

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

LIMINIAL COMPOSITIONS OF THE CHILD-ADULT AND THE ADULT-CHILD  
IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS

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A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Anglia Ruskin University for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Submitted: August 2020

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my first supervisor Professor John Gardner for his continuous support throughout the PhD process. His enthusiasm for, and knowledge of nineteenth-century literature has been a constant source of motivation for me throughout this project. Having been taught by him as an undergraduate I knew he would make an excellent supervisor, and it was for this reason that I returned to Anglia Ruskin University to do my PhD. He has helped me not only in the creation of my thesis, but has also been able to offer much needed advice on all things academic, from writing lectures to delivering conference papers. I am extremely grateful for his guidance and he has helped to make the PhD journey an enjoyable one.

I would also like to thank my second supervisor Professor Valarie Purton and my third supervisor Dr Koenraad Claes. Their insight on all things Dickens helped to strengthen my thesis and refine my argument, for which I am truly grateful.

Special thanks must be offered to Edwin Marr and Katy Lyndon, fellow PhD candidates who truly understand the unique challenges of writing a PhD. In both of you I have made friends for life. I must also say thank you to my partner Curtis Morgan, whose technical support was much needed and very much appreciated.

Lastly, I would like to thank all my friends and family who have supported me since I started on my PhD journey. Your unwavering love and encouragement have meant the world to me, and I don't know what I would do without you all.

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ABSTRACT

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My thesis argues that Charles Dickens populated his novels with liminal characters who exist in the space between childhood and adulthood. The creation of such characters allowed Dickens to engage with a range of themes, some of which were too controversial to refer to explicitly, and therefore needed to be embedded within the narratives. The aim of the thesis is to highlight the significance of such characters and the way Dickens uses their liminality to create subtext within his novels.

Separating the thesis into five chapters I begin with a discussion of ‘The Carer’ in Chapter One, where I discuss characters who are liminal because of their roles as carers in some form or other. In Chapter Two I discuss ‘Mental Capacities: The Mind of a Child’ in which I analyse characters who are afflicted by mental health conditions or learning difficulties and are rendered liminal as a result. Chapter Three focuses on ‘The Infantilised Woman and the Child-Husband’ where I consider how Dickens uses married liminal characters to highlight the necessity of allowing middle-class women to escape the perpetual child-wife state desired by society. In Chapter Four I reveal how Dickens uses liminal characters to highlight the danger faced by working-class children of falling into prostitution. My last chapter focuses on the “Blakean Element” present in Dickens’s fiction, and how liminal characters are often used to deliver the message or the moral of the novel.

By analysing how Dickens uses the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, I am able to offer a fresh analysis of Dickens’s novels. Recognising the significance of the liminal space allows both the everyday reader and the literary critic to better understand the ways in which Dickens pushed for societal change in his fiction.

Key Words: Liminal, Liminality, Childhood, Adulthood, Dickens

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## Introduction

In this thesis I argue that Charles Dickens populated his fiction with liminal characters who exist in the space between childhood and adulthood. Creating such characters allowed Dickens to engage with a range of subject matters, often of a controversial nature, referencing such themes indirectly in the text. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines liminality as a “transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person’s life; *spec.* such a state occupied during a ritual or rite of passage, characterized by a sense of solidarity between participants” (2020). Bjorn Thomassen argues in *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (2016) that “Liminality is a universal concept: cultures and human lives cannot exist without moments of transition, and those brief and important spaces where we live through the in-between. Such transitions mark us, they stamp our personalities, and that is the way it will always be” (p.4). Referring to “brief and important spaces” would suggest that liminality is not a permanent fixture, but a “moment of transition” as Thomassen describes it. However, he goes on to argue that “Liminality is both social and personal” (p.4) and states that being in a liminal space can be understood as “searching for a new frame to settle within” (p.4). He explains that “George Bateson defined schizophrenia as a ‘loss of frames’, which is another way of saying endless liminality” (p.4). It is interesting that Thomassen draws links between “endless liminality” and “schizophrenia”, as this suggests that existing in a perpetually liminal space is unhealthy and results in a negative experience. Thomassen uses examples from the ancient world to highlight how central liminality is to human experience, arguing that “The ancient Greeks knew perfectly well that the middle stage in a ritual passage had its own spatial reality” (p.4). Humans may long have recognised the importance of liminal spaces, but as Michael Joseph highlights, “‘Liminality’ is a coinage from the Scottish anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), who drew on ‘liminaire,’ a term used by Arnold Van Gennep (1909)” (2011, p.138). Turner suggests that:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither

here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (2011, p.95).

Dickens would not have known the term “liminality”, but he did recognise that creating characters who are “betwixt and between” was a key way to engage with important themes in his fiction.

Joseph goes on to argue that “Liminality describes the quality of being socially segregated, set apart and divested of status, and relates to associated characteristics and qualities” (2011, p.138). Throughout my thesis I consider how Dickens uses liminality, highlighting that whilst the characters I analyse are often “socially segregated, set apart and divested of status”, this is not always the case. I consider several characters (as I will go on to explain) whose worth and importance in the novel is a direct result of the liminal space in which they exist. Thereby highlighting the complexities of the liminal spaces Dickens creates in his fiction, and challenging Thomassen’s view that “endless liminality” is always negative. In the introduction to *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (2015), Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra argue that “Liminality is a powerful tool of analysis that can be used to explore different problems at the intersection of anthropology and political studies” (p.1). They define liminality as “a prism through which to understand transformations in the contemporary world” (p.1). Despite having its origins in anthropology, it is widely accepted that liminality can also be a “tool of analysis” when discussing literature. Indeed, Linda Woodbridge and Roland Anderson suggest that “Literary applications of liminality blossomed in the later 1980s” (1993, p.579). In the preface to *Victorian Cultures of Liminality: Borders and Margins* (2018) Alyal, Anderson and Mitchell explain that “In choosing the term liminality the editors are aware of its nuanced implications, allowing suggestions both of the liminal and the transitional. The writers are academics from the fields of literature, history and art history” (p.ix). The editors’ admission that the writers in *Victorian Cultures of Liminality* are from a range of humanities-based disciplines indicates how the term “liminality” can effectively be applied not only in anthropological studies, but also in the Arts. They explain when considering liminality in Victorian literature that “In Part I: Literary Liminality, the chapters focus on the *fin de siècle*” (p.x), but it is not just end-of-century literature that has been considered through a liminal lens. For example, in her article “The Space In-between: Exploring Liminality in *Jane Eyre*” (2017),

Megan Clarke argues that “Jane is always singled out as otherworldly” (p.19) and suggests that as a character Jane possesses “perpetual liminality” (p.19), evident from the beginning of the novel. Using liminality as a lens allows Clarke to highlight the importance of the space Jane occupies in the novel, situated somewhere between the “worlds” or boundaries created by other characters. Considering the importance of liminal spaces is also central to my thesis. I examine characters who are in “transitional or indeterminate” spaces, meaning that whilst some characters like Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) and Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times* (1864) transition through the liminal space in which they exist, ultimately arriving at adulthood, many of the characters I discuss exist in a far more indeterminate space, seemingly caught always between childhood and adulthood. I argue that the liminal spaces in which characters exist have been created by Dickens specifically because they allow him to then use these characters as discussion points and signifiers of subtexts within the narratives. I have concentrated my study on his novels as opposed to his short stories, and have used specific examples from a cross-section of his work, thereby demonstrating that this was a key technique throughout his career. I have not taken a chronological approach, opting instead to use a thematic approach throughout my thesis. Doing so allows me to discuss the liminal spaces I concentrate on in more detail; and proved more useful than just considering Dickens’s use of liminality in a linear sense.

There is an abundance of scholarship on Dickens and childhood. Notable recent publications include *Dickens and the Imagined Child* (2015), a collection of essays edited by Peter Merchant and Catherine Waters which focus on the fact that “in studies of the fiction and journalism of Dickens [...] the figure of the child and the topic of childhood have always loomed large” (p.1). They argue that “Dickens’s multifaceted response to childhood no doubt owes much to the diversity of opinion circulating about the topic in his own day” (p.5) With this in mind, the essays “explore the function of the child and childhood within Dickens’s imagination as well as the cultural resonance of his engagement with the subject.” (p.6). Focussing on three key elements of his writing, the essays are separated into the following categories: “The Dickensian Child”, “Childhood and Memory” and “Children, Reading and Writing”. Another key publication is Selina Schuster’s *An Analysis of Childhood and Child Labour in Charles Dickens’ Works: David Copperfield and Oliver Twist* (2014). In it, Schuster questions



“how children were perceived by the Victorians and how the phenomenon of increasing child labour did fit into this particular perception” (p.7). Both publications are principally concerned with how Victorian childhoods were perceived and represented by Dickens; my thesis in contrast focuses on how Dickens uses the liminal space between childhood and adulthood to address psychological and social concerns. Ambery Malkovich in *Charles Dickens and the Victorian Child: Romanticizing and Socializing the Imperfect Child* (2013), argues that imperfect children are “not limited by a binary construct of good/evil; Romantic child vs. street waif. Through a transitory, blended space, such as occurs between the transition from the ‘real’ to fantastic world and back again, their agency is strengthened and solidified” (p.2). Focussing on the “blended space” many of Dickens’s child characters exist in, Malkovich suggests that “The ‘ideal’ Victorian child was a desire but not a possibility in Victorian culture, though the imperfect child was attainable” (p.136), and declares that “the imperfect child is a depiction of a real and not an ideal child, a child whose perfection is found in their complex and engaging imperfection” (p.140). Malkovich is principally concerned with “pedagogical approaches” (p.8) and argues that “drawing students to imperfect child characters allows them to see that while the world outside of a text is not perfect, happy endings are not always found in the covers of books either” (p.137). Focussing on how students can better engage with Victorian texts if they are encouraged to consider the significance of the imperfect child, her focal point is the idealisation of Victorian childhoods in literature, and the ways in which Dickens presents imperfect children in his fiction, instead of the idealised Victorian child. Although still very much concerned with the representation of childhood, Malkovich is aware of the importance of considering “spaces” in Dickens’s fiction which do not necessarily exist in the physical sense. I develop Malkovich’s discussion of “blended spaces”, arguing that instead of “blended” many characters exist in an in-between space, caught between childhood and adulthood, thereby emphasizing the importance of distance, rather than a coming together as “blended” suggests. Furthermore, my analysis extends not only to characters who can be considered as children in age, but also to characters who have not yet arrived at adulthood despite their advancement in years.

Aspects of Dickens’s works that could be termed studies in liminality have long been a discussion point for Dickens scholars. In 1963, Jane W. Stedman’s article “Child-Wives of Dickens” was published in *The Dickensian*. In it, Stedman re-evaluates some of

Dickens's childlike female characters who had previously been considered as nothing more than "insipid nonentities" (p.112), arguing that these characters had been overlooked by Dickens scholars in the past. In 1994, Malcolm Andrews published *Dickens and the Grown-Up Child*; Andrews stresses that his book "does not pretend to be a comprehensive study of Dickens and childhood: it examines a particular aspect of that larger interest in a period – mainly the later 1840s – when Dickens's fiction seems to be preoccupied with the tensions in the adult-child relationship and with the concept of maturity" (p.5). Stedman and Andrews concentrate their research on liminal characters, but 21st century studies have reassessed liminal spaces in Dickens's work. For example, in 2002, Robert E. Lougy published his article "Filth, Liminality, and Abjection in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*" for *Project Muse*, in which he considers "the significance of filth in *Bleak House*, especially its presence in the form of excrement, mud, ooze, and corpses" (p.475). Lougy indicates that his aim is to "look at how such sites figure into Dickens's interrogation of liminality, the ways in which we find the boundaries, thresholds, and margins of the novel violated or threatened" (p.476). More recently in 2016, Valerie Kennedy and Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou published *Liminal Dickens: Rites of Passage in His Work*, which concentrates on:

Dickens's fascination with liminal zones or rites of passage, like births, growing-up rituals, weddings and deaths; it explores both the implications of the fusion and confusion of these states in major works and journalism [...] All the essays in this collection focus on how Dickens's preoccupation with transitional phases reflects his own liminality (p.2).

I use all of these key publications as a springboard in my thesis, developing their arguments as I apply my own approach to the study of liminality in Dickens's novels. Stedman and Andrews concentrate on key personality traits that certain liminal characters possess, but they do not use the term "liminal" to categorise the characters they discuss. Stedman suggests that Dickens's child-wives share varying degrees of "unfitness to cope with adult life" (p.113). Stedman recognises a commonality between Dickens's child-wives, and it is this common trait among them which allows them to be categorised as the same. Andrews, meanwhile, argues that "The grown-up child in Dickens's fiction takes many forms [...] There are five main categories with some overlap between them and, within them, some sub-categories" (p.73). Andrews defines the five categories as "The Professional Infant" (p.73), "Arrested Development" (p.75),

“Premature Little Adults” (p.79) “Little Mothers and Housekeepers” (p.85) and “The Child-Like Gentle Man” (p.89). “The amalgamation of maturity and childhood in a single figure” (p.74), Andrews claims is “used metaphorically by Dickens, as we shall see, to suggest certain types of personality or psychic states. But in these comic figures from popular entertainment the amalgamation is visually obvious, and they are paraded like human hybrids” (p.75). The term “hybrid”, like Malkovich’s “blended”, suggests a fusing together of adult and childlike personality traits. In contrast, I purposely choose to use the term “liminal” throughout my thesis, because as the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, liminality refers to “A transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person’s life”. I argue that Dickens’s liminal characters are exactly that, “between’ states, either in transition, or in many cases existing for an indeterminate amount of time, between childhood and adulthood. They have left childhood behind but have not yet arrived at adulthood. Essentially then, they exist in the space between the two. Rather than a fusing together, as Andrews suggests, I argue there is instead a distancing between the two states. As a result, my argument whilst it identifies specific personality traits, is more focused on the significance of the liminal space in which particular characters exist, and how Dickens uses the space as a way to hint at themes within the narrative. The liminal space then, can be visualised as an area where Dickens can place these themes, thereby encouraging his readers to acknowledge their presence in the background of his novels.

Whilst Stedman and Andrews are principally concerned with what can be recognised as liminal personality traits, Lougy’s article and Kennedy and Kitsi-Mitakou’s book focus on liminal spaces. Lougy argues that in *Bleak House* (1852-53), “Captain Hawdon enters the novel as neither dead or alive, but rather as an intermediary figure, situated in a transitional state between the two, still in the process of crossing the threshold between these two worlds. As such, he is a liminal figure” (p.480). For Lougy, it is Captain Hawdon’s position between life and death which makes him liminal, rather than a personality trait he possesses. Similarly, Kennedy and Kitsi-Mitakou write of “Dickens’s consistent confusion of life with death, for example, his perception of life as a middle space/stage of deprivation, and his inability to perceive death as necessarily meaning a transition to another life” (p.2) The essays in Kennedy and Kitsi-Mitakou’s book are principally concerned, as is Lougy, with definable spaces or stages, such as life and death. Their research focuses on how these spaces are portrayed, confused and

fused together, and how characters can exist in between them. My research blends the study of character traits employed by Stedman and Andrews, and the study of liminal spaces employed by Lougy and the collection of essays edited by Kennedy and Kitsi-Mitakou. Focusing on Dickens's novels, the characters I concentrate on have particular personality traits that can be identified as liminal, and these traits in their many varied forms, indicate that the character in question exists in a liminal space, somewhere between childhood and adulthood. As a result, I am able to show that defining characters into Andrews's five categories is sometimes problematic, because there are examples where a character possesses many traits that make them liminal, meaning they do not fit neatly into one of Andrews's five selected categories.

Jenny Wren from *Our Mutual Friend* is one of the main characters my thesis centres around. Described as "Twelve, or at the most thirteen" (bk.2, ch.1, p.224), Jenny's face is "at once so young and so old" (bk.2, ch.1, p.224). Her liminality is present for all to see, prompting the landlady Miss Abbey of the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters to ask whether she is "Child or woman?" (bk.3, ch.2, p.439). To which Riah simply replies "child in years [...] woman in self-reliance and trial" (bk.3, ch.2, p.439). Riah refers directly to the liminal space in which Jenny exists. My thesis concentrates on how Dickens uses this space to highlight and discuss some of the hardships children like Jenny experienced. As a result, Jenny features in three out of my five chapters. Andrews categorises Jenny as one of many "female figures, barely out childhood, who have prematurely shouldered some degree of parental responsibility" (p.85). Whilst I agree that Jenny assumes a parental role, this is not the only trait she possesses that makes her liminal. Andrews claims that such characters are designed to elicit from the reader a "mixture of pity and indignation" (p.85), a statement which I agree with, but which I also think is vague. My research therefore reveals the extent to which characters like Jenny and the liminal space they exist in are used by Dickens to engage with important socio-political themes. Indeed, Jenny is the not only child character to have their liminality referred to directly in such a way as Riah describes. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) the clergyman says of Little Nell "She is very young" (ch.52, p.394), prompting the schoolmaster to reply with "Old in adversity and trial, sir" (ch.52, p.394). Similarly, in *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) Florence is described as being "A child in innocent simplicity; a woman in her modest self-reliance" (ch.47, p.603). In each case

Dickens purposely draws attention to the liminal space in which these characters exist, thereby indicating to his readers that it is this space that should command our attention.

