

**Society, Individuals and Fantasies in Dickens's
*Little Dorrit***

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Abstract. In *Little Dorrit* Dickens depicts a society that appraises achievement and talent in terms of money. This society has woven a fantasy around certain businessmen and economy magnates believing that they can transmute whatever they touch into gold and can therefore solve all its problems and enable it to become prosperous and happy. Likewise, many individuals in this society have woven their own private fantasies in order to satisfy their psychological needs. They indulge in dreams of fabulous wealth and glamour. However, those individuals who have kept a certain degree of self-knowledge, humility and a sense of humor and do not take themselves too seriously, can get on with their lives unscathed by whatever unpleasant experiences or people they come across. Others who have lost touch with reality and become slaves to their fantasies bring misery on themselves and on those who come in touch with them.

“... everything in the book is significant
in terms of the whole.”
F.R.Leavis⁽¹⁾

In *Little Dorrit* Dickens depicts a society that reveres surface and veneer and appraises wealth, achievement and talent in terms of money:

O what a wonderful man this Merdle, what a great man.
what a master man, how blessedly and enviable endowed--
in one word, what a rich man (p. 563).⁽²⁾

As Bakhtin has pointed out, these lines represent what society, through a chorus of Merdle's admirers, thinks of him: “The whole point here is to expose the real basis for

⁽¹⁾ F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 224.

⁽²⁾ *Little Dorrit*. All textual references are to The New Oxford Illustrated edition.

such glorification, which is to unmask the chorus' hypocrisy: 'wonderful,' 'great,' 'master,' 'endowed,' can all be replaced by the single word 'rich.'"⁽³⁾ Thus the word "rich", does not merely become a synonym for each of the words listed by Bakhtin, but it also becomes a metonymy that encompasses, and thus stands for, all these meanings simultaneously. The word "rich" becomes expressive of a fantasy, which endows a signifier with a host of imaginary, appetitive, and ideologically-oriented signifieds. The lines quoted above echo a famous passage in *Hamlet*:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How
infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and
admirable! In action, how like an angel! in apprehension,
how like a god!

(II.ii.304-8)

Thus the absurd reduction of man's infinite faculties and the narrowing down of the scope of his dreams and the range of his actions and interests to a mere pursuit of money and the counting of profit betoken a society that has been lured by materialism, greed and a false ideology to a fetishistic worship of money. As Slavoj Žižek, commenting on the nature of ideology, has pointed out:

The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they [individuals in any society] are doing, they are acting as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth, as such. They are fetishistic in practice, not in theory. What They 'do not know,' what they misrecognize, is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity—in the act of commodity exchange--they are guided by the fetishistic illusion.⁽⁴⁾

This society has woven a fantasy around Mr. Merdle whose taciturnity, sumptuous dinners and bejeweled wife have bamboozled it into believing he is a genius in matters of economy and finance and a wizard who, Midas-like, can transmute everything he touches into gold. This fantasy enables those who have enough money to give him to invest (i.e., speculate) on their behalf to indulge in dreams of fabulous wealth, power and glamour. This fantasy reaches even the poorest strata of society (in Bleeding Hearts Yard) and they also begin to entertain dreams of future prosperity; as Edwin Barrett has aptly remarked: "The imaginations of the poor and weak, Dickens would say, sustain themselves upon the atmosphere which the triumphant exhale."⁽⁵⁾ Thus we find Mr. Plornish, one of the inmates of Bleeding Hearts Yard, affirming that "Mr. Merdle was the one, mind you, to put us all to rights in respects of that which all on us looked to, and to bring us all safe home as much we needed, mind you, fur toe be brought." (p. 571.)

⁽³⁾ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 38-39.

⁽⁴⁾ "The Sublime Object of Ideology," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 320.

⁽⁵⁾ "Little Dorrit and the Disease of Modern Life" *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 25 (1970), 205.

This fantasy has spread everywhere. It is like a malady or an epidemic. Even in the schools, pupils “who are in the large text and the letter M, had been set the copy ‘Merdle, Millions’” (p. 575). “The name of Merdle” says Mr. Dorrit “is the name of the age” (p. 484). Merdle is “The rich man, who had in a manner revised The New Testament, and already entered the Kingdom of Heaven” (p. 614). We can surmise in what way he is said to have revised The New Testament. To apply a Bakhtinian approach, we can say that in this statement, Dickens was both showing us the direction the nation was headed and commenting on the course it was taking. The nation was gradually embracing a narrow, die-hard materialism and Merdle had provided it with a new version of The New Testament to justify this materialism, a version in which the supreme values are no longer faith or charity or love, but money-making and speculation. It is not, therefore, surprising that Merdle, Mammon’s emissary on earth, should appear to Fanny like many devils: “Waters of vexation filled her eyes; and they had the effect of making the famous Mr. Merdle, in going down the street, appear to leap, and waltz, and gyrate as if he were possessed by several Devils” (p. 701).

Dickens’s insight into the psychology of his society is nowhere more manifest than in the way he shows it prostrating itself before Merdle and deifying him even though this false god has not given it any sign of greatness and has never benefited it in any way. In its prostration before the bogus genius, Dickens tells us, society is worse than the most primitive savage who worshipped false gods out of sheer ignorance:

The famous name of Merdle⁽⁶⁾ became, every day, more famous in the land. Nobody knew that the Merdle of such high renown had ever done any good to any one, alive or dead or to any earthly thing. ... All people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich; and, for that reason alone, prostrated themselves before him, more degradedly and less excusably than the darkest savage creeps out of his hole in the ground to propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul.

If the “benighted” savage worships reptiles or logs, Dickens’s society has adopted a fetishistic worship of money and rich people.

