, "some vague idea that the old evil is drowned out of him, and that if he should happily come back to resume his occupation of the empty form that lies upon the bed, his spirit will be altered." (p. 505-6). In this case the expectation is unfulfilled ("Sweet delusion for Pleasant Riderhood" (p. 506)), but the concept of spiritual rebirth following near-drowning is brought to the attention of the reader to be remembered in the later context of Eugene. However, there is a point in Arnold Kettle's impatient refutation of the mythic interpretation. "The reason that Eugene has to be rescued in that particular way is simply that this is the sphere in which Lizzie, the female water-man, is uniquely capable of achieving such a rescue."<sup>(1)</sup> Though Dickens probably intended the concept to be applicable in a rather vague fashion it is not crucial in any reading of the novel to accept an elaborate symbolic interpretation of the incident.

There is no such difficulty involved in the conversion or rebirth of Bella Wilfer. The chief agent in this process is Boffin, who in his guise as miser, reflects what Bella takes to be her own values in a form that appalls her. He shows her, in himself, "the most detestable sides of wealth" (p. 846). Thus Bella makes the moral journey from admitting "I am the most mercenary little wretch that ever lived in the world" (p. 374) to recognising, in her father's words, "that she must not sell her sense of what was right and what

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1 A. Kettle, *ibid*, p. 222.

was wrong, and what was true and what was false, and what was just and what was unjust, for any price that could be paid to her by anyone alive." (p. 672). This recognition must be set against the view of the financial Genius in the final chapter, "A man may do anything lawful, for money. But for no money! - Bosh!" (p. 891). It is clear that Bella has come to accept a position which corresponds to the 'death' described by Jenny Wren on Riah's roof-garden. Once again, death to the values of the world results in a recall to spiritual life (to use the language of A Tale of Two Cities).

However, the final evidence of her rebirth - her loyalty to her husband when he is arrested - is artistically unconvincing because of the coyness and sentimentality with which her married life generally is described. Though she tells her husband, "I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house" (p. 746) this is exactly how Dickens presents her married life. He uses the most coy and precious language to describe her at work (or is it at play?) in her home. When her baby is born she behaves to all the world like another Dora - playful, silly, full of nonsense. Once again at a novel's conclusion Dickens utilises a middle-class ideal of the home and hearth (and the playful, pretty little wife/housekeeper). It will be argued that Bella's married life is in keeping with the general ending of the novel which embodies a generous pouring of syrup to sweeten and indeed disguise a grim and pessimistic social vision.

The other chief conversion or rebirth is that of John Harmon (/Rokesmith), the most problematic of all. As this is bound up with the closed nature of the ending it will be discussed in this later context. At this point we will consider the other element which, together with the possibility of individual moral rebirth, stands in opposition to the

mounds and river, the Voice of Society and Podsnap's plate. This is the behaviour and values of the 'good' characters - Lizzie Hexam, the Boffins, Betty Higden, and Twemlow. However, the operation of moral worth and qualitative value in each of these individual cases involves damaging artistic problems.

(iv)

Lizzie Hexam represents a fusion of ideas present in Amy Dorrit and Joe Gargery. Like Amy she can be improved but like Joe she knows her place. Of course, like Amy she resists the corrupting effect of her environment (the other waterside dwellers, remember, were referred to as "accumulated scum of humanity" (p. 63)), but while her moral survival is acceptable her avoidance of the riverside influence on her speech, grammar, and accent, is not plausible. Barbara Hardy's general criticism of the novels that "Virtue often speaks in the neutral language that expresses neither personality or class"<sup>(1)</sup> is certainly true of Lizzie here. It is particularly disappointing that Lizzie's situation lacks the required social detail when we consider the wealth of sociological detail surrounding her two rival lovers - Wrayburn and Headstone.

The other problem with Lizzie is that while her attitude to love and marriage stands in stark opposition to the Voice of Society (she tells Bella, "'Does a woman's heart that - that has the weakness in it which you have spoken of ... seek to gain anything '" (p. 590)) Lizzie herself accepts society's conventions about class and gentility (like Joe and Magwitch). She knows and accepts her place. "I am removed from you and your family by being a working girl" (p. 761), she admits to Eugene. Unlike her brother she is

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1 B. Hardy, *ibid*, p. 26.

not a social aspirer. She achieves upward social mobility only because it is given to her. Her role throughout is passive. In her view of the surface requirements of gentility she might as well be the pupil of Mrs. General. When Jenny Wren asks her if she can imagine herself a lady, Lizzie replies, "More easily than I can make one of such material as myself, Jenny." (p. 404). She reflects a middle-class view of the good worker, and like Betty Higden's staunch independence, this is an idealistic image.