In his publication *The World of Charles Dickens* (1872), Angus Wilson argues that through his fiction Dickens aims “to wake up, to bring to life the child *in* the parents” (p.15), and states that Dickens’s persona of a “perpetual child with a strange, sensitive, ludicrous apprehension of life co-existed with the parent, active, impatient, competent, witty, compassionate reformer and man of the world” (p.15). Wilson suggests that Dickens’s liminal personality is part of the reason why he advocates in his fiction that “in an increasingly utilitarian, industrial world we needed to cultivate the imagination, the fancy of childhood” (p.14). Wilson draws links between Dickens’s own personality and what he calls Dickens’s “favourite moral” (p.14), namely that we should try and incorporate our childhoods into our adult lives. This sentiment not only featured in Dickens’s fiction but was also recognised in his famous essay from 1853, “Where We Stopped Growing” published in *Household Words*. It is useful to consider what Dickens argues for in this essay, because it highlights how significant he considers the liminal space to be. Dickens sets the tone of the essay by stating “Childhood is usually so beautiful and engaging” (p.361), a reality that is not the case for many of Dickens’s child characters, Jenny Wren being a good example. Calling himself “we, the writer” (p.361) the speaker goes on to explain that he was encouraged “to consider whether there were any things as to which this individual We actually did stop growing when we were a child” (p.361). With childlike delight the writer goes on to recount all the examples where he feels he has not lost his childlike mentality, focusing on the literature that captivated him as a child. He explains:

We have never grown the thousandth part of an inch out of Robinson Crusoe. He fits us just as well, and in exactly the same way, as when we were among the smallest of the small [...] Our growth stopped, when the great Haroun Alraschid spelt his name so [...] When Blue Beard, condescending to come out of book at all, came over mountains, to the music of his own march, [...] Our growth stopped when Don Quixote might have been right after all in going about to succour the distressed (p.361).

The writer speaks of his enjoyment as a child at getting lost in literature which captivated his imagination. Claiming that his “growth stopped” indicates that as he has

passed into adulthood, the stories he loved as a child remain as dear to him as ever they were, he has not outgrown them, instead he loves them with the same intensity as he did when he was “the smallest of the small”. The pleasure of discovering literature is spoken about as if it is a natural part of childhood, but it is at odds with the childhoods experienced by many of Dickens’s child characters. Jo in *Bleak House* for example, has had no exposure to the delights of literature, made clear to the reader when we are told that he “Don’t know that Jo is short for a longer name. Thinks it long enough for *him*. – *He* don’t find no fault with it. Spell it? No. *He* can’t spell it. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school” (ch.11, p.177). Jo’s lack of access to literature is part of what robs him of his childhood. His imagination has never been encouraged to grow; so, he too has not outgrown his imagination, but for the very different reason, that he was never allowed to develop an imagination in the first place.

The speaker in “Where We Stopped Growing” is also keen to ensure that the reader knows it is not only literature that they haven’t outgrown. They reveal that:

There are real people and places that we have never outgrown, though they themselves may have passed away long since: which we always regard with the eye and mind of childhood. We miss a tea-tray shop [...] We never have outgrown the region of Covent Garden. We preserve it as a fine, dissipated, insoluble mystery (p.362)

What becomes clear is that Dickens presents an idealised version of childhood in this essay. By assuming the “We, the writer” persona, Dickens is able to navigate his way through his childhood memories, purposely leaving out the more painful remembrances. As George Orwell states in his 1939 essay on Dickens, “a writer’s literary personality has little or nothing to do with his private character” (p.35). But while the childhood portrayed in “Where We Stopped Growing” is idealised, Dickens still hints at darker themes. The speaker talks of “The White Woman” (p.363) who is “dressed entirely in white [...] she is a conceited old creature [...] and evidently went simpering mad on personal grounds alone – no doubt because a wealthy Quaker wouldn’t marry her. This is her bridal dress” (p.363). The White Woman is an early version of Miss Havisham, and whilst she exists as a wonderfully gothic figure locked forever in the speaker’s childlike imagination, she is also an example of how children can be attuned to the suffering of others. The speaker knows she has gone mad, and

when Dickens comes to write Miss Havisham's story years later, she becomes more than just a gothic figure, she is also a key example of what happens when those suffering from trauma do not receive the help they so desperately need.

Dickens also hints at his childhood association with the prison system in the essay. The speaker states "We have never outgrown the rugged walls of Newgate, or any other prison on the outside. All within, is still the same blank remorse and misery" (p.363). When discussing Dickens's childhood, Nicholas Marsh argues that "Charles Dickens, then, must be regarded as self-educated [...] his schooling was brief and his childhood experiences very chequered" (2015, p.166). The "chequered" experiences that Marsh refers to are of course Dickens's time spent at "Warren's Blacking Warehouse, just south of Covent Garden" (Marsh, p.166) following his father's removal to the Marshalsea Prison. Marsh explains that "just after his twelfth birthday [...] Dickens worked six ten-hour days each week, pasting labels onto pots of blacking, in the factory, and continued this job for about fourteen months" (p.166). Marsh reveals that Dickens was one of the boys who "worked in front of the window and passers-by would stop to watch them. This public display of menial work was a matter of deep shame for Dickens, seemingly at the time, as well as later in his life: he hid this part of childhood from public view" (p.166). Marsh concludes that "Charles Dickens's childhood consisted of a period of happy play, imagination and fantasy, a short period of good schooling, a period of hard child labour and family disgrace, rounded off with a period of bad schooling. This was a potent mixture" (p.166). This "potent mixture" is left out of "Where We Stopped Growing". Dickens's actual childhood experiences of Covent Garden are a far-cry from the "fine, dissipated, insoluble mystery" they are described as being in the essay. What is interesting is that despite his desire to hide his painful childhood experiences from public life, he still chooses to hint at them, albeit obliquely in the essay. It would seem that although Dickens wished to hide these experiences, he did recognise their importance with reference to where he "stopped growing". Dickens, like so many of his child characters, departs from childhood early. As Pete Newbon observes "Dickens well recalled his family's stint in the Marshalsea prison, and the interruption of his childhood, labouring in a factory. He never truly forgave his parents these early traumas" (2019, p.294-5). Indeed, these early traumas caused by financial hardship are part of the reason Newbon disagrees with Angus Wilson's claim that Dickens was a "perpetual child" (p.15), arguing instead that Dickens had what he refers

to as “boy-mannish” (p.294) tendencies. Such examples include Dickens’s decision to initially publish under the pseudonym “Boz” which was “the mangled pronunciation of his baby brother Augustus attempting to say ‘Moses’” (p.294) as well as his “fondness for jokes and pranks” (p.294) including the owning of “fake bookcases, on which the titles on the spines of the books were all puns” (p.294). Nevertheless, Newbon concludes “Dickens was not a boy-man, and he kept such tendencies in check by asserting a more robust masculine independence” (p.294). Dickens’s “masculine independence” can be attributed to the “interruption of his childhood” and the learning at a very young age what it means to be a man who is expected to provide for his family.

“Where We Stopped Growing” concludes with the idea that “If we can only preserve ourselves from growing up, we shall never grow old, and the young may love us to the last” (p.363). The speaker is desirous that as adults we hold onto a childlike imagination, and indeed there are characters in Dickens’s novels who do just that. The childlike mind-sets of Barnaby in *Barnaby Rudge* (1840-41) or Mr Dick in *David Copperfield* (1849-50) are championed above others for their unwavering kindness and goodness of heart; but there are also many characters in his fiction who are affected by the negative experiences of their childhoods. Jenny Wren and Jo the road-sweeper are just two examples of characters who, like Dickens himself, are forced from childhood too early as a result of the hardships they face. It would appear then, that Dickens used his fiction as a way to explore the negative reasons why one might stop growing, in a way that he does not in the essay.

In 1842, in a letter to Jacob Harvey, a New York merchant, Dickens writes: “I always seek in drawing characters, for a mixture of Good and Evil – as the Almighty has created Human character after that fashion”. This acknowledgement is important because it highlights two things. Firstly, it is evidence that the creation of liminal characters was a very deliberate narrative technique applied by Dickens throughout his fiction. He speaks of “Good and Evil”, rather than childhood and adulthood, but this remark is still important because it highlights Dickens’s interest in the middle space between two states. Indeed, in the author’s preface to *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39) Dickens declares “If Nicholas be not always found to be blameless or agreeable, he is not always intended to appear so” (p.7). Such a statement is a clue to the reader to pay attention to Nicholas’s potential liminality before the novel even begins. I have chosen



to concentrate on the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, but his remarks both to Harvey and in the preface to *Nicholas Nickleby* indicate that there are potentially many other liminal spaces which could be explored in Dickens's fiction. The second important element regarding his remark about "drawing characters for a mixture of Good and Evil" is that it raises questions about the appropriateness of referring to him as a caricaturist. As a writer, Dickens is often accused of creating caricatures in his fiction. The reviewer in *The Saturday Review*, a journal described by K. J. M. Smith as "inclined towards liberal Conservative attitudes" (2002, p.11), said of *Our Mutual Friend* in 1865:

Mr. Dickens has always been, and always will be, essentially a caricaturist. He always either discovers people who are grotesque enough in themselves and their surroundings to bear reproducing without caricature, or else he takes plain people and brings them into harmony with the rest of his picture by investing them in caricature [...] He exaggerates, but he adheres to the original outline, and conveys a virtually correct impression (p.612).

More recently, Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne argued that "Mixing the influences of the Gothic novel, of ancient demonology and of modern caricature, Dickens thus peopled his London world with poverty-stricken figures, sinister elderly men and women with grimacing faces" (2015, p.21). Both the reviewer in *The Saturday Review* and Peyrache-Leborgne place the caricature at the centre of Dickens's fiction, but this is at odds with Dickens's claim that he "would always seek in drawing characters, for a mixture of Good and Evil". Other critics have challenged the notion that Dickens created caricatures simply for comic effect or for gothic tendencies, as Bibhash Choudhury argues: "Dickens' world was richly populated with a variety of characters drawn from different social structures and often his moral vision is engaged through the mechanism of caricature. [...] Dickens' novels also show, at the same time, a remarkable awareness of contemporary social issues" (2009, p.5). Choudhury acknowledges the link between caricature and an engagement with social issues in Dickens's fiction and I develop this link, putting liminality at the heart of the discussion. Throughout this thesis I re-evaluate some of Dickens's most famous caricatures, arguing that far from being one-dimensional entities, they are in fact often key examples of characters who exist in the space between childhood and adulthood. Dickens refers

to characters who are “a mixture of Good and Evil”, I demonstrate that this is not the only liminal space Dickens purposely creates in his fiction.

In Chapter One I discuss the image of “The Carer”, arguing that Dickens’s fiction is populated with characters who assume the role of a carer in some capacity or other. I highlight how often it is their role as a carer which contributes to their liminality. I use this opening chapter as an opportunity to re-visit some well-known themes in Dickens’s fiction, such as his critiquing of the workhouse and his dislike for telescopic philanthropy among others. Doing so allows me to elucidate how Dickens’s fiction can be reassessed when placing liminality at the centre of the discussion. My first subheading is “Care as a Form of Business”, in this section I discuss characters who provide, or are provided with care as part of their employment. I analyse Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House*, arguing that her preoccupation with the African Project renders her not only incapable of providing her children with adequate care, it actually reveals her to be in need of care herself. Behaving more like a child who needs constant supervision, Mrs Jellyby is cared for by Esther, who takes on the responsibility of Mrs Jellyby as an extension of her duties at Bleak House. I argue that Dickens uses Mrs Jellyby and the neglect of her children as a platform for critiquing philanthropic endeavours overseas, which ignore the suffering that occurs much closer to home. As a result, Mrs Jellyby’s liminality is depicted negatively in the narrative. In contrast, Esther’s liminality is depicted as a positive character trait, because she willingly assumes the role of a mother towards Mrs Jellyby and her children, thereby providing the Jellyby family with the care they so desperately need. As well as Esther’s engagement with the Jellybys, I also consider her place as housekeeper at Bleak House, arguing that her liminal position somewhere between having a guardian and running the household is a way for Dickens to highlight the power affluent men could hold over women of a lower social standing. The last character I discuss in this section is The Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39). I suggest that comparisons can be made between the care Dodger provides Oliver and the care provided for the poor by the workhouse system. I go on to argue that Dodger assumes a parental role over Oliver initially, thereby signalling his liminal position in the novel, but his readiness to abandon Oliver in times of trouble reminds the reader that Dodger himself is still only a child.

The second subheading in Chapter One is “Care as a Form of Duty”. In this section I turn my attention to characters who assume the role of a carer out of a sense of duty towards family members. In this section I discuss Jenny Wren from *Our Mutual* and Little Nell from *The Old Curiosity Shop*, arguing that the parental roles they assume in their family setting whilst still children themselves highlights the devastating effects addiction can have on a family. I then bring in a discussion of Amy Dorrit from *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), arguing that she presents an opportunity for Dickens to reveal the strain and responsibility placed on the shoulders of children whose families are incarcerated for debt. I end this chapter by looking at Wemmick from *Great Expectations* (1860-61) and the care he provides his aged father. I highlight how Dickens uses Wemmick as a way to discuss the care that is needed by the elderly, thereby encouraging his readers to consider what happens to those in society who do not have family members who can care for them in their old age.

The links between mental health conditions and liminality suggested in Chapter One are developed further in Chapter Two, entitled “Mental Capacities: The Mind of a Child”. In this chapter I turn my attention to characters who suffer from a range of mental health issues or learning difficulties, and as a result, exist in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood. The first section is entitled “Innate Mental Health Issues”. Here I analyse characters who have always had reduced mental capacities in some form or another. I begin by looking at Barnaby from *Barnaby Rudge*, suggesting that Barnaby allows Dickens to celebrate those in society who possess a more childlike outlook of the world, just as he champions it in “Where We Stopped Growing”. Next I move on to consider John Willet, also in *Barnaby Rudge*, arguing that while Barnaby is a celebration of the childlike mind-set, John is an example of those who suffer when society does not recognise that an individual is in need of more support because they have reduced mental faculties. Moving away from *Barnaby Rudge*, I then turn my attention to Mr Dick in *David Copperfield* suggesting that the liminal space he exists in allows Dickens to criticise the insane asylum as an institution, and the cruelty that is experienced inside its walls. The last character I look at in this section is Krook from *Bleak House*. I argue that Krook displays signs of what modern audiences would recognise as dyslexia, and suggest that the lack of empathy he receives from those around him can be interpreted as Dickens reminding his readers to support rather than ostracise those in society who struggle with literacy.

The second subheading in Chapter Two is “Consequential Mental Health Issues”. In this section I look at several characters who appear to have developed a mental health issue as a result of a particular event or illness. I start off by looking at Miss Havisham, arguing that she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, following the traumatic ordeal of being jilted on her wedding day. Next I discuss Miss Flite, arguing that she suffers from obsession, caused by the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, which has resulted in her existing in a liminal space, unable to move on all the time that the case remains unresolved. Next I return to *Barnaby Rudge*, focussing on Hugh’s alcohol addiction, arguing that the death of his mother leads to him replacing parental comfort with alcohol. Lastly, I turn my attention to Maggy in *Little Dorrit*, concentrating on her arrested development as a result of a serious illness. I highlight how this renders her forever a child and therefore in need of support and protection from those around her.

Having discussed how society can ignore or abandon those with a childlike mind-set in Chapter Two, in Chapter Three I turn my attention firstly towards those in society who have a childlike persona forced upon them. Entitled “The Infantilised Woman and the Child-Husband”; the first subheading is “The Child-Wife” which focuses on two of Dickens’s famous child-wives, Clara Copperfield and Dora Spenlow from *David Copperfield*. I argue that Dickens uses these women to draw attention to the unrealistic position middle-class women were expected to maintain by society; being at once childlike, whilst at the same time assuming the adult role of a wife who is expected to run the home. I contrast Dora and Clara with Bella Wilfer from *Our Mutual Friend*, suggesting that unlike Dora and Clara whose liminality is indeterminate, Bella is presented as a woman who is able to leave her childlike persona behind, transitioning into adulthood and as a result is able to thrive as a wife and mother. The second subheading in Chapter Three is the “Child-Husband”. Starting with Harold Skimpole from *Bleak House*, I demonstrate how Dickens presents Skimpole as a character who assumes a childlike personality in order to manipulate those around him, thereby revealing himself as a cunning and artful individual. Next I suggest that Jo Gargery from *Great Expectations*, having first been a victim of abuse as a child, then finds himself in an abusive marriage meaning he doesn’t transition into adulthood. Lastly, I argue that Matthew Bagnet in *Bleak House*, assumes an air of authority and capability, whilst in reality is only too aware of his wife’s superior competence. By presenting an alternative and altogether more appropriate depiction of successful wives in Bella and

Mrs Bagnet, Dickens is arguably encouraging his readers to see the merit in allowing wives to transition into womanhood, rather than remaining in the liminal space occupied by Clara and Dora.

Having discussed in Chapter Three the plight of middle-class women who are expected to maintain a perpetual childlike persona even when married, in Chapter Four I turn my attention to working-class children who are sexualised too early. Entitled the “Sexualised Child”, I highlight how Dickens used his fiction as a platform to engage with the shocking theme of child prostitution. Not all the characters I discuss in this chapter are to be considered as prostitutes themselves, nevertheless, they are still a way for Dickens to reveal the horrifying liminal space many real-life working-class children found themselves in, existing in the space between an innocent child and a sexually experienced adult. The first subheading is “Child-Sex Workers” where I discuss Dickens’s *An Appeal to Fallen Women* (1849) arguing that this pamphlet is evidence that Dickens was acutely aware of the hardships and suffering experienced by the often very young women who found themselves working as prostitutes. Next I examine *A Christmas Carol* (1843), focussing on the character “Want”. I suggest that “Want” can be understood as a representation of the many poor children who found themselves wanted by men for prostitution. I then move on to consider Nancy and Master Bates from *Oliver Twist*, suggesting that both these characters can be interpreted as child-sex workers, thereby highlighting the vulnerability of children who make their home on the streets of London. The second subheading is “The Sex Trade and the Sewing Trade”, where I return to Amy Dorrit and Jenny Wren, this time considering them as opportunities for Dickens to make links between prostitution and the sewing trade.