Merdle seems to emanate from the will of society: society has willed him into existence through its materialism, greed and stupidity. (Notice his and his wife’s obsession with society, pp.250-54, 390-92, and 395-56). He is the vulgar embodiment of its vulgar dreams and myopic fantasy. This fantasy leads to a distortion of the real world because it limits its possibilities and imposes on it a self-reflexive imaginary gloss. What Louis Althusser has written on the nature of ideology throws light on the attitude

⁽⁶⁾ The name “Merdle” may derive from the French word “merde” meaning excretion, and, as such, it carries a satirical thrust at the presumptuous ambition of a society which wants to make money without working for it and which therefore deifies Merdle as the idol which will enable it to do that.

demonstrated by Dickens's society: "What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations, which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relations of those individuals to the real relations in which they live."⁽⁷⁾ In other words, Dickens's society has substituted fantasy for reality. The people of this society are guilty of a "fetishistic inversion" and are unaware that, in the words of Slavoj Žižek "it is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the ideological fantasy."⁽⁸⁾

Society is so much in the grip of its ideological fantasy that it even applauds Merdle's squeezing so much money out of it: "It began to be widely understood that one who had done society the admirable service of making so much money out of it, could not be suffered to remain a commoner. A baronetcy was spoken of with confidence; a peerage was frequently mentioned" (p. 692). The surprising anti-climax in "the service of making so much money out of it" reveals society's hidden masochism, which is the result of its endorsing false values and pursuing illusionary dreams. Society, to quote Žižek again: "acts as if the particular things (the commodities) were just so many embodiments of universal Value."⁽⁹⁾

When Merdle commits suicide, his body is discovered to be that "of a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features" (p. 705). There is no more appropriate comment on this society's vulgar fantasy than this description of Merdle's dead body. The genius of the age then turns out to be "simply the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows" (p. 710).

The most important government department that is in charge of the affairs of this society is the Circumlocution Office. This department is administered by the ever-sticking and pervasive Barnacles:

Mechanicians, natural philosophers, soldiers, sailors,
petitioners, memorialists, people with grievances, people
who wanted to prevent grievances, people who wanted to redress
grievances, jobbing people, jobbed people, people who
couldn't get punished for demerit, were all indiscriminately
tucked under the foolscap paper of the Circumlocution Office (p.104).

The Barnacles have developed and perpetuated the fantasy, or illusion, that the best way to run the country is through the philosophy of Laissez-faire and a rigorous application of a "How not to do it" policy (pp. 105-106). Their main concern is to keep—or stick to (as their name implies)—their positions as tenaciously as possible. They therefore strongly resist any change or reform and hamper, cadge, delay, dodge,

⁽⁷⁾ "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 295-96.

⁽⁸⁾ "The Sublime Object of Ideology," 321-22; see also 312-13.

⁽⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, 321.

equivocate and manipulate in order to safeguard their interests and confuse their critics and detractors. They have, however, succeeded in convincing the nation that they are the most capable people for serving it and are therefore indispensable (p. 302). Accordingly, they have gained the power to control almost every activity in the country and managed to put a halt to initiative, originality and creativity.

The oppressive nature of their prevaricating and delaying tactics which have put a stranglehold on all kinds of progress is reified through the analogy Dickens draws between Tite Barnacle's multi-fold cravat and the huge amount of tape and paper (i.e., forms) that the Barnacles have wound round the country and circumscribed its freedom:

He wound and wound folds of white cravat round his neck,
as he wound and wound folds of tape and paper round the
neck of the country. His wristbands and collar were
oppressive, his voice and manner were oppressive (p. 111).

The Barnacles' chauvinism, pretentiousness and narrow-mindedness have spread to other social strata. Thus the inmates of Bleeding Hearts Yard share these qualities with the Barnacles, qualities that have made Englishmen hated all over the world:

In the third place, they had a notion that it was
a sort of Divine visitation upon a foreigner that
he was not an Englishman, and that all kinds of
calamities happened to his country because it did
things that England did not, and did not do things that
England did. In this belief, to be sure, they had long
been carefully trained by the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings,
who were always proclaiming to them, officially and
unofficially, that no country which failed to submit
itself to those two large families could possibly hope
to be under the protection of Providence (p. 302).⁽¹⁰⁾

The Barnacles thus believe that they are empowered by divine sanction and that their authority should therefore never be questioned or challenged.

The Barnacles' solipsistic and exclusionary fantasy assumes such gigantic proportions that they complacently believe that England is only "John Barnacle, Augustus Stiltstalking, William Barnacle, and Tudor Stiltstalking, Tom, Dick, or Harry Barnacle or Stiltstalking, because there was nobody else but mob" (p. 314). And just as the megalomaniacal Chief Butler is convinced that rich people exist for no other reason than to provide him with his all-important job and reflects that "the course of nature required the wealthy population to be kept up on his account," (p.613), the Barnacles, on their part, believe that England is there to minister to their greatness and that the nation was "under a load of obligation to them" (p. 107).

⁽¹⁰⁾ See also 312-13.

In the course of his visit to Arthur Clennam at the Marshalsea Prison, the flamboyant and gentlemanly Ferdinand Barnacle discusses Doyce's invention, which the Circumlocution Office has obstructed for many years and makes a very disturbing comment on society:

Everybody is ready to dislike and ridicule any invention.
You have no idea how many people want to be left alone.
You have no idea how the Genius of the country ... tends to
being left alone. Believe me, Mr. Clennam, ... our place
is not a wicked Giant to be charged at full tilt; but, only a
windmill showing you, as it grinds immense quantities of chaff,
which way the country wind blows (pp. 737-78).