The Boffins too represent middle-class virtues - chiefly work (Boffin lectures Eugene on the bee) and duty ("These two ignorant and unpolished people had guided themselves so far on in their journey of life, by a religious sense of duty and desire to do right" (p. 146)). In Boffin's decision to waive his claim to Old Harmon's fortune - by the latest will Boffin is the legal owner - and give the bulk of it to John Harmon lies the most dramatic refutation of the money-values of the Voice of Society in the novel. To Veneering, Fledgeby, and Podsnap, choosing willingly to give away money would be incomprehensible.

Unlike the case of Joe Gargery the Boffins' presentation as natural gentlemen is made explicit. Betty Higden tells Mrs. Boffin, "It seems to me ... that you were born a lady, and a true one, or there never was a lady born." (p. 252). Not surprisingly natural gentility is accompanied with all that it implies to Dickens - childishness (Boffin has "bright, eager, childishly-inquiring, grey eyes" (p. 90), and even Harmon/Rokesmith regards the Boffins as "single-hearted children" (p. 429)) and vulnerability (Rokesmith is needed to protect Boffin from the charity spongers and in particular from Wegg). However, much to the reader's surprise it appears at first that the Boffins lack the concomitant virtue of knowing their place for when they come into their money they aspire to join the fashionable world.

This provides one of the chief problems in the Boffins' role. It could well be asked what is the difference between the Veneerings' indulgence in ostentatious display and luxury and the, to all appearances, very similar, behaviour of the Boffins when they go in for society (and indeed socialise with the Veneering set). The usual answer is that the Boffins are not spoiled or corrupted by what is no more than an innocent, childish revelling in a fairy-tale situation. Certainly Dickens utilises the childishness of the Boffins and their potential for comic exploitation in an attempt to prevent loss of sympathy. When Mrs. Boffin declares to her husband, "I want society" she does so "laughing with the glee of a child" (p. 144). For her plunging into High Society is a form of grown-up play. Unlike Pip's aspirations Mrs. Boffin's social ambitions are presented squarely in the context of comedy. The odd and eccentric incongruity of their attempts to act out a role - their first carriage before they moved out of the Bower was formerly the laying place of hens, and so on - implies that behaviour so absurd must be harmless (as well as underlining the cupidity of Society to accept such an odd couple so readily).

What is more this emphasis on the incongruity of the Boffins' position in fashionable society is brought into play to help justify John Harmon's problematic decision to 'come alive' to claim his fortune. The implication is that if the whole fortune (and the goods and the leisure activities it can buy) is to go to the Boffins it will be wasted on "two ignorant and unpolished people" who are not equal to the full enjoyment of its aesthetic and cultural possibilities. Boffin himself tells Wegg at their first acquaintance "I don't go higher than comfort, and comfort of the sort that I'm equal to the enjoyment of" (p. 100). Harmon will enjoy aesthetic or cultural pleasures, his education and socialisation qualifying him to appreciate these in a way the Boffins cannot.

However, despite the emphasis on the childish and comic aspects of the Boffins' 'going into society' many aspects of the presentation are suggestive in a disturbing manner. Boffin (who had lectured Wrayburn against idleness, and whose work stood in opposition to the speculation principle and the world of Shares) does after all (under pressure from his wife) exchange his work for a life of idle luxury. The decision not to work is justified by the duty which the Boffins owe to their fortune. "We have come into a great fortune, and we must do what's right by our fortune; we must act up to it." (p . 144). Acting up to Society's expectations about class and money is suspiciously like a strategic manipulation of the concept of duty, uncomfortably reminiscent of the way in which the Merdles utilised the duty which they owed to society to justify and legitimise what for them was merely convenient and selfish behaviour. Another example would be Mrs. Boffin's ostentatious display of expensive goods in that portion of the Bower given over to her taste. The articles she buys ("garish in taste and colour, but ... expensive articles of drawing-room furniture" (p. 99)) are valued solely because they are expensive and hence appropriate to the Boffins' new situation, and are ostentatiously displayed in a self-satisfied manner which disturbingly recalls Podsnap's plate. In this instance Mrs. Boffin reflects a quantitative attitude to goods.