Many of the liminal spaces I discuss in Chapters One to Four are negative spaces, used by Dickens to highlight injustices and to critique social norms. My last chapter, in contrast, focuses on positive liminal spaces by analysing the similar attitudes towards children found in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) and several of Dickens’s novels. I argue that many of Dickens’s child characters can be considered as liminal because they possess the very “Blakean” trait of having knowledge or an understanding of certain things which is withheld from or unattainable to the adults around them. They are liminal because they become the messenger and/or the deliverer of the moral, whose job it is to guide the adults around them from

ignorance to truth. The first subheading is “Desired Information”, I consider child characters who possess information the adults around them are keen to obtain. I start by looking at Jo in *Bleak House*, arguing that his innate understanding of the Christian teaching that lying is a sin, coupled with his knowledge that Lady Dedlock disguised herself as a servant, mean that the novel’s mysteries revolve around him, something which characters such as Mr Bucket are only too aware of. Next I return to Jenny Wren, arguing that another element of her character which makes her liminal is her ability to discern, through careful observation, what Eugene is trying to say following his attack by Bradley Headstone, succeeding where the adults had failed. The second subheading is, “Teaching a Lesson” which focuses on child characters who have important lessons to teach the adults in the novel. I analyse Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times* highlighting how her message about the importance of allowing children’s imagination to grow and flourish is eventually received by Mr Gradgrind, but not before he has caused significant and lasting damage to his own children. Lastly, I turn my attention again to *A Christmas Carol*, this time concentrating on how the Ghost of Christmas Past and Tiny Tim open Scrooge’s eyes to the importance of mercy and charity. All of the characters discussed in this last chapter offer Dickens an opportunity to remind his readers that we as adults can learn much from the children around us, and that we must not be blind to the lessons they can teach.

In each of my chapters I also bring in, where relevant, a discussion of the illustrations that accompanied the sections of the text under scrutiny. As Jane R. Cohen and Jane R. Rabb state, Dickens “left abundant testimony to his intense involvement in most of the nearly nine hundred original illustrations of his writing [...] he had a close personal as well as professional relationship with many of the eighteen artists who worked with him” (1980, p.3). They explain that:

Dickens explained his creative process to Forster by saying, ‘I don’t invent it – really do not -, *but see it*, and write it down.’ His instructions to his artists indicate that he visualized the scenes he wanted illustrated thoroughly indeed. He usually specified the number of the characters as well as their position, gestures, expressions, dress, and settings [...] Dickens exerted unprecedented authority over everything but the actual execution of the illustrated works. With few exceptions, he selected and entitled (often ironically) the subjects, provided the proofs or

precis, and suggested conceptions, models and details. He usually inspected not only the final drawings, but the preliminary sketches as well, which he rarely returned without ideas for improvement (p.5).

Unlike for example, William Makepeace Thackeray, who “After he became a professional writer, he illustrated his own books” (Ray, p.74), Dickens had to rely on others to bring his illustrations to life. Given how important the illustrations were to Dickens, and the control he exercised over their conception, I consider it necessary to include a discussion of them in this thesis, focussing on how they are often used to represent issues of liminality. Stuart Sillars states:

Given the prominence of illustrated fiction as a major force in publishing since the early nineteenth century, it is surprising that it has not attracted critical attention greater in depth and in quality. Despite the fact that many of the novelists who remain solidly within the established canon of literary studies produced work that was illustrated on its first appearance, mainstream literary study has resolutely refused to accept the visual dimensions of such texts (2005, p.2)

Dickens being a key example of a canonical novelist who “produced work that was illustrated on its first appearance” my aim throughout the thesis is to offer a fresh perspective on why the illustrations were of central importance in Dickens’s fiction, arguing that in multiple instances Dickens used his illustrations as an opportunity to further engage with the topic of liminality in his narratives, providing a visual depiction of the liminal spaces in which certain characters exist. Malcolm Andrews argues that “Dickens was the most intensely visual of Victorian writers and yet his novels, more than any by his contemporaries, have come to seem incomplete without their original illustrations” (2008, p.97). However, Andrews also claims that:

Even the best of Dickens’s artists reduced his art. They distilled it to caricature and tableau; they developed a greater density of allegorical detail as an attempt to match the fullness, richness and vitality of Dickens’s scenes, but still fell short; and they made his human beings into small toy figures (2008, p.124).

I challenge this view in my chapters, arguing that far from reducing his art, the original illustrations that accompanied the texts were instrumental in helping to build a picture of the liminal spaces in which so many of Dickens's characters reside. Instead of simply depicting caricatures of "toy soldiers", the illustrations in many cases stress liminality and support my argument for its significance in Dickens's novels. My purpose throughout this thesis is not to identify every liminal character that Dickens created. Instead I use a cross-section of his novels spanning the length of his career, demonstrating that the creation of liminal characters, particularly those who exist between childhood and adulthood, was a key narrative technique applied by Dickens, as a way to engage with a wide range of social issues which needed to be addressed, but could only exist below the surface of the narrative. My aim is to reveal how all of the characters discussed in this thesis have a common trait. The liminal spaces in which they exist might vary widely, but nevertheless, their liminality allows them to be analysed alongside each other in a way that they have not been before.



## Chapter One: The Carer

“No one is useless in this world [...] who lightens the burden of it for any one else.” (bk.3, ch.ch.9, p.520). This quotation from *Our Mutual Friend* is representative of one of Charles Dickens’s key philosophies, namely that we all have a duty to care for one another. Keith Hooper writes of Dickens that “He was convinced that individuals, and society as a whole, had a Christian responsibility to care for the underprivileged” (2017, p.14). As a result, care-giving is a central theme in all of Dickens’s novels, and the image of the carer appears in many varied forms throughout his fiction. Mary E. Braine and Julia Wray explain that:

It was in in the late 1970s that the term ‘carer’ started to appear in literature; up until this time, carers were for the most part invisible [...] Typically, there was an expectation that carer roles were an integral part of family life as such; being a carer was informal and a private matter, certainly not a public one (2016, p.2).

This definition of the term “carer” can be applied to many of Dickens’s characters who assume the role of a carer in a private familial setting. However, by creating such characters, Dickens makes the role of the carer a public matter, and in doing so, reveals the hardships faced by many who became carers for others before they were adults themselves. For many of the characters who can be considered as a carer in Dickens’s fiction, their role in caring for certain individuals is as complex as their identity, which exists in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood.

I have separated the chapter into two sections, the first part being “Care as a Form of Business”, the second part being “Care as a Form of Duty”. In part one I begin by discussing Mrs Jellyby from *Bleak House* and how her care for her African Project results not only in her neglecting her own children but also results in her needing care herself. I then move on to discuss Esther also from *Bleak House*, arguing that her place at Bleak House, somewhere between a housekeeper who cares for the home and a member of the family who is cared for, is Dickens’s way of discussing the power affluent men could hold over women in service. I also bring in a discussion of Susan Nipper from *Dombey and Son* at this point, arguing that through Susan and Esther,

different though their roles are, Dickens highlights how those in servitude could find themselves emotionally invested in the families they serve, thereby blurring the lines between paid employment and inclusion in a family unit. I end this section of the chapter by discussing The Artful Dodger's care of Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, and how Dodger's apparent care of Oliver can be better understood as a business venture, making his function comparable to that of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and the attitudes of the workhouses, that adhered to the view that the poor must be put to work.

In part two of the chapter, I focus on "Care as a Form of Duty", beginning with a discussion of Jenny Wren from *Our Mutual Friend*. I argue that the care she provides her alcoholic father allows Dickens to engage with the themes of alcoholism and child labour. Moving on from Jenny Wren, I discuss Little Nell from *The Old Curiosity Shop*, focussing on the care she provides her grandfather when he develops a gambling addiction. Next I move on to Amy Dorrit from *Little Dorrit*, and how the care she provides for her family whilst her father is incarcerated in the Marshalsea Prison, highlights the inescapable situations inmates of debtors' prisons found themselves in, when they were unable to pay off their debts. Finally, I move on to discuss Wemmick from *Great Expectations* focussing on how the care he provides for his father allows Dickens to engage with the subject of caring for the elderly, and how society leaves the aged abandoned and often alone. Arlene Bowers Andrews pays tribute to Dickens's contribution to creating the profession of social work:

February 7, 2012, marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens, British author and social reformer. Social workers, who owe much to the social movements influenced by Dickens's powerful pen and voice, surely will be among the people who celebrate his life and work going forward from this occasion. Though he lived before social work emerged as a profession, Dickens deserves to be titled an honorary "social worker" for his tireless promotion of compassionate social norms with regard to the poor and oppressed, advocacy for social policy reform, and development of community programs (2012, p.297).

Throughout this chapter I highlight how it is not just Dickens himself, but many of his characters who embody the identity of a social worker, or more specifically, a carer. Focussing on the liminal qualities of the carers I analyse, I am able to advance and

develop previous discussions about the importance of these characters within the narrative, and how they fit into Dickens's philosophy that we all have a duty to be caring towards others.

### **Care as a Form of Business**

Whilst caring for someone may often be an altruistic exercise, on several occasions throughout Dickens's fiction there is a business element or approach to those who can be considered as carers. A key example of quasi-care is that of Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House* and her devotion to her missionary work for Africa. Mrs Jellyby's care is reserved exclusively for her "African project" which she treats like a full-time job and for which she cares a great deal. She explains when discussing her work "I am happy to say it is advancing. We hope by this time next year to have from a hundred and fifty to two hundred healthy families cultivating coffee and educating the natives of Borrioboola-Gha on the left bank of the Niger" (ch.4, p.53). Esther's description of Mrs Jellyby when she first meets her is that she is "a pretty, very diminutive, plump woman, of from forty to fifty, with handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if - I am quoting Richard again - they could see nothing nearer than Africa!" (ch.4, p.52). Esther's description of Mrs Jellyby as being "from forty to fifty" ensures that the reader knows she is a middle-aged woman, and yet there is something very childlike about her sheer lack of responsibility towards her family, and in particular her children. Indeed, Esther's first encounter with one of Mrs Jellyby's children leads her to state "I made my way to the poor child, who was one of the dirtiest little unfortunates I ever saw, and found him very hot and frightened, and crying loudly" (ch.4, p.51). Mrs Jellyby's lack of care for and interest in her own children is reminiscent of a child who has got bored of their toys, and has taken up an interest in something completely new. Evidence for such a claim can be found when Mrs Jellyby states "you find me, my dears, as usual, very busy; but that you will excuse. The African project at present employs my whole time" (ch.4, p.53). However, it is not just the lack of attention afforded for her dependents, but her apparent lack of awareness at their desperate situation that suggests Mrs Jellyby is childish in her understanding of her surroundings and her culpability in her children's neglect. Esther explains on hearing Peepy fall down the stairs:

Mrs Jellyby, whose face reflected none of the uneasiness which we could not help showing in our own faces, as the dear child's head recorded its passage with a bump on every stair - Richard afterwards said he counted seven, besides one for the landing - received us with perfect equanimity (ch.4, p.52).

Esther's confession that the three young people could not help showing uneasiness in their own faces, compared with Mrs Jellyby's which "reflected none of the uneasiness" suggests that she is completely unaware of the desperate situation. When discussing *Oliver Twist*, Selina Schuster argues "What is extraordinary about *Oliver Twist* is the very sarcastic narrator who oftentimes exposes the doings of single characters with the heavy use of irony and dark humour to ridicule" (2014, p.16). Esther's narrative in *Bleak House*, although more restrained and less sarcastic than that of the narrator in *Oliver Twist*, nevertheless also exposes Mrs Jellyby to ridicule from the reader. She is depicted as a ridiculous and an incompetent mother because she does not appear to have the adult capabilities to detect the dangerous and the harmful environment in which she has placed her children. When discussing mothers in Dickens's fiction, Anne Isba points out that:

George Bernard Shaw observed that all Dickens's boy heroes (and many of his heroines as well) had mothers who failed them by being dead, weak, ineffectual or in one case fake; the 'maternal' care of boys and men of any age was delegated to surrogates, often daughters, sisters or aunts – mainly childless (2011, p.24)

Peepy and his siblings may only be minor characters in *Bleak House*, but they too are failed by their mother and her "ineffectual" approach to caring for them.

It would however be wrong to suggest that Dickens wishes the reader to look kindly or forgivingly on Mrs Jellyby for her seemingly childlike mentality. Readers first meet Mrs Jellyby in Chapter Four, aptly named "Telescopic Philanthropy" a subject which Dickens had been publicly critical about in earlier writing. As Adam Lively explains:

In 1840 Buxton launched the African Civilisation Society at Exeter Hall in London [...] in 1843 the Government sponsored an expensive and disastrous expedition up the river Niger. [...] The ignominious

failure of the 1843 Niger expedition was used thereafter as a cautionary tale, illustrative of the wishy-washy naivety of the sentimental philanthropists who gathered at Exeter Hall. Charles Dickens, reviewing an account of the expedition published in 1848, suggested that 'it might be laid down as a very good general rule of social and political guidance, that whatever Exeter Hall champions is the thing by no means to be done' (2000, p.102).

Mrs Jellyby's own African project so closely resembles that of Exeter Hall's that there can be little doubt that Dickens uses her situation as a social and a political criticism of the devastating effects of philanthropy in far-away lands, rather than on home soil. By causing Mrs Jellyby to appear childlike in her mentality and her understanding towards her responsibilities at home, Dickens is reinforcing the "wishy-washy naivety" of those who fail to see the suffering of those right in front of them. Dickens further accentuates his point about telescopic philanthropy through Esther Summerson. When pressed by Mrs Pardiggle to join her on her "round" Esther states "I thought it best to be as useful as I could, and to render what kind services I could, to those immediately about me; and to try to let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself" (ch.8, p.128). If Mrs Jellyby is to be understood as representing the Exeter Hall mindset, Esther represents the opinion "that whatever Exeter Hall champions is the thing by no means to be done". Esther's good sense and adult approach to applying oneself to social issues at home, despite her youthful age, acts exaggerate further Mrs Jellyby's childish and irresponsible approach to philanthropy.

However, it is not just their opposing mind-sets that distinguish the child from the adult in Mrs Jellyby and Esther. Dickens takes it one step further when Esther looks after not only Mrs Jellyby's children, but Mrs Jellyby herself. In preparation for Caddy's wedding Esther explains:

The next question was, how Mrs Jellyby should be dressed on the occasion [...] The state in which her dresses were, and the extraordinary confusion in which she kept them, added not a little to our difficulty; but at length we devised something not very unlike what a common-place mother might wear on such an occasion (ch.30, p.479).

Esther picks out Mrs Jellyby's outfit like a mother choosing what her child should wear. Her description of Mrs Jellyby resembling "a common-place mother" reinstates the role reversal that is occurring as Esther undertakes the duties of a common-place mother whilst Mrs Jellyby remains distracted and preoccupied like a child. Esther states:

The abstracted manner in which Mrs Jellyby would deliver herself up to having this attire tried on by the dressmaker, and the sweetness with which she would then observe to me how sorry she was that I had not turned my thoughts to Africa, were consistent with the rest of her behaviour (ch.30, p.479).

Esther's reference to Mrs Jellyby's consistently distracted behaviour gives her a sense of authority over Mrs Jellyby, like an adult who has grown weary of a child continually refusing to heed instruction or direction. Dickens ensures that we do not forget the reason for Mrs Jellyby's distraction, by having Esther explain "how sorry she [Mrs Jellyby] was that I had not turned my thoughts to Africa". He puts telescopic philanthropy at the heart of the problem, reminding readers that to do without it and to focus attention where it is sorely needed at home, would be a far better investment of one's time. If Mrs Jellyby cared less for her African project and more for her children, she would not need simply to resemble a "common-place mother", she would actually be one.

Aside from caring for Mrs Jellyby and her family, Esther is also employed by Mr Jarndyce to look after Bleak House and its inhabitants. The role she is to play at Bleak House is not immediately clear however, as the letter she receives whilst at Greenwood states:

Our clt Mr Jarndyce being abt to rece into his house, under an Order of the Ct of Chy, a Ward of the Ct in this cause, for whom he wishes to secure an elgble comp, directs us to inform you that he will be glad of your serces in the afsd capacity (ch. 3, p.40).

All we can gather from the letter Esther receives is that she will not be considered as a ward of Mr Jarndyce like Ada, despite being twenty in age and therefore in theory still eligible to be somebody's ward. As Selina Schuster explains when discussing the

Victorian era, “although the legal age of majority in Victorian Britain at the time was twenty-one, a large number of working-class children went to work as young as seven, in some cases even younger” (2014, p.13). Esther may not be “working-class”, but her letter from Kenge and Carboy stating that she is to become an “elgble comp” is the first indication that she will occupy a liminal position in Bleak House. And sure enough, Mr Jarndyce wastes no time in ensuring that Esther is aware of her position within his home, as shortly after her arrival at Bleak House, in Esther’s words:

Our luggage having arrived, and being all at hand, I was dressed in a few minutes, and engaged in putting my worldly goods away, when a maid (not the one in attendance upon Ada, but another whom I had not seen) brought a basket into my room, with two bunches of keys in it, labelled (ch.6, p.88).

The difference between Ada and Esther becomes increasingly clear as Ada has a maid in attendance and Esther does not. The maid explains to Esther “the large bunch is the housekeeping, and the little bunch is the cellars, miss. Anytime you was pleased to appoint to-morrow morning, I was to show you the presses and things they belong to” (ch.6, p.88-89). It becomes evident that unlike Ada and Richard, Esther’s role at Bleak House is one of service. Esther does not view her position as housekeeper with disdain, she admits that she “stood looking at the basket, quite lost in the magnitude of my trust” (ch.6, p.89). It is perhaps not surprising that Esther is impressed with the responsibility entrusted to her, as to be a housekeeper was not so lowly a position. As Tessa Boase explains:

This was the top job for a working woman in the nineteenth century. You could do no better, nor live more comfortably with greater security, and all under your own steam [...] The Victorian years were the housekeeper’s apogee, a time of supreme confidence and expansion for the English country house (2014, p.iv).