Actually, it is the Barnacles themselves who are afraid of new inventions. Just as the people of the *West Land* find April the "cruellest month," the Barnacles want to be left alone. An invention entails change and change is to be avoided at all costs. In spite of Ferdinand's seeming good nature, there is a typical Barnaclean cynicism lurking under his conciliating words, a cynicism that warrants Dickens' Biblical allusion to the Barnacles and their activities as "Legions" (pp. 106 and 457) which refers to both their huge number and their being unclean spirits (Mark 5:9). If people want to be left alone, it is because they are either harassed by predators like the "Patriarch" who operates through his agent Pancks, or because they have become frustrated and morose owing to their poverty and destitution which are brought on them through the inefficiency and indifference of the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office.

By means of their fantasy, the Barnacles have imposed their own social norms on the people and the people have had no choice but to accept them as if they were their own. What John Fiske has written about social norms would very clearly apply to the situation as depicted by Dickens:

The social norms, or that which is socially acceptable, are of course neither neutral nor objective, they have developed in the interests of those with social power and they work to maintain their sites of power by naturalizing them into the commonsense-the-only-social positions for power. Social norms are ideologically slanted in favor of a particular class or group of classes but are accepted as natural by other classes, even when the interests of those other classes are directly opposed by the ideology reproduced by living life according to those norms.⁽¹¹⁾

⁽¹¹⁾ "Culture, Ideology, Interpellation," *Critical Theory: An Anthology*, 307.

The Barnacles are therefore responsible for the apathy that has beset the country and has paralyzed its progress. They are also responsible for the country's throwing itself at Merdle's feet hoping that through his speculations, no matter how shady, it will earn fabulous riches without having to work for them. It is, as Clennam tells Ferdinand, "a dismal prospect for all of us" (p. 738). Leavis is certainly right when he calls the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office "the whole complex organism of pretence, pretension, privilege, parasitic class interest ... the whole social malady."⁽¹²⁾

Many individuals in this society have likewise spun their fantasies in order to satisfy their psychological needs. As Lionel Trilling has remarked, one of the more basic ideas of psychology according to Freud was "the idea of the fulfillment in dream or fantasy of impulses of the will that cannot be fulfilled in actuality."⁽¹³⁾

While a prisoner at the Marshalsea, William Dorrit spawns the convenient fantasy of his genteel birth and expects the other inmates of the Marshalsea to show him respect and offer financial contributions so that he can maintain his status as a gentleman (p. 65). As he gradually tries to obliterate reality completely and replace it with his fantasy, his snobbishness and pretentiousness concomitantly grow until they assume monstrous proportions. He becomes vain, selfish, and overbearing. He is even cruel to Little Dorrit who works very hard and goes about hungry and cold in order to allow him to live comfortably and indulge his fantasy. Little Dorrit, on her part, feels compassion for her father because he has been incarcerated for a quarter of a century for no other crime than that of not having paid his debts. She has witnessed his gradual degradation and moral deterioration but what she has seen has only increased her love and compassion. "How can you," she tells Arthur Clennam, "seeing him there all at once, dear love, and not gradually, as I have done!" (p. 172). When William Dorrit first came to the Marshalsea, he was a delicate, half-baked middle-aged man:

He was a shy, retiring man; well-looking, though in an effeminate style; with a mild voice, curly hair, and irresolute hands--rings upon the fingers in those days, which nervously wandered to his trembling lips a hundred times, in the first half hour of his acquaintance with the jail (p.58).

What his daughter gradually sees then is the emergence under the influence of the jail of a new soul in her father. As Foucault has written:

If the surplus power possessed by the king gives rise to the duplication of his body, has not the surplus power exercised on the subjected body of the condemned man

⁽¹²⁾ Leavis and Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, 259

⁽¹³⁾ "Little Dorrit," *The Dickens' Critics*, ed. by George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. (Westport, CO: rpt. 1976), 282.

given rise to another type of duplication? That of a 'noncorporeal,' a 'soul.' ... The history of this 'microphysics' of the punitive power would then be a genealogy or an element in a genealogy of the modern 'soul.' Rather than seeing this soul as the reactivated remnants of an ideology, one would see it as the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body. It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists; it has a reality; it is produced permanently around, on, within, the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished. ... This is the historical reality of this soul, which, unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint. This real, non-corporeal soul is not a substance; it is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference of a certain type of knowledge. ... The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself.⁽¹⁴⁾

Dickens thus realizes with Foucault that the prison and its attendant evils such as poverty, mendicancy, ill-health, and confinement forge new souls for people. Moreover, incarcerating a man for a quarter of a century for having failed to pay his debts is a blatant injustice that indicts both the society and the administration (as represented by the Barnacles' Circumlocution Office) for sanctioning such inhuman procedures and institutions. The Marshalsea thus symbolizes not only people's cheating themselves by endorsing false values and thus becoming prisoners of their own pretences, greed, and lack of imagination, but it also foregrounds their refusal to acknowledge their relatedness and mutuality.