In addition to this the presentation of the Boffins involves the difficulty of Boffin's 'false' corruption by wealth and his acting out of the role of miser. That Boffin's corruption should turn out to be an act has direct relevance to the unity and coherence of the text. That Boffin can enter the corrupt world of the Veneerings and enjoy immense wealth (the universal corrupter in the novel) and yet escape contamination would appear to contradict the force and logic of the novel's social vision. If money is dirt and filth can an individual handle a lot of it without dirtying his hands?



Presumably Boffin's childish innocence keeps him immune from corruption by the environment in a manner analogous to Amy Dorrit in the Marshalsea. (Again it is a back-handed tribute to the power of the environment to see defence against its pressures as necessarily involved with the maintenance of childish innocence.) However, it still appears artistically right that Boffin's corruption should be real and it is no wonder that many critics have regarded the revelation that all is an act as a late change of plan. Daleski has commented shrewdly on this. "If we are meant to see that wealth corrupts, then we are surely meant to see that it is no respecter of persons, that - like 'Tom's corrupted blood' in Bleak House - it strikes down good and bad alike, ... It is as if Dickens suffered a failure of nerve in his treatment of Boffin, as if all that was pious and sentimental in him forced him to discount what his imagination had seized on as truth."<sup>(1)</sup> Despite Arnold Kettle's praise of the device of Boffin's fake 'coming alive' to the values of the world Dickens cannot have it both ways and his failure of nerve over Boffin weakens the coherence of the total imaginative structure.

The final 'good' character to be considered, Twemlow, will be discussed later in terms of what his contribution to the debate on Eugene's marriage adds to Dickens's developing treatment of the theme of gentility. Like the 'coming alive' of John Harmon this question is ineluctably bound up with the closed nature of the plot resolution.

(v)

Old Harmon's legal will forms an environment which, like the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce in Bleak House, the all-embracing prison of Little Dorrit, and Pip's 'Expectations'

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1 H.M. Daleski, Dickens and the Art of Analogy, pp. 328-9.

reflects the essential human condition within the system. The individual resolves of John Harmon and Bella are enclosed and constrained by the stipulations laid down by Old Harmon. His will makes commodities of people. Bella is "left to him (John Harmon) in a will, like a dozen of spoons" (p. 81). Both John and Bella are trapped and dehumanised, victimised by the will. But it is possible to escape from this condition. However, this necessitates being dead to the world. We have seen how Bella rejects the patronship of Mr. Boffin to fulfil this condition. John Harmon meets it both spiritually and literally. He is literally declared dead when Radfoot's corpse is found by Gaffer Hexam, and his decision to take on a new identity and attempt to win Bella on his own merits indicates a death to the mercenary values which would have impelled others to claim the inheritance by compelling Bella to marry him. Significantly, this decision follows Harmon's escape from near drowning (we are reminded of Eugene), following which his first resolve to have a sly look at Bella without disclosing his identity hardens into viewing refusal to comply with the marriage clause as a feasible possibility, a viable alternative. The irony of being believed dead is thoroughly exploited by Dickens in pursuing this theme. "John Harmon is dead. Should John Harmon come to life?" (p. 428) he debates, and following Bella's rejection of his suit he conclusively "buried John Harmon many additional fathoms deep" (p. 434).

However, the whole point of the ending of the novel is that Harmon does come alive again, and in accordance with his private agreement with Boffin claims the fortune he earlier rejected. What are we to make of this? Does this compromise his earlier repudiation of the Voice of Society.

The reasons given for Harmon's change of mind are important. One of his justifications is his natural desire to offer his wife as much material comfort as he can. "I

love those pretty feet so dearly, that I feel as if I could not bear the dirt to soil the sole of your shoe. Is it not natural that I wish you could ride in a carriage?" (p. 748). This is said before Bella has passed her final test by remaining trustful, loyal, and unquestioning when Harmon is suspected of his own murder. However, it is clear that by then Harmon has already decided to 'come alive' on Boffin's generous terms.