Esther’s ready acceptance of the duties of a housekeeper is evidence that she views herself as of a lower social standing than Richard and Ada, but what is interesting is that Esther finds herself in possession of a guardian (although not in the legal sense like Ada) as well as a family that she is expected to care for from an employment perspective. This is an ambiguous, indeed, a liminal position. She is at once cared for,

and expected to care for others. Esther's employment situation can be considered as fortunate and prosperous for a "working woman", but by placing her alongside Ada, who is not expected to work for her keep, Dickens is making reference to the vastly different realities that young women faced, depending on their social standing. Valentine Cunningham argues that Mr Jarndyce is one of Dickens's characters who "shine especially in the benefit they bring the young" (2008, p.266) and yet, whilst Mr Jarndyce is keen to give Esther status and importance by making her a housekeeper at such a young age, he also does not let her forget her position within the household. When discussing emotional cobwebs Jarndyce states "you will sweep them so neatly out of *our* sky, in the course of your housekeeping, Esther, that one of these days, we shall have to abandon the Growlery, and nail up the door" (ch.8, p.121). Esther goes on to explain that "this was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs Shipton and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden" (ch.8, p.121). Esther's pet names contradict her reality, that of a young woman who has just begun a career in service, and they are indicators of the liminal space in which she exists - somewhere between a young woman not yet of age who has an adult looking after her, and a working woman with responsibilities to fulfil and people to care for. Deborah Epstein Nord argues that Esther's pet names "underscore a maternal yet sexually superannuated identity" (2018, p.100). Esther's position at Bleak House then, is a way for Dickens to highlight how a person's rightful place in society based on their social standing will be a reoccurring theme throughout *Bleak House*.

However, Esther's liminal position at Bleak House, somewhere between being cared for as a minor by a Guardian and taking care of the house as a working woman, becomes more confused when we begin to consider whether she is being paid for her services. A housekeeper in the nineteenth-century, in Tessa Boase's words "was a senior management figure of absolute authority, whose wages might outstrip both cook and butler" (2014, p.iv). But never is it mentioned or even alluded to in *Bleak House* that Esther earns a wage for her work as a housekeeper. When writing about employment in Dickens's fiction Martin A. Danahay states "Dickens as writer and intellectual turns work into play, and chooses women to represent labor that is undertaken voluntarily and without pay" (2016, p.74). Such a sentiment is present in *Dombey and Son* when Susan Nipper is reunited with Florence and exclaims:



“As to wages dear Miss Floy [...] you wouldn’t hint and wrong me so as think of naming them, for I’ve put money by wouldn’t sell my love and duty at a time like this even if the Savings Bank and me were total strangers or the Banks were broke to pieces” (ch.56, p.725).

Susan’s willingness to work for free highlights her deep regard for Florence, and indicates how “love and duty” often became intermingled with paid employment for servants.

Although Esther is touched by Mr Jarndyce’s decision to make her the housekeeper, it is problematic if she fulfils the role without pay. If she is not in paid employment, it makes her position at *Bleak House* even more questionable. Indeed, Esther’s financial situation as a whole is an example of her inhabiting the space in between being a dependant who is cared for financially and a working woman earning a living. She explains that during her time at Greenleaf:

It was understood that I would have to depend, by-and-by on my qualifications as a governess; [...] Although I was treated in every other respect like the rest of the school, this single difference was made in my case from the first. As I began to know more, I taught more (ch.3, p.39).

Even at Greenwood, Esther is caught between being a student and being a teacher, she is not completely one or the other, and whilst we know that Mr Jarndyce funded her education, for she explains, “I sometimes heard Miss Donny and her sister mention how regularly my accounts were paid” (ch.3, p.40), what is unclear is whether she was paid for her teaching duties. We know that she has acquired some money as she explains “I possessed fifteen pounds, odd shillings, which I had saved from my quarterly allowance during several years’ (ch6, p.97). What is not clear however is whether this quarterly allowance came from Greenleaf, or from Mr Jarndyce. Esther’s position somewhere between being financed and working for her keep is a reminder of the financial power affluent men could hold over working women. It appears that Mr Jarndyce keeps Esther ever dependant on his financial generosity towards her, and as a result it renders her grateful for seemingly unpaid employment.

Furthermore, Esther is placed in an awkward position when Jarndyce reveals that he views her not only as a young working woman in his household, but also as a potential spouse. Esther reveals she received a letter from Jarndyce that, “dwelt on my being young, and he past the prime of life; on his having attained a ripe age, while I was a child” (ch.44, p.690-691) There is something distinctly uncomfortable about Jarndyce’s admission that Esther is yet a “child” and although she makes it clear that the letter acknowledges “I owed him nothing” (ch.44, p.691), she is nonetheless placed in a strange liminal space, viewed by Jarndyce as existing somewhere between working for him and being his future sexual partner. In considering his proposal Esther states:

I thought all at once, if my guardian had married some one else, how should I have felt, and what should I have done! That would have been a change indeed. It presented my life in such a new and blank form, that I rang my housekeeping keys and gave them a kiss before I laid them down in their basket again (ch.44, p.692)

Her vulnerability and her liminality are clear to see in this extract, she clings to her keys for comfort the way a child would cling to a doll. Her main anxiety comes from the knowledge that if he chooses to marry another, Esther could easily find herself displaced. Her concern over what her life would look like if she should refuse his offer is the driving force behind her decision to accept the marriage proposal. Her unsuitability to be his wife is reinforced when she says regarding her answer “I have brought it myself, guardian” (ch.44, p.694). By calling him her “guardian” Esther subtly reminds the reader that she still considers him in a quasi-parental sense, not as a suitor. When asking for confirmation Jarndyce asks, “was this the mistress of Bleak House” (ch.44, p.694) thereby suggesting the climb in social status Esther would achieve if she married him. However, despite their engagement, Esther reveals that “it made no difference presently” (ch.44, p.694), indicating that until she was legally his wife, Jarndyce would continue to see her as an employee, rather than his intended. Eventually Jarndyce is able to see the error of his ways, saying to Esther “I know that my mistake has caused you some distress. Forgive your old guardian, in restoring him to his old place in your affections; and blot it out of your memory. Allan, take my dear!” (ch.64, p.966). Whilst he may have Esther’s best interests at heart, there is a sense of ownership in the way he instructs Allan to “take” her. It reminds the reader that Esther has always been at the mercy of Mr Jarndyce’s will, and whilst he chooses to make her happy by

allowing her to marry Allan, he could just as easily have decided to keep her for his own.

Esther's care for Bleak House and its inhabitants does however go beyond a sense of employment duty. Not only is she their housekeeper, but she also becomes a mother figure to Ada in particular. A poignant example of Esther acting in a motherly way towards Ada can be found when she mourns the loss of Ada to Richard after their secret marriage. She explains:

It was only natural that I should not be quite accustomed to the loss of my darling yet. Three or four hours were not a long time, after years. But my mind dwelt so much upon the uncongenial scene in which I had left her, and I pictured it as such an overshadowed stony-hearted one, and I so longed to be near her, and taking some sort of care of her, that I determined to go back in the evening, only to look up at her windows (ch.51, p.789).

She speaks like a mother who having raised a daughter, faces the completely new prospect of not being her primary protector anymore. She talks of losing Ada, as if she had been wrenched from her motherly protection, and speaks in terms of years, as if she has known Ada all her life and had watched her grow. Esther's borderline obsession with "taking some sort of care of her" signifies that she considers her relationship with Ada one in which dependence on Ada's part is central to how they interact, and goes far beyond the relationship of a companion or an employed housekeeper. Such a relationship is seen elsewhere in Dickens's fiction, in particular in the relationship between Florence Dombey and her maid Susan Nipper. Although Susan is of a lower status than Esther in that she is not a housekeeper, she nonetheless harbours a regard for Florence that goes beyond the duties of an employee. Angered by Mr Dombey's continual neglect of Florence, Susan exclaims "I take no merit for my service of twelve year, for I love her – yes, I say to some and all I do!" (ch.44, p.568). Like Esther, Susan is desperate to protect Florence from anyone who would cause her misery or harm, and loves her in a more parental way than ever Mr Dombey did. Introduced to the reader as "a short, brown, womanly girl of fourteen" (ch.3, p.27) Susan is still a child herself when Florence is put under her care, a fact which she acknowledges when she states "I that was her little maid when she was a little child!" (ch.56, p.719). And yet, despite

her youth, Susan is the closest Florence comes to having a mother figure in her life. For Susan, loving Florence is intertwined with her position as a maid, and she makes no attempt to separate the two. This is most evident when Susan justifies her reason for speaking out of turn to Mr Dombey by saying “true and faithful service gives me right to speak I hope, and speak I must and will now, right or wrong” (ch.44, p568). When discussing the relationship between servants and employees in Victorian England, Claudia Nelson explains that:

Even when a clear status difference existed, servants often functioned as surrogate family members for the children of their employers, in some cases because of a similarity in age (about one-third of all female servants were in their teens) in others because child care was among the household duties most likely relegated to an employee. Hence many memoirs recounting Victorian childhoods speak of comradeship between the affluent young and their social inferiors (2007, p.125).

Nelson speaks of “surrogate family members”, but what Dickens makes explicit through the characters of Susan and Esther, is that young female employees often assumed the role of surrogate mothers, despite not yet being adults themselves. Furthermore, Dickens highlights the emotional turmoil such surrogate mothers were subjected to, when they are reminded that despite their attachment to members of the household, they were still employees and were therefore replaceable. On her dismissal for talking out of turn in defence of Florence, Susan says to Florence “My darling there’s a many that may come to serve you and be glad to serve you and who’ll serve you well and true [...] but there can’t be one who’ll serve you so affectionate as me or love you half as dearly, that’s my comfort” (ch.44, p.572). Whilst Susan recognises that her primary role was one of servitude, the emotional attachment she felt towards Florence is made abundantly clear, and when she leaves the narrator explains that “Susan abandoned herself to her grief now” (ch.44, p.575). More reminiscent of a mother who has been wrenched from her child than a servant who has been dismissed, Susan is an example of how servants could be cast aside at a moment’s notice, with little to no regard of how it would affect their emotional wellbeing.

However, being dismissed from the Dombey household is not the only time Susan loses Florence. Having been reunited with her “heart’s own mistress” (ch.44, p.572) later in

the novel, Susan suffers a second separation when Florence marries Walter. When describing the wedding the narrator declares “There was no bridesmaid, unless Susan Nipper was one” (ch.58, p.743). The reference to Susan as a hypothetical bridesmaid reminds the reader firstly that despite assuming a motherly role towards Florence, she is in fact still youthful herself, and secondly it reiterates her also liminal social position, somewhere between being in service, and being part of the family. Despite the happy occasion, Susan is acutely aware that her ties to Florence are lessened by Florence’s move into womanhood, and her decision to accompany Walter overseas. Following the wedding “Miss Nipper cannot speak; she only sobs and chokes (ch.58, p.744) and on Florence’s departure with Walter she “falls into a state of insensibility; and is taken into a baker’s shop to recover” (ch.58, p.745). In contrast, having parted from Susan for the foreseeable future Florence exclaims to Walter on the commencement of their journey “Oh Walter, dearest love, I am so happy!” (ch.58, p.747). Calling him her “dearest love” makes it clear that Walter is more precious to her than Susan was. Whilst a mother can enjoy the prospect of her daughter entering into married life, for Susan, Florence’s marriage means a departure from childhood, and therefore a departure from her. It is a bitter reminder that despite the love Susan harbours for Florence, it was ultimately bound in servitude.

Rather than a physical separation, Ada’s marriage to Richard is distressing for Esther because it places Ada in a position of financial hardship. Caring for Ada the way she does, Esther, like Susan, can be considered as a “womanly girl”, appearing wise beyond her years, and certainly wiser than Ada by being evidently more concerned about “the uncongenial scene” Ada is in, than Ada herself is. Again, Dickens is referring to the social divide between Esther and her companion. Wise in knowledge despite her youth, Esther is representative of people who understand hardship and trials, whilst Ada, having been sheltered from the harsh realities of true poverty, has blindly followed her heart’s desire, placing herself for the first time in real financial danger. Ada is reminiscent of a child who has not given proper thought to her actions and their consequences, and as a result finds herself beyond the reach of the mother figure who once cared for her.

The illustration by Hablot K. Browne from the first edition of *Bleak House*, of Esther inside the marital home of Ada and Richard, entitled “Light”, further accentuates

Esther's position as one who has found herself misplaced, and unsure what her role is now that Ada is a married woman.



FIGURE 1. "LIGHT" FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *BLEAK HOUSE* (1852-53), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *BLEAK HOUSE*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) p.787.

In Dorcas Yarn-Pooi Lam's words:

This illustration uses light and shadow to elucidate the reality of their circumstances. Despite the absence of a light source, the illustration nevertheless portrays the characters in full lighting as though a spotlight is shining upon Esther who stands looking at Ada and Richard, while another is shining upon Ada who is holding Richard in her arms (2012, p.17).

By suggesting that "a spotlight is shining on Esther [...] while another is shining upon Ada", Yarn-Pooi Lam demonstrates not only how light is used to reveal the lovers' secret marriage, but also how Browne's illustration is indicative of a transitional period for these characters in which Esther's motherly role towards Ada is no longer appropriate. Never after her illness and her subsequent scarring do we see Esther's face in any of Browne's illustrations, but in "Light" we see quite plainly the youthful faces of Ada and Richard. However, despite it being the faces of the newly married couple

that are plain to see, Richard's far off look, distracted and disengaged, helps focus our attention on the discourse that is occurring between Ada and Esther. Ada holds Richard in a protective and a loving embrace, whilst Esther assumes a pose of hesitation, reaching towards Ada, whilst at the same time holding herself back in a restrained manner. Ada's youthful face and protective embrace highlight the position she now finds herself in. Although still youthful, she is no longer the child that Esther loved to care for; she has become the carer of a husband who is rapidly losing his way. By not being able to see Esther's facial expression, we rely solely on her body language to try and understand her place in this illustration. Just as Esther's pose indicates uncertainty, the shielding of her face from our view renders us as readers, uncertain of her involvement in the scene. Her slightly outstretched hand is indicative of wanting to aid Ada in her new position as Richard's wife, and Ada's head, tilted towards Esther, suggests that she still yearns for the care and motherly protection Esther had previously provided for her. However, the space between the two young women, compared with the closeness of Ada and Richard, indicates that both Esther and Ada are aware there is a distance between them now that is not recoverable. Despite her love for Ada, Esther has been displaced, and she is forced for the first time to consider Ada as a woman, rather than a child that needs care and protection. Esther's displacement though, ends when Ada becomes a widow. Following Richard's death, Esther declares "They gave my darling into my arms, and through many weeks I never left her" (ch.67, p.985). The loss of Richard sees Ada restored to Esther's protection and motherly care. Despite now being a mother herself, Ada resumes the role of a child that has been welcomed back into its mother's loving embrace. The close of Esther's narrative reiterates her liminal position within the novel; "I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen" (ch.67, p.989). Esther sandwiches the description of Ada between the description of her children and that of her husband, signalling to the reader that to her, Ada is embedded within her family. More than that of a companion or an employee, Esther considers her relationship with Ada to be one of familial love. Meanwhile the reference to her "guardian" reminds us that despite having moved into womanhood and having a family of her own, Esther still considers herself under the protection of Mr Jarndyce. Therefore, the lasting image of Esther is a liminal one, and a reminder that throughout

the novel she has existed in the space somewhere in between being a carer, and being cared for.

Esther's liminality may have allowed Dickens to engage with representations of class, but it's not just in *Bleak House* that this technique is present. The Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist* and his care of Oliver is an interesting example of how the image of a carer is used elsewhere in Dickens's fiction to explore the class system. Dickens wastes no time in ensuring that his readers are aware that Dodger possesses attributes of both a child and a man:

The boy who addressed this inquiry to the young wayfarer, was about his own age: but one of the queerest looking boys that Oliver had ever seen. He was a snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced boy enough; and as dirty a juvenile as one would wish to see; but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man (ch.8, p.66).

Dickens's description of Dodger sets the tone of his character with perfect clarity. By describing Oliver as "the young wayfarer" and then describing Dodger as "about his own age" he is alerting the reader to the fact that Dodger is himself young. He repeatedly makes reference to his age by calling him a "boy" and a "juvenile" so that the reader is in no doubt that he is describing a child. However, the reference to Dodger as having "had about him all the airs and manners of a man" is our first indication that Dodger is yet another character in Dickens's fiction who inhabits the space between a child and an adult. This initial description however is also an indication that Dickens wants to address the poverty and the hardships of the working class through Dodger. By describing him as "queer looking" and "dirty" Dickens paints the woes and trials of the low working classes on the face of a child.

Dodger immediately assumes an authoritative and almost parental role over Oliver and carries out the most basic but essential task of feeding him. He states "you want grub, and you shall have it. I'm at low-water-mark myself - only one bob and a magpie; but *as far as it goes*, I'll fork out and stump. Up with you on your pins. There!" (ch.8, p.67). Dodger providing for Oliver in such a way indicates that he is very much the adult in this situation, with Oliver assuming the role of a dependant who needs caring for. However, it is Dodger's offer of accommodation for Oliver that signifies to the reader



that his care of Oliver has a business element to it and reminds us that Dodger is not a child in the traditional sense. He states “I’ve got to be in London to-night; and I know a ‘spectable old genelman as lives there, wot’ll give you lodgings for nothink, and never ask for the change - that is, if any genelman he knows interduces you. And don’t he know me?” (ch.8, p.68). He speaks like a man of business, “I’ve got to be in London to-night”, a sentence suggestive of his presence being required somewhere important. Indeed, he makes a convincing salesman as he sells the idea of Fagin’s lodgings by describing Fagin as a “‘spectable old genelman [...] ‘wot’ll give you lodgings for nothink, and never ask for the change”. Painting a philanthropic picture of Fagin, Dodger sells the plus points, whilst purposely avoiding the subject of pickpocketing and crime, in an attempt to lure Oliver in.

Dodger is not alone however: all of the boys that lodge with Fagin can be understood to have “all the airs and manners of a man”. On entering Fagin’s den, the narrator describes how Oliver notices that “seated round the table were four or five boys, none older than the Dodger, smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits with the air of middle-aged men” (ch.8, p.71). The original illustration of the boys seated round the table, entitled “Oliver Introduced to the Respectable Old Gentleman” by George Cruikshank accentuates the point that these children really do inhabit both a childlike and an adult identity.



FIGURE 2. "OLIVER INTRODUCED TO THE RESPECTABLE OLD GENTLEMAN". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *OLIVER TWIST* (1837-39), ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE CRUIKSHANK. RPT. IN *OLIVER TWIST* (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) p.65.