In William Dorrit, Dickens achieves a complexity of characterization that had been unparalleled at the time the novel was published (1857). William Dorrit is unique in that he can be viewed through the perspective of both comedy and tragedy. His vanity, pomposity and pretentiousness have reached such huge proportions and he is so unaware what a ridiculous figure he cuts through his solemnity and robot-like insistence that his fantasy be accepted and respected that he becomes a comic figure in the Jonsonian tradition of the comedy of humors. As Bergson has remarked:

Here, too, it is really a kind of automatism that makes us laugh—an automatism... closely akin to absent-mindedness. To realize this more fully, it need only be

⁽¹⁴⁾ From "The Body of The Condemned," *Discipline and Punish in The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1991), 176-77.

noted that a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious.⁽¹⁵⁾

On the other hand, Little Dorrit's uncompromising honesty and her unremitting solicitude save him from falling to irredeemable depths of baseness and self-degradation and bring *him*, at times, a certain measure of self-knowledge that makes him aware, if only during the occasion that has called forth her protest, of his shortcomings and reminds *us* that he is a man more sinned against than sinning. Little Dorrit's love and concern raise him in these moments to the status of a tragic character. Thus when he suggests that she should pretend to accept young John Chivery's amorous attentions and "lead him on" so that he will not lose the privileges granted him by John's father who is the jail's turnkey, "... her hand gradually crept to his lips. For a little while, there was a dead silence and stillness; and he remained shrunk in his chair, and she remained with her arm round his neck, and her head bowed down upon his shoulder" (p. 227). He becomes aware of the meaning of what he has been asking her to do. Apart from the self-knowledge Little Dorrit helps her father acquire in this situation, the whole incident is fraught with tragic intensity and agony. We come to realize that this man is, in spite of his maudlin self-pity, the victim of a system that has become, through the appalling inefficiency and inhuman callousness of its administrators completely irrational and even diabolical.

Some critics believe that Little Dorrit is to blame for not standing up to her father, that if she had done that "the reader would not have lost his respect for either character—and the air would have been cleared in a way it never cleared in *Little Dorrit*."⁽¹⁶⁾ Apart from the fact that Little Dorrit would be acting out of character if she "made a scene," or stood up strongly to her father,⁽¹⁷⁾ it is Dickens's purpose in the novel to show the corrupting influence of the Marshalsea on William Dorrit. Dickens was familiar with the results of such an influence from his own father's experience and he could see the detrimental effect that the jail had had on his father's character. Therefore, it would serve Dickens's purpose to have William Dorrit maintain his fantasy so that he could follow the effect of the Marshalsea on his character to its dire conclusion and show how far it would taint and corrupt a man's moral outlook and ruin his life.

When Dorrit comes into his inheritance and is finally released from the Marshalsea, he cannot come to terms with his past. We remember what Mr. Meagles said upon his release from quarantine in Marseilles at the beginning of the novel: "One always begins to forgive a place as soon as it is left behind; I dare say a prisoner begins to relent towards his prison after he is let out" (p. 22). Dorrit, however, never forgives the

⁽¹⁵⁾ "An Essay on Comedy" by George Meredith and "Laughter" by Henry Bergson, ed. by Wylie Sypher (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 71.

⁽¹⁶⁾ David Holbrook, *Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 92.

⁽¹⁷⁾ For a feminist attitude to Little Dorrit's character, see Patricia Ingham, *Dickens, Women & Language* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1992), 120-24.

Marshalsea and therefore continues to carry it inside him until the very end. He even turns his back on those who helped him, like Arthur Clennam and Pancks, and is savagely rude to poor John Chivery when he presumes to visit him: “Young John Chivery gave it [his hand]; but Mr. Dorrit had driven his heart out of it, and nothing could change his face now, from its white, shocked look” (p. 633). Dorrit is unable to relax and takes offence at the slightest thing as he constantly suspects that people do not accord him the deference and respect due to a gentleman because they know about his past (p. 459). He even suspects his servants of not showing him enough respect because they must have heard of his incarceration in the Marshalsea (p.475). As he is returning from a visit to Mrs. Clennam, he debates with himself whether to pass by the Marshalsea and have a look at it again. He decides, however, against it and even shouts at the coachman who was surprised at his request to follow a roundabout way in order to avoid it (p. 630). Even though Dorrit was not a criminal, his long incarceration developed in him, as Foucault has indicated, the soul of a criminal who is afraid his guilt may be discovered at any time and is therefore anxious to “cover his tracks” by any means.

As he starts to deteriorate both physically and mentally and to act irrationally at times, he misses his old black cap which he used to wear when was incarcerated in the Marshalsea: “though it has been ignominiously given away in the Marshalsea, and had never got free to that hour, but still hovered about the yards on the head of his successor” (p. 642). Through this anthropomorphism, Dickens points out the similarity between the hat which “never got free” and Dorrit who, in spite of his efforts and determination, also remained tied to the Marshalsea and never really got free.

The great mistake that Dorrit makes is to think that he can emerge from his past ordeal and humiliating experience unspotted and unscathed:

I have suffered. Probably I know how much I have
suffered better than any one—ha—I say than any one!
If *I* can put that aside, if *I* can eradicate the marks of what
I have endured, and can emerge before the world a—ha—
gentleman unspoiled, unspotted—is it a great deal to expect—
I say again, is it a great deal to expect—that my children
Should--hum—do the same, and sweep that accursed experience
off the face of the earth? (p. 479).

Unlike her father, Little Dorrit, to whom Dorrit was addressing the above-quoted words, will not “sweep that accursed experience” because she accepts her past and is not ashamed of it. She even yearns for it and feels lost when she finds herself in unfamiliar surroundings. The elegance and luxury she encounters in Venice and other cities in Europe seem to her unreal. She is at home amidst the ruins of Rome because they remind her of the Marshalsea (p. 621). Little Dorrit therefore can derive moral sustenance and strength from her past because her life is a unified continuum and not an arbitrarily truncated present like her father’s. Dorrit cannot forgive or accept his past and is therefore unable to achieve harmony and be at peace with himself and the outside world.