In another conversation with Bella, Harmon makes two general points about wealth which in effect amount to a formal justification or legitimisation of this decision. Both these points would appear to have authorial support although they contradict the imaginative logic of the novel's social vision. Asking Bella if she would like to be rich John reassures her as follows.

"But all people are not the worst for riches, my own."

"Most people?" Bella musingly suggested with raised eyebrows.

"Nor even most people, it may be hoped. If you were rich, for instance, you would have a great power of doing good to others.'" (p. 747).

Harmon's assertion that not even "most people" are liable to be corrupted by wealth is breathtaking in its complacency and wilful self-delusion. Harmon completely puts aside his own life-history (before he admitted that he knew of "nothing but wretchedness that my father's wealth had ever brought about" (p. 423)), as well as what he sees every day in the social world around him. Of course, this remark clashes with the emblematic significance of the mounds. At this point the mounds have to be completely ignored (their relevance for the world of the novel presumably having suddenly ceased) or else it has to be admitted that there is a serious failure to integrate the key image of the mounds with the plot resolution.

The other point in Harmon's justification is also problematic. Money offers the power to do good to others, he assures Bella. Interestingly it is in this novel that the individual benefactor on the Pickwick, Cheeryble, and Jarndyce model reappears in Boffin's attempts to aid Johnny the orphan Betty Higden, and Sloppy. In all but the last case Boffin has a very limited success, and some critics see this aspect of his role as a parody on the earlier benefactors. However, Harmon's remarks put before us the whole ethos of private charity and the individual philanthropist, the good rich man. But how does Harmon spend his money when he 'comes alive'? - at first in an ostentatious manner not unrelated to Fledgeby's view of 'life'. The scale of luxury enjoyed in Harmon's house seems excessive and self-indulgent. Earlier Bella had said playfully that she was sure "that baby noticed birds". As a result Harmon plans this surprise. "Going on a little higher, they came to a charming aviary, in which a number of tropical birds, more gorgeous in colour than the flowers, were flying about; and among those birds were gold and silver fish, and mosses, and water-lilies, and a fountain, and all manners of wonders." (p. 838). The scale of this (if not the motive) reminds us uncomfortably of Veneering's 'bran-new' surfaces and golden camels. Similarly, Bella discovers that "on Bella's exquisite toilette table was an ivory casket, and in the casket were jewels the like of which she had never dreamed of, and aloft on an upper floor was a nursery garnished as with rainbows" (pp. 848-9), and so on.

The good to others which will result from Harmon's wealth will (apart from the rewarding of friends which is itself problematic and will be considered in a moment) have to be taken on trust. It would also appear that Harmon has no intention of working and will spend his future time sitting at home planning more surprises for his wife. That Harmon abandons work as readily as Boffin did before him compromises the novel's attack on the speculation principle (the social/

moral opposite of work). His decision not to work and the degree of luxury with which Harmon deems it necessary to maintain his home would no doubt be approved by the Voice of Society.

It is interesting to note the quality of the language with which the breathtaking luxury of the Harmon household is described. This Language ("all manners of wonders" and "jewels the like of which she had never dreamed of") imposes the mood and tone of a fairy-tale romance on what has claims to be a great novel of social realism. The sentimental tone echoes the language used of Bella's married life. Indeed the distribution of economic aid to those who might have, or did, suffer when John Harmon was regarded as dead (in effect an all-round rewarding of friends) also reinforces the fairy-tale elements in the plot resolution. This 'compensation' is not only a throwback to the characteristic endings of the earlier novels (e.g. Martin Chuzzlewit) but is the fitting and expected end to a sentimental romance. "In tracing out affairs for which John's fictitious death was to be considered in any way responsible, they used a very broad and free construction." (pp. 874-5). Among those rewarded are Jenny Wren, Riah, Mr. Inspector (who gained the equivalent of the government reward for actually solving Harmon's 'murder') and Mr. Wilfer (appointed Harmon's secretary). Thus the novel's ending supports patronage as well as property.