There is a vast difference between the boys sitting at the table and Oliver. We cannot see Oliver's expression fully, but his stance is one of timidity, and he keeps his eyes locked on Fagin, as if he is searching for reassurance in the old man's face. It is perhaps not surprising that Oliver focuses his attention on Fagin, as Fagin is the only person who is smiling at Oliver. The boys seated round the table look suitably unimpressed with Oliver, looking at him intently, but in a most unwelcoming way. They have a relaxed and a confident air about them, leaning on the table and exhaling their pipes, and it is clear that they do not regard Oliver as a threat of any kind, but they do not look too impressed at the prospect of welcoming him into their gang either. It is this point however, which is most interesting. Whilst the boys do indeed appear to have "the air of middle-aged men" (ch.8, p.71), there is something equally childlike about their apparent unwillingness to welcome Oliver in. Their behaviour is reminiscent of

children that are unwilling to let a new child into their group, and Fagin, all smiles therefore appears the adult in the scene and lives up to his name of “spectable old genelman” (ch.8, p.66).

Dodger occupies the ground somewhere between Fagin and the other boys in this illustration in terms of his attitude towards Oliver, and this is not by accident. His outstretched hand indicates that he intends Oliver to join Fagin’s gang, but he stands apart from Oliver, instead choosing to be close to the boys sitting round the table, and perhaps this is because Dodger does not want to alienate himself too much from his friends. He has the business attributes of a man, seeing the potential in recruiting Oliver as another pickpocket, but the child in him also yearns for the acceptance of his friends and he is unwilling to jeopardise this by being as openly friendly as Fagin is when his friends appear less impressed at the prospect of welcoming Oliver in. However, it would seem that Dickens does intend us to consider Dodger more adult than the rest of Fagin’s boys. Evidence for this can be found in Charley Bates’s reaction to Oliver’s reply that he would like to be taught how to make pocket-handkerchiefs. Oliver says “very much, indeed, if you’ll teach me sir” (ch.9, p.77), to which the narrator explains Charley “saw something so exquisitely ludicrous in this reply that he burst into another laugh” (ch. 9, p.77) and “‘he is so jolly green’ said Charley when he recovered” (ch. 9, p.77). Although Charley is laughing at Oliver’s naivety, there is at the same time, something teasing and childish about the way he pokes fun at Oliver, reminiscent of a child making fun of a peer who doesn’t understand the rules of a game. Dodger’s reaction to Charley’s taunting remarks only persuades the reader further that Charley has more of a childlike mind-set than him, as the narrator goes on to explain that “the Dodger said nothing, but he smoothed Oliver’s hair over his eyes, and said he’d know better, by-and-by” (ch.9, p.77). Dodger appears protective over Oliver, and he seems to harbour a sense of regret that Oliver will soon understand the rules of the game, or rather the nature of his new employment all too well. He appears like an adult who does not wish their child to grow up too fast.

Dodger’s understanding of the position Oliver is in, is a strong indication to the reader that Dickens is making a reference to the choices faced by the poor in Victorian society. It has often been observed that *Oliver Twist* is Dickens’s response to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. In Sirinya Pakditawan’s words:

In the story of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens uses past experiences from his childhood and targets the Poor Law of 1834 which renewed the importance of the workhouse as a means of relief of the poor [...] The Poor Law of 1834 wanted to make the workhouse more of a deterrent to idleness as it was believed that people were poor because they were lazy and needed to be punished. So people in workhouses were deliberately treated harshly and the workhouses were similar to prisons [...] Nevertheless, in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens goes far beyond the mere experiences of the workhouse, extending his depiction of poverty to London's squalid streets, dark alehouses, and thieves' den's. Thus, he gives voice to those who had no voice, establishing a link between politics and literature with his social commentary (2012, p.4.).

Pakditawan suggests that Dickens's depiction of London's street poor is an extension of his critique of the workhouses. But, rather than an extension, Dodger can be considered as representing a direct parallel to the Poor Law. His taking Oliver off the street and into the employment of Fagin was for business purposes, he believed that Oliver could work for Fagin. Although it may have appeared as a caring thing to do, offering Oliver help when he needed it, the realities of life under Fagin's protection are far from appealing. It is similar to the way in which the Poor Law may have appeared to offer a solution to the poor, taking them off the street and placing them in employment within workhouses. The reality, as Pakditawan explains, was not that the poor were cared for or helped, but that they "were deliberately treated harshly and the workhouses were similar to prisons". Indeed, so appalling was the idea of the workhouse to many, that they would do anything within their power to avoid going there. In *Our Mutual Friend*, we see Betty Higden tramp herself to death, rather than resort to the workhouse; "old Betty Higden fared upon her pilgrimage as many ruggedly honest creatures, women and men, fare on their toiling way along the roads of life. Patiently to earn a spare bare living, and quietly to die, untouched by workhouse hands – this was her highest sublunary hope" (book 3, ch.8, p.503). It is perhaps not surprising that Bessy wanted to remain "untouched by workhouse hands", for as Gillian Bennett explains:

The Anatomy Act of 1832 allowed anatomists to claim the bodies of paupers who had died in workhouses or

hospitals if those corpses were unclaimed for burial by their friends or relatives – effectively, if they were too poor to pay for a funeral. Needless to say, this was an enormously unpopular piece of legislation. Dissection had previously been a punishment for serious crime [...] at a stroke, with the passing of the 1832 Anatomy Act, this dreaded fate became a punishment for poverty (2009, p.225).

It was not simply because the idea of being dissected was distasteful that people were averse to it; there were serious religious reasons why being dissected was something to be feared in Victorian Britain. Michelle Hamilton observes that “some Christians, those, for example, who disagreed with cremation in the nineteenth century, believed that the body needed to be preserved in order to be resurrected. For these individuals, the collection and distribution of human remains would prevent an afterlife in heaven” (2010, p.85). Essentially then, not only was existence inside the workhouse hellish, it was believed that it could actually prevent one’s entry to heaven after death. On the surface entering a workhouse might provide one with employment, food and shelter, just as Fagin’s gang provides Oliver with the same, but the reality of the workhouse, as with Fagin’s gang, is far from savoury.

Indeed, Dodger’s comparison with the Poor Law can be extended further when we consider his treatment of Oliver following Oliver’s unsuccessful attempt at pickpocketing. Dickens writes:

The Dodger and Master Bates, unwilling to attract public attention by running down the open street, had merely retired into the very first doorway round the corner. They no sooner heard the cry, and saw Oliver running, than, guessing exactly how the matter stood, they issued forth with great promptitude; and, shouting ‘Stop thief!’ too, joined in the pursuit like good citizens (ch.10, p.83).

Having previously appeared caring towards Oliver, Dodger now abandons any pretence of protecting him and acts only in his own interests with no concern for Oliver’s welfare. Dickens is painting Dodger and Charley as hypocrites, who “joined in the pursuit like good citizens” when really, they are only concerned with their own survival. Indeed, Dickens actually acknowledges this fact in the following satirical sentence. He explains that when Oliver was caught pickpocketing:

They were actuated by a very laudable and becoming regard for themselves; and forasmuch as the freedom of the subject and the liberty of the individual are among the first and proudest boasts of a true-hearted Englishman, so, I need hardly beg the reader to observe, that this action should tend to exalt them in the opinion of all public and patriotic men (ch.12, p. 102).

According to Samuel Mencher, “the Poor Law Reform Act of 1834 provided the narrowest base for social responsibility” (1968, 213) and this is what Dickens is alluding to here through the actions of Dodger. Having appeared to be acting as a form of help for Oliver, Dodger goes on to harbour the very “narrowest base” of responsibility towards him. Pakditawan explains that the Poor Law Act of 1834 “was successful from one point of view, for within three years the cost of poor relief was reduced by more than one-third” (2012, p.4). Reducing the cost of relief for the poor, without actually providing any relief for them, can be understood as society’s way of relinquishing “social responsibility” for those in need, just as Dodger does with Oliver.

Dickens’s description of Dodger’s and Charley’s behaviour is however also interesting for another reason. He satirically describes them as having “the first and proudest boasts of a true-hearted Englishman” and suggests this should “exalt them in the opinion of all public and patriotic men”. By describing them as “Englishmen” and referring to “public and patriotic men” Dickens speaks about Charley and Dodger as if they were adults; there is not one reference to them being children, no older than Oliver himself. Dickens presents them as adults, who were right to relinquish any association with Oliver, in the “laudable and becoming regard for themselves”. But when we remember that they are in fact just children, who are imitating the adults around them (for let us not forget they “joined in the pursuit like good citizens” (ch.10, p.83) they did not begin the chase) it becomes clear that Dickens intends us to look more forgivingly on their behaviour, and more damningly on the adult world that influences them and that is so ready to relinquish any responsibility towards those in need.

## Care as a Form of Duty

Having discussed how Dickens presents us with characters who engage with care as a form of employment or from a business perspective, I will now turn to a discussion of characters who approach being a carer as a form of duty. Whilst there are multiple characters throughout Dickens's novels that fit this description and who exist in liminal spaces, perhaps the most poignant example is that of Jenny Wren from *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5). Miss Abbey asks of Riah concerning Jenny, "child or woman?" (book 3, ch.2, p.439), to which the reply is "child in years" was the answer; "woman in self-reliance and trial" (Book 3, ch.2, p.439). Riah's description of "self-reliance and trial" hits at the heart of how Jenny Wren is presented throughout *Our Mutual Friend*, and the care she is required to provide her father with is without a doubt the reason for her "self-reliance and trial". Jenny and her father engage in a complete role reversal, with her regularly referring to him as her "troublesome bad child" (book 2, ch.2, p.240), and referring to herself as "the person of the house" (book 2, ch.1, p.222). Dickens actually refers to the role reversal directly when he calls it a "dire reversal of the places of parent and child" (book 2, ch.2, p.240). Jenny does undoubtedly assume an authority over her father, evidence for which can be found in the way she orders him about: "turn all your pockets inside out, and leave 'em so!" cried the person of the house. He obeyed. And if anything could have made him look more abject or more dismally ridiculous than before, it would have been his so displaying himself" ( book 2, ch.2, p.240) The phrase "dismally ridiculous" can be understood to refer to more than just the perception of a father taking instruction from his own child. It refers in a wider sense to the outrageous and cruel position he has placed Jenny in, turning her into his carer when she is but a child herself. Marcus Stone's illustration of Jenny and her father titled, "The Person of the House and the Bad Child" (Book 2, Ch.2), does much to reinforce the level to which a reversal of roles has occurred between Jenny and her father.





FIGURE 3. "THE PERSON OF THE HOUSE AND THE BAD CHILD". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND* (1864-65), ILLUSTRATION BY MARCUS STONE, RPT. IN *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*, (LONDON: VINTAGE BOOKS, 2011) p.233.

Considering that Jenny is supposedly "twelve, or at the most thirteen" (book 2, ch.1, p.224), she looks much younger than this in Stone's illustration. Dwarfed not only by the size of her father, but also by the chair she sits on, Jenny is reminiscent of a child no older than nine or ten, and could even be described as resembling a doll. Her little cane is visible hanging up next to where her father is sitting, and this further encourages us to understand that although she is "the person of the house", Jenny is physically very fragile and small. However, despite her physical stature, Jenny's body language, in



particular her pointing finger is indicative of authority, and her inclined head towards her father suggests that she is striving to make him understand what she is saying. Her father's posture, hunched over and shrinking away from his daughter indicates that he is uncomfortable and ashamed, and an expression of sorrow and woe is clearly visible on his face. By representing Jenny as such a little child, Stone is reinforcing the point that Jenny is misplaced in this scene, assuming a parental role much too early on in her young life. If it was not for the very evident pain on Mr Dolls's face, this illustration of Jenny and her father could easily be mistaken for a child playing games with her parent, pretending to tell him off. When discussing Marcus Stone, and his illustrations in *Our Mutual Friend*, Cohen and Rabb argue that "for many readers, perhaps, the novelist's more sustained interest in psychological characterization in *Our Mutual Friend*, together with the continued visuality of his prose, rendered Stone's illustrations even more superfluous than Browne's recent ones" (1980, p.203). Whilst the novel undoubtedly has a "sustained interest in psychological characterization", it is fair to suggest that part of the formation of the "characterization" comes from the illustrations' ability to enhance further the characters' identities. We see this clearly in the deliberate decision by Stone to depict Jenny as extremely small and doll-like, arguably even more so than the text indicates.

Studying Jenny's situation more closely it becomes apparent that despite being her dependant, Jenny's father still controls her situation, and by default, controls her. He is not just a burden to her, he also holds her captive. We see this played out clearly when her father stumbles home drunk, causing Jenny to exclaim:

"I know your tricks and your manners" cried Miss Wren. "I know where you've been to!" (which indeed it did not require discernment to discover). "Oh you disgraceful old chap!" The very breathing of the figure was contemptible [...] "Slave, slave, slave, from morning to night," pursued the person of the house, "and all for this! What do you mean by it?" [...] "I wish you had been taken up, and locked up" (book 2, ch.2, p.241).

Jenny's repeated use of "slave" and her desire to see her father locked up indicates that she is very aware she is trapped in her situation, and that it is her father's doing. Despite their role reversal being very evident, Dickens manages to blur the line further between

who is in control. Jenny is at once a parental and an adult figure, caring for a dependant, but she is also a child trapped and controlled by the actions of her parent. Likewise, her father is at once submissive and childlike, but also in control of his daughter's situation. Neither character inhabits completely one identity or the other. By having Jenny and her father locked in a battle of control, Dickens is able to expose the complex and deeply troubling reality of the underlying themes that these two characters represent, namely that of alcoholism and child labour.

It would perhaps be expected that given the negative portrayal of, as Riah bluntly refers to him, Jenny's "drunken father" (book 4, ch.9, p.731), Dickens uses Mr Dolls as a way to critique and even to shame alcoholics, but this is not necessarily his intention. Paul Schlicke argues:

Dickens himself wrote a review, in the 8 July 1848 *Examiner* of Cruikshank's sequel, *The Drunkard's Children*, praising both its execution and its human sympathy [...] But Dickens disagreed with Cruikshank's moral. "Drunkenness does not begin [in the gin shop]," he maintained in his review. "It has a teeming and a reproachful history anterior to that stage." For Dickens, excessive drinking, begins in sorrow, or poverty, or ignorance, and the government was as much at fault as individuals, especially for its failure to provide the working classes with education that would lift them out of poverty (2011, p.204).

Although his review of *The Drunkard's Children* was written sixteen years prior to *Our Mutual Friend*, there can still be found, in the portrayal of Mr Dolls, a sense of the sorrow and the inability to escape the poverty which Dickens holds to be responsible for alcohol addiction. For example, we know that Jenny's father works, because Jenny has him count out his wages in front of her:

"Spent a fortune out of your wages, I'll be bound!" said the person of the house. "Put it here! All you've got left! Every farthing!" [...] "Is this all?" demanded the person of the house, when a confused heap of pence and shillings lay on the table [...] "here's but seven and eightpence halfpenny!" exclaimed Miss Wren, after reducing the heap to order. "Oh you prodigal old son! Now you shall be starved!" (book 2, ch.2, p.242).

We know that Jenny's wages are low, for she explains to Bradley Headstone that she is "poorly paid. And I'm often so pressed for time! I had a doll married, last week, and was obliged to work all night" (book 2, ch. 1, p.223). This, coupled with her horror at how little money is left and her reference to her father starving, help Dickens to build up a picture of a family trapped in poverty with no means of escape. Although the actions of Mr Dolls are undoubtedly irresponsible and selfish, it could be that he harbours a sense of shame and mortification at his situation, never more pertinent than when his daughter scolds him; "abject tears stood in its eyes, and stained the blotched red cheeks. The swollen lead-coloured under-lip trembled with a shameful whine" (book 2, ch.2, p.241). Whilst Mr Dolls being reduced to tears is reminiscent of a child being told off and therefore plays into the role reversal that Dickens refers to, there is also a suggestion of a more adult pain being experienced. It is arguable that Mr Dolls' tears are the result of his sorrow and shame, and when considered from this respect they suggest that he is a father shamed by his situation and yet unable to escape it, making drink his only refuge. Jenny's hard words towards her father are completely understandable, but perhaps her inability to comprehend why he turns to drink, is the result of her being "twelve, or at the most thirteen" (book 2, ch.1, p.224) and therefore not having the capability to understand why an adult, in particular a parent would purposely make her life so hard. Dickens reduces Mr Dolls to somewhere between an adult and a child, aware of his desperate situation, but lacking in the strength required of a man to endure it. And he distorts Jenny to somewhere between a child and a mother, required to care for a parent, but unable to fully comprehend the self-destructive and selfish behaviour of one under her control. The result being, Dickens is able to expose the devastating realities of life for the working-classes who are unable to escape poverty, and to indicate the reason that so many of them are forced into child labour in order to survive. If Jenny is unable to fully comprehend why her father behaves the way he does, one thing she is able to fully understand is the difference between her and other children. When speaking of Bradley Headstone, the narrator explains, "perhaps it scarcely required the teacher-habit to perceive that the dolls' dressmaker was inclined to be bitter on the difference between herself and other children" (book 2, ch.1, p.224). We know that Jenny is vocal about her dislike for children because she says, "don't talk of children, I can't bear children" (book 2, ch.1, p.224) and it is likely that when Dickens writes of her bitterness "on the difference between herself and other children" he is

referring to her awareness that she does not possess the “education that would lift [her] out of poverty” (Schlicke, 2011, p.204). Just as Jenny’s father is ashamed and resentful of his situation, Jenny is equally as ashamed and as resentful of hers. Through these two characters, Dickens presents the never-ending circle of sorrow, poverty, and ignorance that keep Jenny and her father low.