Even when he travels to Switzerland and Italy, he does not find in the landscape and the unlimited expanse offered by the sublime mountains a liberating influence that would release him from his inner prison. Nature does not seem to have any effect on him because his egotism is such that he only thinks of his own greatness and the respect due to him by innkeepers. He fails to perceive in the travelers who were frozen to death on the mountains (p.433) an example of the insignificance of man and the absurdity of vanity, ambition and self-importance. He is like the rest of the tourists who never form an original opinion on what they see but repeat parrot-like what Eustace's travel guide and Mrs. General, the arch votary of surfaces and proprieties, tell them. His only concern is with shallow appearances manifested in luxurious clothes, expensive hotels, coaches, valets and couriers.

Following his interview with Flora, which will be discussed later, and the visit he receives from young John Chivery, Dorrit is considerably shaken. He realizes he cannot exclude the Marshalsea experience from his present life: the Marshalsea will continue to haunt him and spoil his joy. He is unable to derive any moral sustenance from his past because he has repudiated it and turned his back on Little Dorrit's unstinting and supporting love. His mental and physical deterioration sets in under the strain and is accelerated by the physical efforts he exerts on his frenetic journey from London to Italy, a journey which he is in a hurry to make in order to get away from the city that harbors the Marshalsea and the people associated with it. He also cannot wait to be reunited with Mrs. General, the goddess of cliché, spuriousness and surface, whom he intends to marry. As a result he collapses at the Merdles' dinner and relapses into the Marshalsea prisoner as his subconscious gains complete control of his conscious mind. His fantasy's fake and presumptuous posturing is no longer able to withstand pressure from the reality he has sought to repress.

Dorrit's elder daughter, Fanny, and his only son, Edward or "Tip," are also contaminated by their father's fantasy. They treat this fantasy as if it were real and insist on being looked upon as superior beings. As a result, they become arrogant, snobbish, materialistic, vain, and selfish. These drawbacks reach monstrous proportions when their father inherits a great deal of money and drive them to actions which bring a great deal of misery to both of them. Thus Fanny marries a moron in order to move up on the social ladder and to wage war against his mother, Mrs. Merdle, for past humiliations. Tip, on his part, ruins his health through excessive drinking and gambling.

Flora Finching is one of the most memorable and amusing characters in the novel. Although she is fat and well past the prime of life, she still believes she can be attractive to her ex-sweetheart, Arthur Clennam, who has returned from China after an absence of twenty years. She indulges in girlish behavior and all kinds of absurdity in order to maintain the fantasy that she can revive their romance.

After the death of her husband Mr. F, Flora moved in with her father, the hypocritical and greedy Christopher Casby, nicknamed the "Patriarch." He is a moron who is

incapable of uttering a single meaningful sentence or original idea. His sole interest in life is to collect the rents on his property in Bleeding Hearts Yard. Flora is naturally unhappy to live with such a father: "I returned to Papa's roof and lived secluded if not happy during some years ..." (p. 285). In spite of the company of the eccentric Mr. F's aunt, she feels lonely and desolate. Her world is limited and therefore dreary. She finds consolation in brandy and sherry and incessant babbling. She also reads romantic poetry, mythology, and works of romance and intrigue such as Dumas' *The Man in the Iron Mask* (p.283) and Otway's *Venice Preserved* (p. 536)—all of which find their way in her endless flow of words. Dickens, however, feels compassion for her. He shows that her garrulity does have coherence and can even reveal shrewdness and creativity:

I will draw a veil over that dreamy life, Mr. F was in good spirits his appetite was good he liked the cookery he considered the wine weak but palatable and all was well, we returned to the immediate neighbourhood of Number Thirty Little Gosling Street London Docks and settled down, ere we had yet fully detected the housemaid in selling the feathers out of the spare bed Gout flying upwards soared with Mr. F to another sphere (p.285).

Flora achieves individuality through her very abuse of the rules of punctuation and syntax. She harnesses language into naming various objects and experiences and a multitude of feelings and impressions simultaneously. She also ignores the conventions attaching to time and place traveling from past to present to past in one breath and crossing China into England into Italy and the Alps and back into England in one utterance. She flouts the outside world in favor of a personal fantasy that acknowledges no bounds or barriers but pursues a course which is both creative and self-creative and enables her to cope with what Eric Bentley calls "the daily, hourly, inescapable difficulty of being."⁽¹⁸⁾ She manages to cheer herself up in her loneliness and to put up with and insensitive and senseless father by refusing to take her predicament seriously and minimizing her own importance.⁽¹⁹⁾ She even finds joy and escape in her flights of loquacity,⁽²⁰⁾ and in forging similes, metaphors and other tropes by which she romanticizes her life and renders an unpleasant person or event ridiculous. Thus Arthur's mother, Mrs. Clennam, whom she dislikes because she put an end to her romance with Arthur "sits glowering at me like Fate in a go-cart" (p. 284); Flintwinch is "a rusty screw in gaiters" (p. 624); and when Arthur went to China, she became "the statue bride of the late Mr. F."(p. 285).

Just as her abuse of language endows her with freedom and individuality, her kindness to Little Dorrit humanizes her. In her treatment of the poor girl she shows she is

⁽¹⁸⁾ Ch. 9 on 'Comedy,' *The Life of the Drama*(New York: Atheneum, 1964), 306.

⁽¹⁹⁾ See Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington, IN, 1968), in *Comedy, Developments in Criticism*, ed. by D.J. Palmer (London: Macmillan, 1984), 151.

⁽²⁰⁾ See 535 and 820.

generous, kind-hearted and devoid of snobbery.⁽²¹⁾ Even when she realizes she has lost Arthur to her and that they are going to get married, she harbors no grudge and is selfless enough to wish them happiness.⁽²²⁾ Unlike other absurd characters in Dickens's comic gallery, such as Mrs. Wilfur, Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Nickleby and Mrs. Micawber, Flora's absurdity never incurs our anger or contempt. Moreover, in handling Mr. F's aunt, she shows patience, common sense and sympathy.⁽²³⁾ All these qualities make of her a complex character.