This wholesale rewarding of the good is problematic. The success of Riah or Jenny Wren in rejecting the dominant market philosophy would make more sense if they were not ultimately rewarded with the very thing which is presented as the chief agent of corruption in society - money. Once again the plot resolution ignores the suggestiveness of the mounds which has resonated throughout the social world of the novel. Even accepting that the mounds represent an attitude to money (rather than money in the abstract) it

seems strange to give it (with its potential to sully and defile) as a reward to those who have so far kept their hands clean. Furthermore, this type of ending (hand-outs for the good and punishments for the bad (e.g. Silas Wegg)) is alarmingly similar to the message of the moral autobiographies given out to the children at Headstone's school, which had earlier been criticised by Dickens because they suggested an investment in morality - "it always appearing from the lessons of those very boastful persons, that you were to do good, not because it was good, but because you were to make a good thing of it." (p. 264). It is yet another contradiction in the ending that the conclusion might be taken as suggestive of a moral speculation in goodness.

The helping of the deserving from a private base (and a considerable personal fortune) recalls Jarndyce - and in a sense Harmon as well as Boffin represents the return to the novels of the individual benefactor. This is a curious reappearance, especially if we give to this showering of money any general significance for the salvation of society as a whole. Will individual philanthropy clear the dust-mounds from the social horizon or purify the river? It would be a very muddled moral indeed which suggests that the mounds could be metaphorically cleared by the operation of money.

It is significant too that while at the end of Little Dorrit Clennam and his wife go down into the streets to a life of moderate success, at the conclusion of Our Mutual Friend Harmon and Bella retire into a private world to excessive luxury. The Jarndyce solution of Bleak House had been implicitly revalued in Little Dorrit. Now it appears to have won back authorial approval. How secure can a private retreat be as a haven from a corrupting environment if the retreat itself is founded on possession of one of the chief agents of corruption? Yet there is no suggestion at the end of the novel that Harmon's retreat is not completely secure.

Comparisons between Clennam and Harmon are interesting. Clennam accepted society for what it was, in order to fight for authentic values. Harmon, on the other hand, distorts what his experience and history has told him society is like. He refuses to face the truth about society and idealistically he views it as it might or could be. He retreats from the implications of the essential nature of the system to play at being rich in a home which corresponds to the middle-class ideal (down to the behaviour of his pretty little wife). It could be argued that Harmon appears at the end of the novel not as a tragic man (like Clennam) but as a bourgeois apologist.

By coming 'alive' he has become integrated back into mid-Victorian society, whose values (and dominant voice or frame of reference) he had earlier rejected. But the means of this integration is luck rather than character - i.e. Boffin's decision to gift him the bulk of what is legally his. Harmon admits that "I owe everything I possess, solely to the disinterestedness, uprightness, tenderness, goodness (there are no words to satisfy me) of Mr. and Mrs. Boffin." (p. 860). Thus once again a money-gift is the means of the contrived plot resolution and the method by which the hero is rendered no longer problematic.

The concessions Dickens makes to the reading public at the end of this novel are absolute. There is even a suggestion of a future romance between Jenny Wren and Sloppy, as ill-advised as if John Chivery were to go sweet on Maggy at the end of Little Dorrit, as well as the suggestion that Wrayburn's scars, like Esther's pockmarks, may be fading. Our Mutual Friend is the most closed of Dickens's later novels. (There is little of the tension between open and closed forms which characterises the post-Bleak House fiction.) Probably Dickens thought that an ending in which Harmon does not reveal his identity but remains dead to the world to share

with Bella a life of self-limitation on moderate means would have been too depressing for his readers - and yet this is not so dissimilar to the actual ending of Little Dorrit. As it is, virtually everything concerning the ending of Our Mutual Friend is coated in a sentimental gloss. This is especially true of Twemlow's vindication of Eugene's action in marrying Lizzie which shocks the dinner guests at Veneerings' in the closing chapter and sends Mortimer Lightwood back to his chambers in the Temple 'gaily' - indeed, 'gaily' is the closing word of the novel.

Following the opinions of Lady Tippins, the Contractor, the financial Genius, etc. Twemlow asserts an independent point of view. "I am disposed to think ... that this is a question of the feelings of a gentleman. ... If this gentleman's feelings of gratitude, of respect, of admiration, and affection, induced him (as I presume they did) to marry this lady ... I think he is the greater gentleman for the action, and makes her the greater lady. I beg to say, that when I use the word, gentleman, I use it in the sense in which the degree may be obtained by any man. The feelings of a gentleman I hold sacred, and I confess I am not comfortable when they are made the subject of sport or general discussion." (pp. 891-2).