Alcoholism is not, however, the only addiction referred to in Dickens’s fiction. *The Old Curiosity Shop*, published twenty-four years prior to *Our Mutual Friend*, portrays an equally destructive addiction – that of gambling. Again, Dickens is able to engage with this theme through the character of a child carer. Similar in many ways to Jenny Wren, Little Nell is described as “nearly fourteen” (ch.7, p.63) and a “Fine girl of her age, but small” (ch.7, p.63). Again, Dickens is emphasising the magnitude of responsibility heaped on her young shoulders, by making her physical stature small in comparison. The care she provides her gambling-addicted grandfather has many similarities to the care Jenny Wren provides her alcoholic father, and when the clergyman says of Little Nell “She is very young” (ch.52, p.394), the schoolmaster replies “Old in adversity and trial sir” (ch.52, p.394). Like Jenny, the “adversity and trial” bestowed on Little Nell is caused in no small part by the parental figure she cares for. Like Mr Dolls, Nell’s grandfather is rendered childlike under the weight of his addiction and is described as “very patient and willing, happy to execute any little task, and glad to be of use; but he was in the same listless state, with no prospect of improvement – a mere child – a poor, thoughtless, vacant creature – a harmless fond old man” (ch.29, p.224). At once a child and an old man, Nell’s grandfather displays the same submissiveness as Mr Dolls, but like Mr Dolls, he is also at the mercy of an addiction he can’t control. On stumbling across a gambling party the narrator explains:

The child saw with astonishment and alarm that his whole appearance had undergone a complete change. His face was flushed and eager, his eyes were strained, his teeth set, his breath came short and thick, and the hand he laid upon her arm trembled so violently that she shook beneath its grasp (ch.29, p.226).

The physical change the old man undergoes at the prospect of gambling demonstrates not only the extent to which his addiction affects him, but also how helpless Little Nell is in the face of it. Like Jenny, Nell is not able to assert any control over the addiction

which blights her life, and therefore despite assuming a parental role, Nell is ultimately controlled and restricted by her grandfather's actions. As with Jenny, Nell is responsible for looking after the money she and her grandfather possess, which is made evident when her grandfather demands that she hands it over to him "What money have we, Nell? Come, I saw you with money yesterday. What money have we? Give it to me." (ch.29, p.226). Nell's grandfather, like Mr Dolls, has no regard for how little money there is, he is consumed only by the idea of gambling, and there is nothing Nell can do to prevent him from taking it. Nell desperately pleads "No, no, let me keep it, grandfather [...] Do not take it [...] Pray do not take it, dear. For both our sakes let me keep it, or let me throw it away - better let me throw it away, than you take it now. Let us go; do let us go" (ch.29, p.227), but it is all to no avail. Despite being the one responsible for the money, Nell is completely at the mercy of her grandfather's will. The narrator explains that "She took from her pocket a little purse. He seized it with the same rapid impatience which had characterised his speech, and hastily made his way to the other side of the screen. It was impossible to restrain him, and the trembling child followed close behind" (ch.29, p.227). The fear Nell exhibits at the prospect of her grandfather gambling reminds the reader that she is misplaced as his carer, and that it is she who should be being cared for instead of him.

The original illustration by Hablot K. Brown of Nell succumbing to her grandfather's wishes further accentuates the desperate nature of their situation.



FIGURE 4. "A GAME OF CARDS". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP* (1840-41), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2000) P.230.

With his back towards Nell, the old man is engrossed in the game, and completely ignores her as she watches nervously from the corner of the room. The chair he sits on creates a physical barrier between himself and his granddaughter, indicating that his addiction to gambling has driven a wedge between them. The narrator explains that as the game wore on "the anxious child was quite forgotten" (ch.29, p.229), and Browne captures Nell's anxiety in his illustration. The divide between Nell and her grandfather is further accentuated by her body language. Turned away from the old man, Nell is depicted as wishing to get away from her current situation, whilst holding her head in her hand indicates how weighed down she feels as her grandfather's carer. However, she keeps her eyes locked on the old man, as if despite her desire to get away, she is powerless to do so, and therefore looks on helplessly at the adult who drives her further into poverty, instead of protecting her from it. Schlicke explains that "Dickens never disguised his distaste for and disapproval of gambling" (2011, p.253) but goes on to nuance his point by stating that in the case of Grandfather Trent the gambling was: "for a good cause, the future of Little Nell" (p.253). Schlicke is right to suggest that the old man believes gambling is the answer to their financial problems because it is made

explicit in the text when he berates Nell for telling him to forget about the cards. He exclaims “How are we ever to grow rich if I forget them?” (ch.30, p.232). Far from resembling a responsible adult, he appears more like a child who believes in a fairy story with a happy ending. Dickens’s distaste for gambling is clear to see, through the old man’s belief that they will be “rich”. Completely disconnected from the reality that his gambling is making him poorer not richer, Dickens highlights the damaging effects of the addiction not only on Grandfather Trent’s state of mind, but also on the effect it has on Nell. When discussing gambling as a theme in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Sarah Winter explains that “In its treatment of the harm caused by gambling, *Shop* again exhibits its analytic grasp of mentalities associated with capitalist modernity, particularly the experience of new forms of temporality associated with risk” (2018, p.142). Grandfather Trent can be understood as possessing the “capitalist modernity” mentality which Winter refers to, as he is consumed by the idea of increasing his capital, and is therefore unable to see the permanent damage he is causing. Rather than improving Nell’s future through gambling, he actually takes it away in its entirety. For towards the end of the novel, Nell dies. “She was dead, and past all help, or need of it” (ch.71, p.540). Unlike Jenny Wren, Nell does not survive the trials of her young life. Having been without care and help whilst she was living, there is a cynical and a bitter undertone to the narrator’s claim that she is now “past all help or need of it”. Jenny survives her trials, because her father dies, relieving her of her responsibilities towards him. Nell in contrast, is driven to an early grave by the burden of caring for her grandfather. Through Jenny and Nell, Dickens is able to show the devastating effects of addiction, not only on those afflicted by the condition, but also on those who care for them.

Jenny and Nell are responsible for the care of one family member, but Dickens himself had personal experience of being responsible for the whole family unit, whilst still being a child himself. In Jon Mee’s words:

When the Dickens family moved back to London in 1822, the financial difficulties that would continue to make problems for them were catching up with John Dickens [Charles Dickens’s father]. The most immediate result for the young Charles was being sent away from home to work at Warren’s blacking factory [...] John Dickens, like Wilkins Micawber in *David Copperfield*

(1849-50) and William Dorrit in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), was locked up in the Marshalsea Prison, and took his family with him, but not Charles, who lodged with family friends in Camden Town (2010, p.2).

Like Jenny Wren, Dickens experienced being brought low by his father's actions, and at the same age as Jenny, found himself providing for his father, rather than being provided for. Mee also points out that John Dickens's situation is comparable to William Dorrit in *Little Dorrit* as they both spent time in the Marshalsea Debtor's Prison. But it is not just William Dorrit who suggests a comparison to Dickens's childhood. Amy Dorrit also bears a resemblance to Dickens's past, because she also has her family to support and care for whilst her father is in prison. As Amy's uncle Frederick declares, "we should all have been quite lost without Amy. She is a very good girl, Amy. She does her duty" (book 1, ch.9, p.108). Frederick's description of Amy as a "very good girl" who "does her duty" makes Amy sound like an obedient child who knows her place, and the chapter in which Frederick states this is aptly titled "Little Mother". Amy is a clear example of a character who can be considered as existing in a liminal space, and yet, we learn early on in the novel that Amy is:

A woman, probably of not less than two and twenty, she might have been passed in the street for little more than half that age. Not that her face was very youthful, for in truth there was more consideration and care in it than naturally belonged to her utmost years [...] she had all the manner and much of the appearance of a subdued child (book 1, ch.5, p.67-8).

The fact that Amy is "probably of not less than two and twenty" indicates that she would be considered as an adult from a legal perspective, and considering "that her face was not very youthful", Dickens appears to be keen for us to recognise that Amy is to all intents and purposes, an adult. It is clear then, that Dickens is not going to use Amy as a way to discuss child labour, the way he does with Jenny Wren, but there is a good reason that he wants us to consider Amy as "a subdued child" with a face evident of "more consideration and care in it than naturally belonged to her utmost years". Amy is representative of the debtors' prison system and the damaging effect it had not just on those convicted of debt, but on their families as well. As Monika Fludernik argues, "Dickens kept returning to debtors' prison and other (sometimes metaphorical) carceral



settings throughout his career [...] clearly, Dickens had a personal reason for this obsession with carcerality, but the prison also haunted him as an aspect of his social concerns” (2008, p.71). “Haunted” is an apt term to describe Dickens’s “social concerns” regarding the debtors’ prison as an institution, for as Margot C. Finn suggest, “Tales recounted by Dickens’s mother, who resided with her husband in the Marshalsea, provided the young novelist with a fund of information on debtors and their plight” (2003. p.55). What becomes clear in *Little Dorrit*, is that as well as being haunted by painful memories, Dickens is also haunted by the flawed concept of the debtors’ prison.

Through Amy Dorrit and her father, Dickens engages with the “social concerns” he harboured about the debtors’ prison. Amy can be understood as a character who is dwarfed and rendered childlike by those around her, despite being expected to provide and care for her family like an adult would be. Just as Amy’s family keep her somewhere between their little child and their main adult provider, we see the inmates of debtors’ prisons incarcerated and therefore dependents of the prison, yet expected to pay their way out of their debts like working adults. Amy’s family have a hold on her like “a subdued child”, just as the debtors’ prison had a hold on its inmates, like dependent children who weren’t allowed to leave. As Gerry Bailey and Felicia Law make clear when writing about debtors’ prisons in nineteenth-century Britain, “the debtor couldn’t get out of prison until the debts were paid, but equally the debts couldn’t be paid until he got out of prison. Luckily for many, someone outside the prison paid the debts. But if not, the inmates could be stuck there for life” (2006, p.31). This is the situation that Amy’s father finds himself in, for as the turnkey states when talking about him, “*he’ll never get out. Unless his creditors take him by the shoulders and shove him out*” (book 1, ch.6, p.75). Amy’s father is bound for a life controlled and restricted by the Marshalsea prison, just as a child is controlled and restricted by a parent. But it is not just William’s situation that renders him childlike, for in the same chapter we see the turnkey address him as such: “Don’t waste your time in clasping your hands and biting your fingers,” responded the practical turnkey, taking him by the elbow, “but come along with me.” The turnkey conducted him - trembling from head to foot, and constantly crying under his breath” (book 1, ch.6, p.75). William is presented as a nervous child who is being scolded and reprimanded for his behaviour, indicating that it is not just Amy who appears to inhabit both identities, her father does as well.

But it is important to recognise the difference between Amy and her father, despite them both existing in liminal spaces. Their roles are reversed, with Amy being the carer, whilst her father lacks the adult capacity to care properly for his family. It is a similar situation to that of Jenny Wren and her father, and once again Dickens has his reasons for portraying the father figure the way he does. Arthur Clennam on meeting Amy's father and her family notices a sense of dependency and expectation on their part towards Amy:

It was not that they stinted her praises, or were insensible to what she did for them; but that they were lazily habituated to her, as they were to all the rest of their condition. He fancied that although they had before them, every day, the means of comparison between her and one another and themselves, they regarded her as being in her necessary place; as holding a position towards them all which belonged to her, like her name or her age. He fancied that they viewed her, not as having risen away from the prison atmosphere, but as appertaining to it; as being vaguely what they had a right to expect, and nothing more (book 1, ch. 9, p.109).

Amy's family being "lazily habituated to her as they were to all the rest of their condition" signifies what Dickens wants to address, namely the state of dependency debtors found themselves in. As Schuster explains, "sending debtors and subsequently their whole families to prison was quite counterproductive for the repayment of the debts. Since fathers couldn't work at the time they were imprisoned and thus couldn't earn money, the financial problems which brought the family into prison in the first place prevailed" (2014, p.33). Whilst Amy's family are portrayed negatively, in a state of dependency on the youngest family member, Dickens can also be understood as identifying the heart of the problem with debtors' prison and the impossible situation its inmates found themselves in. Whilst undoubtedly it should not fall to Amy to support the whole family, the idea that they seem to view Amy "not as having risen away from the prison atmosphere, but as appertaining to it" indicates that they do not believe any one of them is capable of rising away from the prison. William, unable to pay his debts, is condemned to a life in prison, and the acceptance of this by the family might translate as laziness, but it also translates as what they "had a right to expect, and nothing more". No amount of hard work would ever raise the funds needed to liberate William, so there is little point in "comparison between her and one another and themselves" because lazy attitude or good work ethic, either way William stays incarcerated. Dickens uses the

Dorrit family mentality to highlight the flaws in the debtors' prison system. Incarcerating people for debt, with no means of repayment, results only in dependency on the prison itself. Amy's hard-working attitude and determination to provide her family with whatever she can, only goes to further highlight the damaging and counterproductive prison system she is dwarfed by and unable to escape from, despite her hardest efforts. The fact that she cares for her family out of a sense of duty, whilst "they regarded her as being in her necessary place" suggests that Dickens ultimately intends to draw attention to the effect imprisonment had, not only on the debtor but also on those who could never be free from the prison, and were expected to provide for those who it incarcerated. Amy's role as carer for the family, despite being the youngest member of the family, reveals those who often suffered the most under the debtors' prison system were not always the debtors themselves, but those whose role it was to provide for them, a task which often fell to their children.

Care as a form of duty has featured much in this chapter, but perhaps one of the clearest examples of care as a form of duty can be found in *Great Expectations* in the form of Wemmick and the care he provides for his Aged Parent. So far, youth has played a part when care of a parent has been discussed, but Wemmick cannot be considered as a youthful character, for as Pip explains when describing Wemmick's eyes, "he had had them, to the best of my belief, from forty to fifty years" (vol.2, ch.2, p. 171). We know then that Wemmick is a middle-aged man, but nonetheless, he is still the child of the Aged Parent, and he is the primary carer of his father. Jacob Jewusiak argues:

Ostensibly supported by male income, the idealised Victorian family structure was based on a tacit belief that the paterfamilias would be able to support his wife and children well into old age. While some individuals secured a pension by contributing to Friendly Societies, many working-class and some middle-class men staked their future on the uncertain prospect of being able to work late in life. The difficulties that old age presented for the integrity of the family were systemized by the passage of the New Poor Law in 1834. The uneven ability of family or kin to support elderly parents set the groundwork for this reform, in which the local and haphazard deployment of relief to the aged poor by the parish gave way to a more centralized and depersonalized model. (2019, p.48).

Unable to work “late in life” the Aged Parent is fortunate that he can rely on his son’s income and care, but as Jewusiak points out, there was, an “uneven ability of family or kin to support elderly parents” (p.48), meaning that for many in society, familial care was not an option. Jewusiak goes on to declare “Though critics are divided about the efficacy of the poor laws in distributing relief, few would argue with the fact that the workhouse was regarded with horror by the elderly” (p.48). The uncertainty of familial care that others faced and the fear of having to resort to the workhouse if they were unable to work, highlights the fortunate position the Aged Parent is in while he has Wemmick to take care of him.

Children becoming their sick parent’s carer is present elsewhere in Victorian fiction; Margaret Hale in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854-55) for example begs her mother to let her become her carer: “Oh mama! let me be your nurse. I will learn anything Dixon can teach me. But you know I am your child, and I do think I have a right to do everything for you.” (vol.1, ch.16, p.128). Margaret sees caring for her mother as part of her sacred duty as a daughter, but Mrs Hale’s apprehension at letting Margaret assume the role of her carer is clear to see: “You don’t know what you are asking” (vol.1, ch.16, p.128). Mrs Hale is unwilling to expose her child to the pain of caring for a parent who is dying, but Margaret is resolute that no one could care for her mother better than she can: “I know a great deal more than you are aware of. Let me be your nurse. Let me try, at any rate. No one has ever, shall ever try so hard as I will do. It will be such a comfort, mamma.” (vol.1, ch.16, p.128) “Mamma” whilst a popular term of endearment for one’s mother in the nineteenth-century, also helps to remind the reader that Margaret is still young, which is part of the reason Mrs Hale wishes to protect her daughter from what it means to care for someone who is dying. This sentiment is made clear when on agreeing to let Margaret be her nurse, she exclaims “My poor child!” (vol.1, ch.16, p.128). Margaret’s strong desire to care for her mother is similar to Wemmick’s, who also see it as his duty to care for his parent. The Aged Parent’s need to be cared for comes not from diminishing physical health as is Margaret’s mother’s case, but because he possesses the persona of a child, despite his advanced years. Rather than being depicted as old and wise, the Aged Parent is reminiscent of a child who needs constant supervision. Pip explains that “there was a neat little girl in attendance, who looked after the Aged in the day. When she had laid the supper-cloth, the bridge was lowered to give her means of egress, and she withdrew for the night”

(vol.2, ch.6, p.209). Not only does the Aged Parent need to be looked after, he is also rendered a captive in his own home, as Pip explains by “a chasm about four feet wide and two deep” (vol.2, ch.6, p.206). We can gather that it is extremely important that the Aged Parent does not have access to cross this chasm because in Wemmick’s words “after I have crossed this bridge, I hoist it up - so - and cut off the communication” (vol.2, ch.6, p.206). Pete Newbon argues that Wemmick “achieves the equipoise between the hardnosed, officious man of business in the office of Mr Jaggers, and yet reveals to Pip Gargery his playful suburban home, complete with a model castle and drawbridge in the garden where he dotes upon his infantilised ‘aged P.’”(2019, p.293). Newbon draws attention to Wemmick’s liminal character, calling him one of “Dickens’s boy-men” (p.293) and uses his “playful suburban home” to suggest that Wemmick has childlike tendencies. However, the “castle and drawbridge” are not just childlike whimsical fancies of Wemmick’s, they also indicate that the Aged Parent clearly cannot be trusted to leave the house of his own accord, and they reveal how dependant he is on those around him. His dependence is likely due to his having developed dementia in his old age. Art Walaszek describes someone suffering from dementia as “experiencing symptoms such as memory loss, repetitive questions and statements, word-finding difficulties, slowed responses, misplacing items, getting lost [...] and behavioural changes” (2019, p.35). Alzheimer’s disease was not a recognised condition during the nineteenth-century, for as Rodger M. Nitsch and Christoph Hock explain, “in the 1910 edition of his psychiatry textbook, Alzheimer’s mentor, Emil Kreapelin, coined the term, ‘Alzheimer’s Disease’” (2006, p.424), but Dickens’s portrayal of an elderly man suffering from reduced mental faculties fits with symptoms we now associate with the disease.