In spite of her absurdity and indulgence in fantasies, Flora is not unaware of her deficiencies:

I know I am not what you expected, I know that
very well (p. 153).

... and many will congratulate you some in earnest
some not and many will congratulate you with all
their hearts but none more so I do assure you than from
bottom of my own I do myself though sensible of
blundering and being stupid ... (p. 416).

Upon your word no isn't there I never did but
that's like me I run away with an idea and having none to
spare I keep it ... (p. 536).

... for the very dress I have on now can prove it and
sweetly made though there is no denying that it would
tell better on a better figure for my own is much too fat
though how to bring it down I know not, pray excuse me
I am roving off again (p. 622)

The self-knowledge she achieves and her acceptance of her own absurdity allow her to transcend both her fantasy and her absurdity. In this also she is unique among Dickens's other absurd characters who are, until the end, identified with their absurdity.

One of the greatest comic scenes in the novel occurs when Flora pays a visit to William Dorrit at his hotel in London in order to ask him, in Arthur Clennam's behalf, to look for Rigaud when he travels back to Italy (Book II, ch. 17). The meeting between these two people shows Dickens's comic genius at its most inspired and creative. It also conflates their two divergent fantasies and attitudes. In this scene Dorrit is exposed to Flora's garrulity for the first time and is completely nonplussed by it. The incongruity between his stiffness, self-importance, and lack of sympathy, and Flora's spontaneity, kindness and humility⁽²⁴⁾ is, of course, all in Flora's favor, but it also makes the scene one

⁽²¹⁾ See 282, 286, and 415-16.

⁽²²⁾ See 819-26.

⁽²³⁾ See 323 and 417.

⁽²⁴⁾ See 621-23.

of the greatest comic scenes in literature. Flora is actuated by the unselfish desire to help Clennam, while Dorrit is absorbed in his self-regard and the fantasy he has woven around himself. His stony pride and monstrous vanity bring on him a well-deserved punishment, for he becomes utterly helpless before Flora's barrage of words and is made to cut a ridiculous figure. She sets his pretentiousness at naught by simply not being conscious of it.

Flora keeps reminding him of certain facts and people unaware that he would very much like to forget them. She thus mentions the time when Little Dorrit used to work for her for half-a-crown a day and tells him about her pitiable condition, of her "having gone off perfectly limp and white and cold in my house" (p. 621), which he had chosen to disregard and now hates to have it brought to his attention by a stranger. She then mentions the now embarrassing names of Arthur Clennam and Pancks who are associated with his days in the Marshalsea. She thus "deconstructs" him and almost drives him out of his mind.⁽²⁵⁾ At the end of the interview, Dorrit is seriously shaken up as he realizes that his past will always come back to haunt and torment him in one way or another. His determined clinging to his fantasy and his ability to keep the Marshalsea experience out of his conscious mind begin to falter.

Mrs. Clennam is a character who has let illusions and fantasies dominate and control her life. She believes she is carrying out God's commandments as she found them in The Old Testament and that she has been chosen to be God's scourge to sinners. She uses this fantasy, or illusion, to justify her cruelty, fanaticism and lust for revenge, and to conceal from others and from herself her jealousy, enviousness and satanic pride. Her Calvinistic religion knows no mercy, pity or forgiveness and shies away from love and feelings. Even her Calvinism is distorted, for the god she really worships is a god of her own creation or fantasy:

Verily, verily, travelers have seen many monstrous
idols in many countries; but no human eyes have ever
seen more daring, gross and shocking images of the
Divine nature, than we creatures of the dust make in
our likeness, of our bad passions.

The room, which she never leaves, is described as a grave in which images of death pervade:

...the usual deadened fire was in the grate; the
bed had its usual pall upon it; and the mistress of
all sat on her back bier-like sofa, propped up by
her black angular bolster that was like the headsman's
block (p.763).

⁽²⁵⁾ See 624.

The room thus becomes a metonymy for the death-in-life-existence of Mrs. Clennam and her grim executioner-like role in life.

The old black house which harbors Mrs. Clennam also performs a metonymic function: it is never touched by the sun, which is the symbol of life and self-renewal, and is always wrapped in a cloak of darkness, which symbolizes the cruelty, wickedness and negation of life that characterize Mrs. Clennam's actions:

The 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, never knew a healthy or a cheerful interval, let what would betide. If the sun ever touched it, it was but with a ray, and that was gone in half an hour, if the moonlight ever fell upon it, it was only to put a few patches on its doleful cloak, and make it look more wretched (p. 178)

The streets in the neighborhood in which the house is situated "seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets" (p. 542). The old house is also therefore a keeper of secrets: "Its close air was secret. The gloom, and must, and dust of the whole tenement, were secret" (pp. 542-3). Therefore the history of the house and that of its inmates become identical, as Rigaud tells Mrs. Clennam:

I have known many adventurers; interesting spirits—amiable society! To one of them I owe my knowledge, and my proofs—I repeat it, estimable lady—proofs—of the ravishing little family history I go to commence. . . . One should name a history. Shall I name it the history of this house? (p. 771).

The house is thus anthropomorphized and becomes both a manifestation and a depository of the history and cruel fantasies of its inmates. Once the family history has been revealed by Rigaud, Mrs. Clennam and Affrey, it loses its *raison d'être* and dies, i.e., collapses.

Even when Mrs. Clennam sees how Little Dorrit, to whom she has repeated the story of her life, shrinks from her, she does not relent but sticks to her cruel and demented fantasy to the very end: "I have done . . . what it was given to me to do. I have set myself against sin." She does not show any signs of repentance or remorse. At the sight of the rubble and dust which her house has become and which symbolize what her life with all its intransigence and unforgiveness has amounted to, she too collapses (p. 794).