Twemlow's words clearly have authorial support. They represent the culmination of Dickens's developing treatment of the gentility theme. More explicitly than in the case of Joe Gargery the category of gentility is defined in moral (not socially exclusive) terms. Gentility becomes an open social category accessible to the Boffins as well as Lizzie Hexam. However, as we have witnessed in other novels, if the implications of Dickens's position are examined, they amount to an empty social gesture - not a radical or subversive opposition to class as an institution. Humphrey House is worth quoting at length on Twemlow's proposition. House



questions, "How can any action of his (Eugene) make a 'greater lady' of a girl whose moral superiority to him has been hammered in with such unremitting emphasis, except on the assumption that she gains in status by becoming his wife?

Two things are interesting in this speech: its obvious sincerity and its obvious sophistry. Twemlow's ingenious phrasing very imperfectly conceals a sort of satisfaction in the fact that Eugene is really doing a very generous thing in marrying Lizzie, and that she is doing very well for herself by marrying him. This satisfaction is based on the acceptance of existing class distinctions in general, while allowing that in particular cases the right thing is to cross them: they are not ignored as irrelevant, otherwise all the relish in the crossing would be lost."<sup>(1)</sup>

The implications of Twemlow's words are in fact consistent with the treatment of class and gentility in Great Expectations, which tacitly accepted all the conventional middle-class assumptions about the class system. The open moral class of gentlemen in effect is bound up with qualifying and restricting social factors. The term "greater gentleman" gives the game away. It implies gradations of gentility within this moral class which are independent of moral qualities. In fact what determines one's degree of gentility (in addition to the primary factor of moral worth) is possession of the learnt social skills and surfaces of the mannered code. This is why Lizzie achieves a reflected gain in gentility by marrying Eugene, and why the Boffins (though they too are moral gentleman) defer to the greater gentleman, John Harmon, by standing down from the inheritance in his favour. Within this moral group social deference, status differences, and differential enjoyment of economic privileges characteristic of the wider system are all preserved. What is being offered is merely an idealised form of industrial class society as it existed in mid-Victorian England.

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1 H. House, *ibid*, p. 163.

In concluding our discussion of the gentility theme it is worth commenting on a remark made by E.D.H. Johnson. In the later novels "Dickens confronted a challenge which he shared with other Victorian novelists: namely, the problem of locating within the context of contemporary manners and morals the grounds for heroic action. His solution to this problem ... was to seek to redefine the traditional concept of the gentleman in conformity with Victorian ideals."<sup>(1)</sup> Although their heroism takes different forms all Dickens's middle-class heroes prove their true gentility by heroically placing themselves at a significant point in the novel in opposition to society's dominant values (with the exception of David Copperfield whose heroism is equated with the Victorian ideal of the self-made man). This stand, however, is somewhat compromised by their later integration back into the social world. Does opening up the category of gentility offer the possibility of heroic action to working-class characters? Heroism with reference to working-class figures is a purely domestic concept, a non-political patience and perseverance in their allotted station. Indeed Stephen Blackpool's heroism is defined in terms of his opposition to political interference in the even tenor of his life. Dickens's presentation of working-class figures is clearly governed by middle-class ideology. In addition, in his creation of characters like Stephen Blackpool and Joe Gargery Dickens was contributing towards the hardening of the literary convention of the idealised non-political worker, a novelistic convention which George Eliot later drew on in her creation of Caleb Garth (Middlemarch, 1871/2).

Of course, Twemlow's vindication of Eugene is the final gesture by Dickens towards an optimistic, hopeful, closed ending. Yet if Twemlow's words bring disharmony to

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1 E.D.H. Johnson, Charles Dickens: An Introduction to his Novels, p. 138.

the feast Twemlow is too harmless and innocent a figure to have any real impact on the value-system of the Voice of Society. That Dickens's spokesman should be such an ineffectual figure implies the strength of the forces ranged against the few problematic individuals who orientate themselves to qualitative value. Twemlow is not a social prophet for a future moral-change within society (neither of course is Harmon). It could be said of all the good characters in the novel (Betty Higden, Lizzie, the Boffins, Twemlow, etc.) that "we certainly get no impression that such people stand any sort of chance in competition with the hideous solidity of Podsnappery, or the glitter of the Veneering surface."<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed, in his novels generally "Dickens creates such a powerful anatomy of a corrupting and corrupted society, ruled and moved by greed and ambition, that the wish-fulfilling fantasies of virtue and conversion are too fragile to support faith."<sup>(2)</sup> This depressing insight (a direct product of the nature of the social vision) lies underneath the superficial happiness of the ending. Podsnap and Fledgeby will grind on and though Veneering may fall as dramatically as he arrived on the scene (and follow Lammle into exile) the operation of Shares will produce new men to take his place. The opposition between the social vision and plot close is the most extreme and unresolved of the later novels.