Walaszek states that “Individuals who care for patients with dementia are at risk of developing caregiver burnout, depression and anxiety” (2019, p.35), but Wemmick does not appear disheartened at having to assume the role of his father’s carer. Indeed, he is concerned with ensuring that his father is included in conversation and that his little whims and fancies are satisfied. He instructs Pip, “nod away at him, Mr Pip; that’s what he likes. Nod away at him, if you please, like winking!” (vol.2, ch.6, p.208) and “getting near gun-fire,” said Wemmick then, as he laid down his pipe; “it’s the Aged’s treat.” (vol.2, ch.6, p.208). Wemmick’s care and attention towards his father suggest that he harbours deep respect and regard for him, and the title he has given him, the Aged Parent,

further alludes to this. Wemmick does not call him infirm, or a liability or confused or a burden, because that is not how he views him. “Aged” suggests that Wemmick is aware his father has lived through many years, and is now deserving of respect and care in his later years. “Parent”, is a constant reminder that this old man once cared for Wemmick when he was a dependent, and that the roles are now reversed. An understanding that parents become more childlike as they age is present elsewhere in Dickens’s fiction as Mrs Brown in *Dombey and Son* complains of her daughter Alice, “You think I’m in my second childhood, I know! [...] That’s the respect and duty that I get from my own gal, but I’m wiser than you take me for” (ch.52, p.668). Mrs Brown considers it a lack of “respect and duty” that Alice talks to her condescendingly, but whilst she may not have reached her “second childhood” yet, she would do well to remember that should such a time come, Alice would be her only carer. Indeed, Alice does understand that she has a duty towards her mother, for on her premature deathbed she implores of Harriet “You will not forget my mother?” (ch.58, p.760) Aware that her mother will be left alone in the world, it is important to Alice that she dies knowing that her mother will be looked after once she has gone. With The Aged Parent being well advanced in his second childhood, Wemmick’s view and attitude towards his father can be understood as Dickens representing the ideal. He is presenting his readers with a social discussion of how the elderly in Victorian society should be treated and cared for; the reality, however, could be very different. As Robin Means et al state:

Through much of the Victorian period, there was little recognition of a social group, definable as elderly people, who needed special provision because of their age. Elderly people, and especially elderly men, were expected to work until they died. Those elderly people who were unable to support themselves in the community through the labour market or with the help of relatives were often forced to enter the workhouse, where no distinction was made between them and other paupers (2008, p.21).

The Aged Parent is fortunate in that he has his son to care for him; had this not been the case his situation would have been vastly different. Considering that he is not capable of leaving the house on his own, it is very likely that he would not have been able to work, and therefore he would have been at the mercy of the Workhouse, or the insane asylum. Fear of the asylum among the elderly is present in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, when

Grandfather Trent “was haunted by apprehensions of being led captive to some gloomy place where he would be chained and scourged” (ch.24, p.186). Wemmick’s care and commitment to his father is commendable, but he is the only means of care that his father could receive. Dickens it would seem, did not hold the view that family members alone should provide care for their elderly, he believed it should also be the responsibility of society as a whole to provide care for the aged. When discussing Dickens’s attitude to social reform, Kathryn Leigh and Krueger Henderson argue that:

In essence, Dickens uses a call for social reform in order to highlight what “we” the privileged and beneficent reader, can do to help “them”, the destitute, who have been excluded from the domestic ideal. The individuals treated as the “other” of Dickens’ discourse of home were labelled first by The New Poor Law of 1834 and a succession of social welfare laws that followed. When the laws began to define old age and regulate state aid, they exposed the plight of the aged (2008, p.25).

Wemmick’s father then, doesn’t just represent one individual, he represents the “Aged” population in general. Wemmick is devoted to his father, who needs constant care like a child. But Wemmick has no children of his own, leading us to ask, if it is the sole responsibility of the family to care for their elderly, what happens when there are no children to take up this task? As Leigh and Henderson argue, Dickens is urging his readers to “call for social reform” to better aid those “who have been excluded from the domestic ideal”.

The purpose of this chapter has been to show how throughout his novels Dickens presents his readers with characters who can be recognised as carers in some form or another. It was my intention to offer a fresh analysis of some of Dickens’s key themes throughout his novels, by placing the carer at the centre of the discussion. The presence of these characters enables Dickens to highlight and discuss certain social and political themes, and in each of the examples focussed on in this chapter, emphasis has been made on how these carers exist in liminal spaces, somewhere between childhood and adulthood. For many of the characters discussed in this chapter, the act of being a carer in some form is what distorts their identity. Recognising the carer as an individual who inhabits the space in between childhood and adulthood is important because it allows the

reader to better understand the social issues Dickens is exploring, in many cases well ahead of his time.



## Chapter Two: Mental Capacities: The Mind of a Child

This chapter focuses on liminal characters in Dickens's novels who appear to be afflicted by mental health issues or learning difficulties. Having begun a discussion about the representations of mental health conditions in chapter one through Grandfather Trent's gambling addiction, Mr Dolls's alcoholism and The Aged Parent's dementia, I now turn my attention to an array of other characters throughout Dickens's fiction who also exist in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, caused by reduced mental faculties. I have split this chapter into two sections. The first section is "Innate Mental Health Issues" in which I talk about characters who appear to have mental health issues or learning difficulties that have not been brought on by an event. The second section will be the direct opposite, focussing on characters who appear to have had their minds altered by an event or an illness, making this section a study of "Consequential Mental Health Issues". I begin my first section with a discussion of the character Barnaby in *Barnaby Rudge* focussing on why Barnaby is considered an "idiot" and how this relates to the "nature versus nurture" debate. As Paul Schacht argues, "although the celebrated 'nature vs. nurture' controversy arose only in the last decades of the Victorian period, it was adumbrated much earlier in the competition between 'moralistic' and 'environmentalist' explanations of poverty" (1990, p.77). While the "moralistic versus environmentalist" argument certainly does apply to explanations of poverty, Dickens does not restrict it exclusively to this, as it can also be considered when discussing his representations of mental health issues, which I will show through my discussion of Barnaby. Staying within the confines of *Barnaby Rudge*, I then move on to discuss the character John Willet, and how he can be understood as also possessing an innate mental health condition, but in a vastly different way to Barnaby. Having discussed John Willet, I move away from *Barnaby Rudge*, turning my attention to Mr Dick in *David Copperfield* and highlight how Dickens uses him to criticise the infamous institution of the insane asylum. The last character I discuss in this section is Krook from *Bleak House*, concentrating on how he displays signs of suffering from dyslexia. In the "Consequential Mental Health Issues" section I begin with a discussion of Miss Havisham, arguing she suffers from PTSD following the trauma of being jilted on her wedding day, before moving on to discuss Miss Flite in *Bleak House* and how she appears to suffer from obsession with the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case. Next, I discuss Hugh's alcohol addiction in *Barnaby Rudge*. Finally, I

discuss Maggy in *Little Dorrit*, concentrating on her arrested development following an illness in her childhood. Many of the mental afflictions discussed in this chapter would not have been formally recognised as conditions during the time in which Dickens was writing; nevertheless, I have made the decision to refer to them by their contemporary medical names. My reason for this is that the conditions I discuss may not have been medically recognised, but that does not mean they were any less present in Victorian society. Through his powers of observation, Dickens was able to identify many traits of what would now be considered mental health conditions or learning disabilities. It is my opinion that using the correct medical terms when discussing such conditions highlights that Dickens was ahead of his time in his awareness that these mental health conditions have a profound effect on people's lives. As Clare Barker and Stuart Murray explain:

Disability is everywhere in literature. Whether in the bodies that populate countless narratives containing physical disability, or in the mental difference that informs so much detail about character and psychology, disability features in literary production as a constant presence. And it does so across all time periods, from the earliest expressions of European poetry to the contemporary global novel, and all points in between (2018, p.1).

As Barker and Murray suggest, disabilities both physical and mental have always featured in works of literature, and Dickens's fiction is no different. This chapter aims to show that the inclusion of mental disabilities in his narratives was an important way in which Dickens engaged with liminal spaces, and the characters who existed within them.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term mental health as meaning "health of the mind as distinct from physical health" (2017). Just as physical health can deteriorate or weaken, so can one's mental health, and in this chapter, I discuss how the "health of the mind" in many of Dickens's characters appears to be compromised in some way. Reference to the concept of "health of the mind" or mental health can be found as early

as 1650, when Thomas Jordan writes in his poem *Claraphil and Clarinda in a Forrest of Fancies* (1650), “Virtue is a Virgins Wealth, The Magazine of Mental Health”. However, during the nineteenth-century growing attention was given to the study of mental health issues and the potential causes and reasons behind the weakening of one’s mind, often with a particular focus on childhood and how this can be understood as connected or linked to mental health problems. In 1848 physician Charles West published “his *Lectures on the Diseases of Infancy and Childhood*. Between the first edition of 1848 and the third, enlarged edition of 1854, West significantly expanded his chapter on the mental health of the child” (Boehm, 2013, p.113). Boehm goes on to explain that:

Dickens’s friend, the celebrated physician and alienist John Conolly, similarly called for the expansion of knowledge about the child’s mind in a string of articles that appeared in the *Medical Times and Gazette* between January and August 1862. [...] Even before Dickens and Conolly met in person, most probably in the early 1850s, Dickens had praised the Hanwell Asylum (where Conolly was resident physician) in *American Notes* (1842). They remained friends until Conolly’s death in 1866, and Dickens ran several favourable articles on Conolly’s work in *Household Words*’ (p.113).

Considering Dickens’s active interest in the study of mental health it is not surprising that he engages with it in his fiction, highlighting the liminal spaces in which people can exist, when they are considered to have reduced mental faculties. His aim often being to encourage society to reconsider their views on people who are not completely sound of mind, and where they fit in society.

### **Innate Mental Health Issues**

*Barnaby Rudge* continually engages with mental health issues throughout the narrative. Dickens’s initial description of Barnaby is that his “pale face, [was] strangely lighted up by something that was *not* intellect” (ch.3, p.35-6), and faced with the prospect of having to touch Edward Chester’s motionless body, Dickens describes Barnaby as “the idiot falling back, and shuddering as with a strong spasm” (ch.3, p.38). Dickens describes Barnaby as an “idiot” no fewer than eighteen times throughout the novel, and his decision to do so indicates the importance of regarding Barnaby as special and

different. Contemporary readers of Dickens would probably have had a clear understanding of the concept of an “idiot”, for as Kathryn Burtinshaw and John Burt highlight:

From as early as the thirteenth century there was a clearly defined legal difference established through the judiciary of England between idiots and lunatics. [...] Idiots, who in the early days were termed ‘natural fools’, were seen as having a congenital and permanent condition involving an absence of understanding. [...] By the fifteenth century ‘idiot’, rather than ‘natural fool’ had become the preferred term (2017, p.169-70).

The fact that the term “idiot” was predated by the phrase “natural fool” is an indication of how through *Barnaby*, Dickens is engaging with the nature side of the nature/nurture debate. Indeed, Gabriel Varden makes a direct reference to the nature/nurture debate when he states regarding Barnaby’s idiocy, “It’s in his nature, I know” (ch.3, p.38). For Dickens it is important that his readers are aware that Barnaby has always been “a silly fellow” (ch.3, p.38) who has lived all his life with “the disorder of his mind” (ch.3, p.36). Dickens does not offer an explanation for the cause of Barnaby’s idiocy, but Darren Eblovi and Christopher Clardy argue that it is likely Barnaby suffered from Williams syndrome. They explain:

Williams syndrome, a disorder caused by a genetic deletion and characterized by moderate intellectual disability with relatively strong language skills and a hypersocial personality, was first described in medical literature in 1961. However, 120 years earlier, Charles Dickens wrote the novel *Barnaby Rudge*, which follows an ‘idiot’ through London’s Gordon Riots of 1780. We propose that Dickens based this character on a person he knew with Williams syndrome. Common features include an ‘elfin’ face, decreased cognitive ability and dependence on a caretaker, strong language skills with emphatic and perseverative speech, anxiety, and an empathetic, overly trusting personality (2016).

Their argument is persuasive, for not only does Barnaby’s personality fit the symptoms of Williams syndrome (as I will go on to demonstrate), but Dickens actually describes Barnaby at one point as “elfin-like in face” (ch.25, p.199), indicating that it is not just Barnaby’s personality that is reminiscent of Williams syndrome, but his appearance as

well. This is an example of several instances where Dickens appears to have an acute understanding of a medical condition which was not officially recognised during the time in which he was writing. Modern-day readers would not regard Barnaby as an “idiot” because he was afflicted by Williams syndrome, as the term no longer has any reference to medical conditions and is instead used as a simple insult. Indeed when discussing the terms “lunatics”, “imbeciles” and “idiots” Kathryn Burtinshaw and John Burt state that “these terms were regularly used to label people with mental health disorders in nineteenth century Britain and Ireland” (2017, p.6), but go on to argue that such terms are “archaic and confrontational definitions, which in today’s society are totally unacceptable” (p.6). However, as Burtinshaw and Burt explain, “idiot” was “regularly used” and this is why Dickens’s contemporary readership would have regarded Barnaby simply as an “idiot”. However, the links between “idiot” and “natural fool” are interesting when we consider that the term “natural fool” in literature has often been used to indicate the wisdom of a character. As *the Encyclopedia of Disability, Volume 1* (2006) states:

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance natural folly simply described a condition of essential mental difference. Natural fools were understood as differing not only from the normal but also from the mentally ill, since their condition was not a temporary, but a permanent one. [...] In sixteenth-century Europe, jest books were another genre that collected anecdotes about all kinds of fools [...] First, actions of natural fools were said to evoke laughter. Second, natural fools were shown as divine beings bearing messages from God. Third natural fools were used as positive didactic examples [...] authors interpreted not only single episodes of a fool’s life but the whole foolish behaviour as a sign of prophecy or wise telling. (p.cv)

Considering Barnaby as a “natural fool” rather than an “idiot” makes his purpose in the novel clearer to see. Instead of disregarding him as silly or unintelligent, opinions we may be tempted to hold of him when viewing him simply as an “idiot”, we should in fact be tuned into how he sees the world, for it might turn out to be the best lesson we can heed. The links between the term “idiot” and “natural fool” can be seen elsewhere in later nineteenth-century literature, in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* (1868-69). When discussing the novel’s protagonist Prince Myshkin, Agnes Cardinal explains:

The idiot, who has suffered since childhood from some unspecified mental illness so that his every response comes from the heart rather than the head, is endowed with very real traits. As he becomes embroiled in the various intrigues of the plot, he emerges as a unique combination of the Christ-like qualities of humility, love and selflessness (1996, p.v).

Prince Myshkin and Barnaby share many of the same traits, and as with Barnaby, “natural fool” would perhaps be a kinder term to use when describing him. However, in both cases, using “idiot” to describe the protagonists is a deliberate decision by the author. As Cardinal argues: “*The Idiot* conveys bleak despair as Dostoevsky provides a harsh indictment of the real world and particularly of the Russian ruling class of his day. It is their supreme failure that a positively good man cannot survive in the world they have created” (1996, p.vi). Just as Dostoevsky uses Prince Myskin to expose the failings of the Russian ruling class, Dickens uses Barnaby to highlight the savagery of mob mentality. Calling them both “idiots” reminds us of the prejudice both characters experience at the hands of society.

Dickens wastes little time in bringing to his readers’ attention that Barnaby exists in the liminal space between a child and an adult. On meeting him we learn that “he was about three-and-twenty years old” (ch3, p.36), and yet Gabriel Varden speaks to him as if he were a child. He is aware that asking Barnaby to aid in the moving of Edward Chester will distress him, so he begins his request for assistance with, “Barnaby – good Barnaby – dear Barnaby” (ch.3, p.38), and on the successful completion of the task, Gabriel encourages Barnaby’s efforts with, “well done, well done!” (ch.3, p.38). In both discourses Gabriel employs the use of repetition. In the first instance the repetition acts as a way for Gabriel to soothe and to reassure Barnaby that he has nothing to worry about, whilst the adjectives “good” and “dear” before Barnaby’s name reiterate to Barnaby that he is in the company of one who cares for him, and that he can trust Gabriel. In the second instance, the emphatic repetition of “well done”, is a way of rewarding Barnaby for his cooperation. Gabriel manages to command control over Barnaby through the use of speech, just as if he was instructing a child who is aware that he is his elder and his superior.

Barnaby may appear to have reduced mental faculties, but there is much throughout the novel that suggests his mind is sharper than it seems. One of the most striking and yet surprising traits of Barnaby's character is his awareness that he is simple. It seems contradictory that he should possess such an acute sense of his own limitations, but there are many instances throughout the novel where this is just the case. When discussing his own shadow with Gabriel Varden, Barnaby states, "he's a merry fellow, that shadow, and keeps close to me, though I *am* silly" (ch.6, p.57). Barnaby's description of his shadow as "a merry fellow" is closer to the rhetoric of a child with an active imagination than it is to a man in his twenties, but the emphasis he puts on the statement, "I *am* silly" is inclined to make the reader question to what extent he truly is silly. His awareness of how others perceive him seems to allow for a level of consciousness that one may not expect from him. Perceptions are to play a large part in *Barnaby Rudge*, and not all those around Barnaby view him as an unintelligent fool. Gabriel Varden states when talking about Barnaby, "to my mind he grows wiser every day" (ch.5, p. 51), and goes on to joke to Barnaby's mother, "take care, when we are growing old and foolish, Barnaby doesn't put us to the blush" (ch.5, p.51). Gabriel's rhetoric refers very much to the passing of time, and is concerned with the notion of aging, suggesting that as their minds dim in the coming of old age, Barnaby's will remain bright. To Gabriel, Barnaby appears youthful; he "grows wiser" the way children do as they pass into adulthood. Barnaby isn't an "idiot" to Gabriel, he is an adult who still possesses a childlike mind, and to Gabriel at least, the two are not the same thing. As readers we are encouraged to admire Gabriel for his perceptiveness and his accepting attitude towards Barnaby.