Miss Wade, "The Self-Tormentor," whose morbidity and over-inflated ego prevent her from establishing normal relations with people, suffers from a self-induced fantasy

of being the victim of Victorian snobbishness and unjust attitude to illegitimate birth. Like William Dorrit who cannot forgive the Marshalsea, she cannot forgive society and go on with her life. Her excessively embittered reaction to what she considers to be society's unfairness reveals a satanic pride that cannot be appeased or satisfied. If she loves a girl of her own sex, her love shows a lesbian-like passionate possessiveness (pp. 663-65); and if she falls in love with a man she becomes jealous, conspiratorial and domineering. When she is shown sympathy, she becomes suspicious, arrogant and standoffish. As a result of her paranoia and persecution complex, she harbors implacable hatred and contempt for everybody and derives great pleasure from spiting and outraging whoever makes friendly approaches to her. She can neither be happy nor bring happiness to anyone. In Pancks' words "[s]he writhes under her life. A woman more angry, passionate, reckless, and revengeful never lived" (p. 540).

Just as Mrs. Clennam's attitude to life transformed her room into a grave, Miss Wade's irreconcilable hostility to whatever is spontaneous, innocent or benevolent has the effect of spreading an atmosphere of death around her. Thus, the description of her residence in Calais is replete with images of death:

A dead sort of house, with a dead wall over the way and a dead gateway at the side, where a pendant bell-handle produced two dead tinkles, and a knocker produced a dead, flat surface-tapping, that seemed not to have depth enough in it to penetrate even the cracked door. However, the door jarred open on a dead sort of spring, and he [Arthur Clennam] closed it behind him as he entered a dull yard, soon brought to a close at the back by another dead wall (p. 654).

At the end of his interview with her, Arthur "came down ... with an increased sense upon him of the gloom of the wall that was dead, and of the shrubs that were dead, and of the fountain that was dry, and of the statue that was gone" (p.662). Miss Wade's residence, like Mrs. Clennam's house, has the metonymic function of underscoring Miss Wade's nature and her effect on her environment and the people who cross her path.

It is the inevitable fate of such a woman who harbors such a fantasy or illusion about society and about the injustice she is victim to and who launches, like Mrs. Clennam, into a personal crusade against what she believes to be hypocrisy, condescension and unfairness, to fall prey to her own delusions. Her life becomes as barren as her metonymic residence in Calais and she is condemned to a life of loneliness and misery as even the wayward and rebellious Tattycoram deserts her when she discovers her true nature.

Moving up the social ladder we encounter the impoverished. Mrs. Gowan who nurtures the fantasy that it is the Meagles who have been unrelenting in their efforts to catch her highly desirable son, Henry, as a husband for their daughter Pet. By means of

this fantasy she gratifies her gargantuan snobbishness and sense of superiority over the rich Meagles and maintains her status and pride among her neighbors in Hampton Court. Like the rest of society, however, she is not too proud to worship Merdle's wealth: "True, the Hampton Court Bohemians, without exception, turned up their noses at Merdle as an upstart; but they turned them down again, by falling flat on their faces to worship his wealth" (p.390).

Her son has been disappointed by his relatives, the Barnacles, because they have not favored him with a lucrative governmental post. He has subsequently taken up art as a profession, though his skills are rather dubious.⁽²⁶⁾ He has carefully developed a cynical fantasy that what is good or honest is really bad and vice versa. He then proceeds to downgrade and cast a malicious slur on everything that is genuinely good or honest. He also claims that all art is mercenary and profit-seeking and all artists are commercially-minded.⁽²⁷⁾ He thus tries to play the part of the tragic hero in life without being either tragic or a hero and is no better than a decadent upper-middle class dilettante in art and parasite in life. Dickens describes his way of thinking as degenerate: "The habit, too, of seeking some sort of recompense in the discontented boast of being disappointed, is a habit fraught with degeneracy" (p. 488). By devalorizing and ill-treating whatever and whoever come his way, he betrays his latent sadism and snobbishness as well as his monstrous egotism and vanity. He has his mother's exasperating pretentiousness and whenever he is in society he keeps insinuating that by marrying Pet he has made a great sacrifice. In the meantime, he continues to sponge shamelessly on her parents. No wonder, therefore, that Rigaud has become his friend. They both spurn hard work, they both would like to batten on society, and they both have diabolical natures.⁽²⁸⁾

Rigaud (alias Blandois, alias Lagnier) the cowardly villain has fabricated the fantasy that he is a gentleman and a man of great prowess. Like many other characters in the novel, Rigaud has come to believe his own fantasy and uses it as a pretext for imposing himself on society and making it cater to his own needs:

I am a man ...whom society has deeply wronged since you last saw me. You know that I am sensitive and brave, and that it is my character to govern. How has society respected those qualities in me? ... Such are the humiliations that society has inflicted upon me, possessing the qualities I have mentioned, and which you know me to possess. But society shall pay for it (p. 132).

⁽²⁶⁾ See 205-206 and 550-51.

⁽²⁷⁾ See 403.

⁽²⁸⁾ The idyllic Meagles' residence at Twickenham is called "Paradise" by Gowan, (p. 202), and since he is going to cause a great deal of pain and anxiety to the Meagles and disrupt the serenity and harmony of their lives through his selfishness, cynicism and inability to appreciate their generosity and kindness, he plays a role not very different from the one played by Satan with Adam and Eve in Paradise.