The social vision itself is a unified and uncompromising social indictment in which the parts - the mounds, Podsnap's plate, the Voice of Society, Boffin the 'miser' - are organically related to reinforce the whole in its stark and depressing repudiation of mid-Victorian 'progress' and 'prosperity'. Beneath the impressive and sparkling surfaces of an expanding economy lies the impoverishment in the quality

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1 R. Barnard, Imagery and Theme in the Novels of Dickens, p. 128.

2 B. Hardy, *ibid*, p. 25.

of everyday life scrupulously detailed by Dickens. The lack of coherence in the total structure brought about by the failure to resolve this social vision and the plot close is due in part to the operation of the middle-class value index (seen in particular in the method of integrating John Harmon back into society) which implicitly demands an optimistic closed ending for the novels' middle-class heroes and generally to a failure of artistic nerve and control. To a significant extent Our Mutual Friend is a weary novel which reworks old material, and in certain respects looks back to Dickens's earlier mode of fiction (e.g. the reappearance of the individual philanthropist, the hand-outs of the ending reminiscent of Martin Chuzzlewit). In addition, in the manner of the earlier novels the Betty Higden poor-law satire is not so well integrated into the total structure as Chancery or the Circumlocution Office. We are left with the inescapable judgement that of the three long novels of his maturity Our Mutual Friend is the most damagingly flawed, and the least successful artistic achievement.

## CHAPTER 6

## CONCLUSION

The readings of the five selected novels all reveal, to differing degrees, contradictions and inconsistencies in the total imaginative structures (e.g. the tension between alternative methods of social change, change of heart and change of system; and the conflicting pressures of Dickens's social realism and his moral optimism). One major reason for this is the uncertainty in Dickens's handling of the concept of environment. On the one hand, the moral life of the community is the product of the social/economic environment, Victorian society is a total system, corrupt and in need of total change, and, on the other hand, it is possible for innocence and goodness to survive in this environment, and there is even the suggestion that the environment might be purged by the operation and spread of some moral force from within, presumably located in those individuals who miraculously escape the blighting influence of the 'totally' corrupt system. The confusion and change of emphasis (often within the same novel) in Dickens's handling of environment reduces the consistency and coherence of the social vision of the later novels.

The same effect results from the mutually reinforcing operation of the middle-class value index and the novelistic convention of the closed plot ending, twin agents by which the novels gain acceptance from a middle-class reading public. It must be emphasised that the closed ending is not an accidental aspect of the Victorian novel form but is directly related to the expectations and demands of a middle-class reading public, who wished to see the virtues of hero and heroine (defined in terms of the values of the middle-class interpretive code) rewarded, celebrated, and hence legitimised

through a happy ending of love, marriage and children (itself part of the middle-class ethos of home and hearth). Dickens's commitment to his realistic art never overruled his expert judgement of what he felt his public would accept - though he often wrote close to this margin he stopped short of alienating the sympathies of his audience. Thus Dickens never satisfactorily freed himself from the dictates of novelistic conventions, which were themselves largely a response to the implicit demands of middle-class readers. He comes closest in Little Dorrit, and in the sober, subdued ending of Hard Times and the original conclusion of Great Expectations. In fact, the almost obligatory closed plot ending was probably even more of a fatal imposition on his work than the middle-class standards of propriety and delicacy to which he always adhered, in order not to offend 'the young person'. As a result Dickens's endings are the weakest part of his novels, where the strengths of his social criticism are least in evidence.