He is associated with the devil: “[T]hat’s the true reason why they said that the devil was let loose” (p. 126). His diabolical nature is underscored when his condescension is reified into a separate concrete entity that leaves his body and overwhelms the hotel residents and owners:

The house was kept in a homely manner, and the condescension of Mr. Blandois was infinite. It seemed to fill to inconvenience the little bar in which the widow landlady and her two daughters received him; it was much too big for the narrow wainscoted room...; it perfectly swamped the little private sitting-room of the family, which was finally given up to him (p. 351).

This diabolical quality of Rigaud is alluded to again when he laughs in Mr. Flintwinch’s face: “He met his eyes directly; and on the instant of their fixing one another, the visitor, with that ugly play of nose and moustache, laughed ... a diabolically silent laugh” (p. 359). Rigaud has a mannerism which he always repeats and which performs the function of a synecdoche that reveals the ruthlessness and greed of the entire man: “When Monsieur Rigaud laughed, a change took place in his face, that was more remarkable than prepossessing. His moustache went up under his nose, and his nose came down over his moustache, in a very sinister and cruel manner” (pp. 5-6). Rigaud even casts a diabolical shadow as he sat “with a monstrous shadow imitating him on the wall and ceiling” (p. 445). Little Dorrit and Pet perceive towards him “an aversion amounting to the repugnance and horror of a natural antipathy towards an odious creature of the reptile kind” (p. 509). They thus associate him with the snake which is usually connected with the devil.

Rigaud’s contempt for society is the most disturbing for it not only sounds like Gowan’s debunking of it, but it goes beyond Gowan’s cynicism and draws a picture of a mercenary and greedy society in which every individual has a price and is therefore reduced to a mere commodity. In view of what we have seen of society, as Dickens portrays it in his novel, we feel that there is much truth in what he says:

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? ... Effectively, sir, ... society sells itself and sells me: and I sell society (p. 749).

Here Dickens not only anticipates Karl Marx’s indictment of capitalism, but he seems also to predict the relativism in moral values that will pervade modern society. It is only fitting that such a relativism be propounded by the diabolical Rigaud.

It is therefore appropriate that when Mrs. Clennam’s house, which has been the seat of an idolatrous religion that was quasi-satanic in its cruelty, vengefulness and treachery, collapses, that it should take Rigaud with it.

Even Pancks, who moves as mechanically as a steam engine, indulges in fantasies. He tells Little Dorrit he is “a fortune-teller” and that he is “Pancks ... the gipsy” (p. 289). He surrounds himself with an aura of mystery from which he obviously derives some fun. This helps him cope with the drabness of life and the ugliness of his job as the Patriarch’s grubber or rent-collector who has to squeeze the last penny from the poor tenants of Bleeding Hearts Yard to satisfy his master’s insatiable greed. He does, however, render Little Dorrit an invaluable service for it is through his efforts that her father comes into his inheritance and is released from the Marshalsea.

Pancks, however, entertains another fantasy. He insists that each tenant pay his rent which he calls his “bond.” Thus he likens himself to Shylock who was adamant in exacting his bond and refused to show any mercy to Antonio in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. “I want my bond,” shouts Pancks (p.278) and terrorizes Bleeding Hearts Yard “demanding his bond. ...” Pancks’ fantasy of being the hateful Shylock and his frenzied activities in the Yard are his masochistic way of expressing his anger with and contempt for himself for submitting to the hypocritical Patriarch and squeezing the tenants dry. His anger and self-contempt, however, will eventually erupt into a volcanic fury that will lead to his turning against the Patriarch, showing him up in front of the tenants of Bleeding Hearts Yard and shearing his impressive locks of hair with which he has imposed on everybody (pp. 800-3).

Mrs. Plornish, the poor matron who lives in Bleeding Hearts Yard, has not escaped the fantasy-spinning habit of Dickens’s society. She entertains the fantasy that she is a linguist and understands Italian and can therefore talk to Cavalletto in his own native tongue. This fantasy is a source of pleasure and pride to her and helps her cope with the drabness and dullness of her life (p. 303).

Finally, the keeper of the chandler’s shop in the Marshalsea prison, an individual on the lowest rung of the social ladder, maintains the odd fantasy that there is a fund which ought to come to the inmates of the jail, or the Collegiates, but that “the Marshal intercepted it” (p. 88). With this fantasy he obviously gives himself some importance and finds a topic to keep him thinking and talking. He even begins to believe that there is some hope for his fantasy to come true when he sees Mr. Dorrit come into his inheritance.

Dickens’ vision which emerges from *Little Dorrit* is a very somber one. There is no indication that the Circumlocution Office and the Barnacles will stop plaguing England: they will continue to impede progress and exasperate, baffle and torment whoever comes up with an original idea or invention. And even though Merdle is gone, there is no guarantee, in view of the absence of accountability and the laxity of the laissez-faire system advocated by the Barnacles, that another Merdle will not crop up and be patronized by them and the rest of society which will always need a false god to worship. Ferdinand Barnacle himself tells Arthur that other Merdles are sure to make their appearance, sooner or later: “The next man who has as large a capacity and as

genuine a taste for swindling, will succeed as well. 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” (p. 738). Moreover, although the Marshalsea is gone (as Dickens tells us in Book 1, ch.VI), the conditions that had led to poverty and destitution and resulted in incarceration within its walls are still there. Society will also continue to produce the likes of the Patriarch, Mrs. Clennam, Miss Wade, Mrs. Gowan and the Bosom.

Individuals in this kind of society are forced to create their own fantasies in order to cope with their misery, frustration and loneliness. They are tempted, more often than not, to replace real life with their fantasies and thus bring misery upon themselves. Those individuals, however, who have a certain degree of self-knowledge, humility and a sense of humor and do not take themselves too seriously, like Flora, can get on with their lives unscathed by whatever unpleasant experience or people they come across.

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