Though economic reasons for Dickens's desire not to endanger the acceptability and market success of his novels no doubt operated there were clearly psychological reasons too why Dickens, like an ageing actor who needed to feel that his audience was still at his feet, feared to lose his hold on his public. This was especially true in his later years, characterised by domestic unfulfilment and the loss of the confidently-held social certainties of his youth. Thus though his novels became increasingly pessimistic Dickens always sugared the pill of social despair, and the unique bond with his readers was not broken. Thus Dickens was able to write in the Preface to the first edition of Little Dorrit (1857), "In the Preface to Bleak House I remarked that I had never had so many readers. In the Preface to its next successor, Little Dorrit, I have still to repeat the same words." And he responded to criticism of the lack of humour in Little Dorrit by introducing more comedy into Great

Expectations (Joe Gargery was originally conceived as a comic character) and Our Mutual Friend (where in the Silas Wegg, 'Decline and Fall of the Rooshan Empire' scenes we see him returning to an earlier style).

And yet there is something of critical arrogance in the view which implies that a writer should be willing to divorce himself from the sympathies of his readers in his service to his art. What is more, often when Dickens followed contemporary opinion in his novelistic treatment of social themes his implicit acceptance of conventional social attitudes and preconceptions was neither insincere nor imposed on him, but was in line with his own declared position (cf. his implicit acceptance of conventional middle-class attitudes to the class structure in the gentility debate of Little Dorrit and Great Expectations, as well as his horror of revolutionary violence in A Tale of Two Cities). When criticising Dickens for artistic concessions which characteristically prevented him from achieving coherent and unified imaginative structures we must remember how much Dickens did achieve, and how far he was able to take his readers with him as his view of society widened and jaundiced. The imaginative world of Little Dorrit is significantly different from that of Martin Chuzzlewit, and had the former been the first work of a new writer, without Dickens's reputation and past body of work to smooth the way for its reception, it is unlikely that it would have been congenial to contemporary taste.

It can also be argued that while Dickens's successes added something new to the English novel (e.g. he is the first great English novelist of the industrial city, whose work inaugurates a tradition tapped in different ways by Gissing, Wells, Joyce, and Lawrence; and he is the first great novelist of the alienated man in a modern bureaucratised world), his characteristic failures were those built into

the English critical realist tradition, and which he inherited - e.g. the conventions of middle-class heroes and heroines, and the closed 'happy' ending. Indeed Dickens's complex relationship to the middle classes (his positive evaluation of middle-class norms accompanying a hostility to the contemporary experience of the middle-classes and rejection of bourgeois society) is also characteristic of the English novel tradition, which from the beginning drew its popularity from the author's nod in the direction of middle-class virtues, but which was also critical of the society in which the middle classes and their scheme of values flourished.

Though the inconsistencies in Dickens's mature novels flaw them as total works they do not invalidate the many insights into the nature of Nineteenth Century industrial society (indeed of industrial society as a type) which the novels contain. In particular the crucial analogy between society and the market-place which is central to the vision of the later fiction was a major literary contribution to the understanding of the day to day effects on the lives of the population of the new industrial environment - the novels demonstrating the way in which the new economic relations and social institutions permeated the quality of everyday social life in all areas of social behaviour (cf. speculation). It must always be remembered that Dickens lived and wrote in an historical situation. One must look past his weaknesses and mistakes (e.g. his fear that a mid-Victorian revolution was imminent), his confusions and omissions, to recognise that Dickens saw more of the tensions and contradictory social realities of industrialism underlying the stable and prosperous surface of mid-Victorian England than any other contemporary writer, and deserves to be regarded by the modern reader as the most important and relevant Nineteenth Century English novelist.



## APPENDIX

## THE DATES OF DICKENS'S WORKS

Sketches by Boz (Essays) .....	1836
The Pickwick Papers .....	1836-7
Oliver Twist .....	1837-8
Nicholas Nickleby .....	1838-9
The Old Curiosity Shop .....	1840-1
Barnaby Rudge .....	1841
American Notes .....	1842
Martin Chuzzlewit .....	1843-4
A Christmas Carol .....	1843
Dombey and Son .....	1846-8
David Copperfield .....	1849-50
Bleak House .....	1852-3
Hard Times .....	1854
Little Dorrit .....	1855-7
A Tale of Two Cities .....	1859
Great Expectations .....	1860-1
The Uncommercial Traveller (Essays) .....	1861
Our Mutual Friend .....	1864-5
The Mystery of Edwin Drood (unfinished) .....	1870

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