Gabriel's view of Barnaby as one simply with a more childlike mind than other adults, is part of the undertone that is present throughout the novel. *Barnaby Rudge* is principally concerned with misconceptions. When describing the mob that causes the Gordon Riots, Dickens writes that it was a "vast throng, sprinkled doubtless here and there with honest zealots, but composed for the most part of the very scum and refuse of London" (ch.49, p. 385). Founded on religious objection, claiming to be pursuing an "honest, true and in a sacred cause" (ch. 36, p.282) the mob in reality are little more than "scum". Gabriel Varden is one of the characters who sees the mob for what they really are, and does not allow himself to be influenced or bullied by them. When he is seized by the mob and forcibly marched to Newgate Prison, he defiantly addresses Mr

Akerman the head jailer at the prison and declares, “Brought here by force – brought here to pick the lock of the great door for them” [...]. “Bear witness for me, Mr Akerman, that I refuse to do it; and that I will not do it, come what may of my refusal. If any violence is done to me, please to remember this” (ch.64, p.500). Just as he clearly sees the mob for what they really are and refuses to yield to them, he also sees Barnaby for what he really is; namely one who “grows wiser every day” (ch.5, p. 51). Barnaby is the complete opposite of the mob, because he is gentle and kind and childlike. Never is the difference between the mob and Barnaby clearer than when an attack is planned by the mob on Mr Haredale’s home. Hugh explains when he is discussing Barnaby’s connection with Mr Haredale’s family:

“Why, the people we mean to visit, were friends of his [Barnaby’s], once upon a time, and I know that much of him to feel pretty sure that if he thought we were going to do them any harm, he’d be no friend to our side, but would lend a ready hand to the other. So I’ve persuaded him (for I know him of old) that Lord George has picked him out to guard this place tomorrow while we’re away, and that it’s a great honour – and so he’s on duty now, and as proud of it as if he was a general. Ha ha!” (ch.54, p.410).

The phrase “once upon a time” reminds the reader that Barnaby is childlike, and the idea that he lives in his own make-believe world is indicated at by the fictitious story Hugh spins him about Lord George picking him out to guard The Boot whilst the rioters are away. Barnaby is represented here as extremely gullible and trusting of those who in reality he has real reason to fear and abhor. This behaviour is in keeping with the “overly trusting personality” (Eblovi and Clardy, 2016) often associated with Williams syndrome, and offers further evidence for the suggestion that this is the condition with which Barnaby is afflicted. Essentially Barnaby is manipulated like a child, who is not aware of the need to question those around him. What is interesting however is that Hugh is well aware that Barnaby would never condone the violence and destruction that the mob has planned for Mr Haredale’s home. Despite his childish and gullible nature, Barnaby also possesses a strong resolution against violence towards his friends, so strong in fact that Hugh must take pains to ensure that Barnaby remains ignorant of the rioters’ true intentions. Hugh’s conviction that Barnaby would be no friend to the rioters’ side if he knew the truth, indicates a strength of character in Barnaby and a



sense of bravery that is anything but childlike. It is reminiscent of Gabriel's character when he refuses to yield to the mob's demands, and is a world away from the characteristics of the mob, the members of which who have been goaded and misguided by one another to create a body of people that rather than standing for a true and "sacred cause" (ch. 36, p.282), stand only for violence and destruction.

Being brave and understanding the necessity of being brave is a characteristic of Barnaby's which intensifies and becomes more prominent as the novel unfolds. On facing his execution, Barnaby, Dickens tells us, understood:

He was expected to be brave – that he was a man of great consequence, and that the prison people would be glad to make him weep. He trod the ground more firmly as he thought of this, and bade her [his mother] take heart and cry no more, and feel how steady his hand was. "They call me silly, mother. They shall see tomorrow!" (ch.76, p.598).

Barnaby's defiance that he will not indulge the prison people in their desire to see him weep and panic demonstrates that he is "a man of great consequence", who is refusing to be the "silly" individual others perceive him as. There is also however, an evolving of Barnaby's character in this scene, which allows Varden's statement from earlier on in the novel that Barnaby "grows wiser every day" (ch.5, p. 51), to gain new importance and relevance. Early on in the narrative Barnaby states, "I *am* silly" (ch.6, p.57), but on the eve of his execution he challenges this perception of himself by stating, "They call me silly, mother. They shall see tomorrow!" (ch.76, p.598). Barnaby's calm resolution that he will not give into the crowd is commendable, and in this scene he is not reminiscent of the childlike character who had to be persuaded and coaxed by Gabriel Varden to assist in the recovery of Edward Chester at the beginning of the novel. Hablot K. Browne's illustration of Barnaby on the eve of his death sentence does much to reinforce the notion that Barnaby is firm in his conviction that he will not be afraid.



FIGURE 5. "IN THE CONDEMNED CELL". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *BARNABY RUDGE* (1841), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *BARNABY RUDGE*, (WARE: WORDSWORTH CLASSICS, 2010) p.599.

The smile present on Barnaby's face in this illustration is a sign of his calmness and of his acceptance of the situation that he has found himself in. He studies his hat intently, as if his mind is untroubled with darker thoughts. The absence of fear or worry concerning what is in store for him on the morrow could be construed as a childish unawareness of the gravity of his desperate situation, but Browne goes some way to dispel this interpretation by having Barnaby's mother dejectedly rest her head upon her son's shoulder. It appears that the roles have been reversed in this scene, with the son offering comfort to the mother. She leans on him for support, unable to protect her child from his doomed fate. She has failed as a mother to protect her childlike son, and therefore it is she in this illustration who needs support and comfort. Barnaby meanwhile faces his fate with a manly bravery, apparently devoid of any fear or anxiety. When discussing Browne's illustrations in *Barnaby Rudge*, Robert L. Patten states that, "Phiz's illustrations deepen the historical and religious precedents of these riots" (2012, p.294). Patten is right to refer to "religious precedents" when discussing *Barnaby Rudge*, for there is a religious undertone that runs throughout the novel. This religious

undertone is present in Browne's illustration, "In the condemned cell". It can be found in the presence of the light which shines down upon Barnaby from above. Highlighting Barnaby's contended smile, it can be interpreted as God's light and love shining down upon Barnaby in his hour of need. Barnaby as the condemned son, calmly awaiting his death with his devoted and devastated mother by his side is reminiscent of Jesus Christ awaiting his crucifixion. As it explains in John, 19:25: "but there were standing by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. Therefore, when Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing there, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son!'" Just as Jesus addresses his mother whilst he waits for death, so does Barnaby, as he "bade her take heart and cry no more" (ch.76, p.598). Both men recognise their mother's devastation and take pains to comfort her. Furthermore, Barnaby's childlike persona suggests in Christian terms that he is ready for heaven, for in the Gospel according to Matthew Jesus advises his disciples "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew, 18:3). The nod towards Jesus's words as reported in Matthew's Gospel remind the reader firstly of Christianity in its purest form, and secondly how far the mob have strayed from anything representing Christian morality.

Unlike Christ however, Barnaby is not put to death in the end, but is saved at the eleventh hour. Whilst it was undoubtedly a joint effort between Gabriel and Mr Haredale in being "successful at last, in awakening an interest in his [Barnaby's] favour" (ch.79, p.624) special emphasis is put on Gabriel's part in the rescue. Dickens explains that "Mr Haredale, assured that all was safe, had gone straight from Bloomsbury Square to the Golden Key, leaving to Gabriel the grateful task of bringing him [Barnaby] home in triumph" (ch.79, p.624). Dickens also writes that on Gabriel's request to the crowd that followed him and Barnaby home, to give three cheers to "nothing particular" (ch.79, p.625) along with King and Country, that "the crowd assenting, substituted Gabriel Varden for the nothing particular" (ch.79, p.625). Throughout the novel, Gabriel sees Barnaby for what he truly is, namely one with a more childlike mind than others, and when Barnaby is condemned to die, Dickens writes that "if the whole population had had him [Barnaby] in their minds, and had wished his life to be spared, not one among them could have done so with a purer zeal or greater singleness of heart than that good locksmith" (ch.76, p597). With his pure

zeal and “singleness of heart”, Gabriel is reminiscent of the Angel Gabriel. In the Gospel of Luke, the Angel Gabriel states, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God” (Luke, 1:19). Likewise, Gabriel Varden can be understood as a representation of God’s will. He earnestly strives to secure a pardon for Barnaby, based on the grounds of Barnaby’s unsound mind and his lack of understanding in his involvement with the mob. For as Dickens explains “he [Barnaby] had no consciousness, God help him, of having done wrong” (ch.69, p.540). In this sense, Gabriel is like Barnaby’s guardian Angel, doing God’s work, to spare one from death that is undeserving of the punishment.

Gabriel may have been able to convince those in power that Barnaby is not sound of mind, and therefore cannot be held accountable for his actions, but this is not proof that Barnaby is an “idiot”. Gabriel stated that Barnaby “grows wiser every day” (ch.5, p. 51), and indeed he does just that. For as the mob’s actions grow increasingly violent and further and further away from anything that could be considered as grounded in religious sentiment, we begin to see the worth of a mind like Barnaby’s. If the mob are the sound-of -mind men, and Barnaby is the childlike one, then Dickens appears to be implying that those with a childlike nature, should be given more worth. Through the rising of the mob, Dickens has demonstrated that those in society perceived to be of a sound mind, can easily be the ones to create havoc and destruction. Therefore, rather than shunning those individuals like Barnaby who are perceived to be “silly”, society should place more worth on people who have a more childlike outlook on this world. Barnaby then, can be recognised as a “holy fool” type character. As Ian Ker argues in his book *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (2011):

The concept of the ‘holy fool’ was hardly familiar to the Protestantism with which Dickens was familiar. It is very much, though, a Catholic and even more an Eastern Orthodox idea (one has only to think of Dostoevsky). Yet again Dickens unconsciously created characters that conform to the type. [...] The Secret of Dickens’s ‘humble characters’ is that ‘they are all great fools’, a ‘great fool’ being someone ‘who is above wisdom rather than below it’ (p.174)

Barnaby is indeed above the wisdom of the mob, which in reality is not wise at all, and Gabriel recognises this. I cited Michael Joseph in the introduction who argues that

“Liminality describes the quality of being socially segregated, set apart and divested of status” (2011, p.138). Barnaby though, is an example of one whose liminality rather than divesting him of status, actually reveals the true worth of his character and signifies his importance. At the end of the novel Dickens returns to the point about Barnaby growing wiser, for he explains, “although he [Barnaby] could never separate his condemnation and escape from the idea of a terrific dream, he became in other respects, more rational. Dating from the time of his recovery, he had a better memory and greater steadiness of purpose” (ch.82, p.647). Barnaby still experiences a lack of understanding and comprehension regarding his experience with the mob, attributing it to a “terrific dream”, but his “greater steadiness of purpose” indicates a growth of character. If Barnaby’s character has grown in strength and virtue, and the term “idiot” is therefore now an unsuitable description of him, he does however become associated with another mental health condition as a direct result of the riots. Dickens explains that, “he [Barnaby] never could be tempted into London [...] no matter how full of promise and enjoyment, could he be persuaded to set foot in the streets: nor did he ever conquer this repugnance or look upon the town again” (ch.82, p.648). Barnaby’s phobia of London can be understood as indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder. Although as Arie S. Shalev and Charles R. Marmar state “the term PTSD was only coined in 1980” (2018, p.3), Julian Ford explains that “traumatic stressors and the resultant psychological trauma have been sources of both horror and fascination for thousands of years. Both have been documented in many different art forms and in written histories across the ages” (2015, p.1). Interestingly, Deirdre Barrett reveals that “Nightmares and recurring dreams are among the most common symptoms of PTSD” (2001, p.2). Barret also argues that “From folklore of the dead visiting dreamers to Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth sleepwalking and trying to wash blood of her hands, people in centuries past have known of the special relationship between trauma and dreaming” (p.1). Barnaby’s understanding of the riots as a “terrific dream” is a seemingly accurate depiction of how one suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder may recollect the traumatic event they suffered. Again, Dickens appears to have an acute understanding of a disorder which during the time he was writing had not yet been officially defined. In describing Barnaby as one haunted by a dream, Dickens is suggesting a child frightened by their nightmares, and it reinforces that Barnaby despite his growth of character, still exists somewhere between a child and an adult. However, as modern-day readers we are now in a better position to understand the significance of Barnaby’s “terrific dream”, and

can attribute it to the development of a mental health condition, brought on by the actions of society. Through Barnaby's apparent post-traumatic stress disorder, Dickens makes a clear distinction between innate and consequential mental health disorders. There is worth and strength of character in Barnaby's nature, viewed by many as "idiocy", but his post-traumatic stress disorder acts as a poignant example of how damaging the actions of society can be on those who fall victim to its cruelties.

John Willet is another character in *Barnaby Rudge* who also appears to be afflicted by a mental health condition. Dickens's initial description of John Willet is that he is:

A burly, large-headed man with a fat face, which betokened profound obstinacy and slowness of apprehension, combined with a very strong reliance upon his own merits. It was John Willet's ordinary boast in his more placid moods that if he were slow he was sure [...] he was in everything unquestionably the reverse of fast [...] always sure that what he thought or said or did was right, and holding it as a thing quite settled and ordained by the laws of nature and providence (ch.1, p.11).

Dickens's physical description of John as a "large-headed man" could be interpreted as meaning that he has a large brain, but Dickens is quick to dispel any notion of significant intelligence on John's part, by going on to state that he possesses "profound obstinacy and slowness of apprehension". This description of John is the first indication that he is afflicted by a mental health issue, but it also hints at the way in which John will be portrayed as childlike. Describing John as "obstinate" suggests he is stubborn, a childish trait which children are encouraged and expected to grow out of. Dickens further accentuates this point by explaining that John is "always sure that what he thought or said or did was right, and holding it as a thing quite settled and ordained by the laws of nature and providence". John's inability to consider other people's opinions or perspectives is certainly a childlike trait, but Dickens is also referring here to the nature versus nurture debate, when he describes John as considering his opinions to be right "by the laws of nature". When we consider the notion that John's obstinacy is a result of a "slowness" on his part, we begin to see the picture Dickens is building of John's state of mind and how it affects him.

Dickens may describe John Willet as being “unquestionably the reverse of fast”, but John’s reduced mental capacity is not referred to in the same way as Barnaby’s. Continuously referred to as an “idiot”, and aware himself of how he is perceived, Barnaby can be understood as representing the complete opposite to John Willet. This is quite intentional on Dickens’s part. If Barnaby represents how those deemed as “idiots” can have more worth than they are credited with, John Willet represents those in society who are not recognised as having reduced mental capacities. Dickens describes John as a “sturdy landlord” (ch.1, p.12), a description which not only applies to John’s stature, but also to his long and sturdy career as landlord of the Maypole. Whilst it is not made clear how long John has been landlord of the Maypole, we get a sense that it has been a considerable length of time, for when John is talking about the night of the murder at The Warren, he states, “it’s a Maypole story, and has been any time these four-and-twenty years” (ch.1, p.19). This statement indicates the length of John’s career, casting him as a man not only past the youth of his life, but also as a man quite capable of holding down and running a business, despite being “slow”. So far there is arguably little about John’s character that indicates a significant hindering of capabilities based on his mental capacities. The introduction of John’s son, “a broad-shouldered strapping young fellow of twenty” (ch.1, p.14-15) perhaps only reaffirms the notion that despite his obstinate and childishly stubborn nature, John is to all intents and purposes, an adult, who possesses adult qualities, evident in the fact that he has fathered a child and runs a successful business. However, when introducing Joe to the reader Dickens explains, “it pleased his father still to consider [Joe] a little boy, and to treat accordingly” (ch.1, p.15). This is the first real indication that John’s “slowness of apprehension” has an impact on how he interacts with those around him. John’s inability to recognise Joe as a grown man, is evidence of him projecting his own limitations on to Joe. The first conversation between John and Joe indicates that Joe has a sharper mind than his father. When the stranger at the Maypole asks, “What house is that which stands a mile or so from here?” (ch.1, p.15), the following exchange between father and son occurs:

“Public house?” said the landlord, with his usual deliberation.

“Public house, father!” exclaimed Joe, “where’s the public house within a mile or so of the Maypole? He means the great house – the Warren – naturally and of course” (ch.1, p.15).

Dickens lays emphasis on John's "slowness" by referring to his "usual deliberation" and by his inability to answer a simple question. Joe is quick to correct his father's misunderstanding, and he places an emphasis on the extent of his father's ineptitude by claiming that the house referred to was "the Warren – naturally and of course". By suggesting that it is natural and a matter of course that the stranger should be referring to the Warren, Dickens highlights how John is confused by so straightforward a question. There is the suggestion of a lack of natural ability in John, that is, however, present in Joe. In this exchange, Joe speaks to John as if he were a child, and is reminiscent of a parent exasperated by the slowness of their child's learning. This role reversal between father and son is an early indicator of what is to come later in the novel.

John's inability to recognise Joe as a man is never more apparent than when Joe runs away. The narrator explains that on writing an advert describing Joe following his disappearance, "Mr Willet had obstinately persisted, despite the advice and entreaties of his friends, in describing his son as a 'young boy'" (ch.33, p.261). The narrator goes on to explain that this advert was wholly unsuccessful, "never having been productive of any other effect than the transmission to Chigwell at various times and at a vast expense, of some five-and-forty runaways varying from six years old to twelve" (ch.33, p.261). This scene hints at the extent to which John is not sound of mind, and the lack of support that is afforded him. The narrator explains that John "obstinately persisted" despite the "advice and entreaties of his friends", and whilst this depicts John as reminiscent of a stubborn child that cannot be reasoned with, it also causes the reader to question to what extent his friends truly did try to reason with him. We learn early on in the novel that John possesses an authority over his friends, for when they are all gathered in the Maypole of a night, the narrator explains, "a general murmur from his three cronies, and a general shaking of heads at the copper boiler, assured John Willet that they had had good experience of his powers and needed no further evidence to assure them of his superiority" (ch.1, p.18). The description of his friends as his "cronies", coupled with the explanation that they were assured "of his superiority", suggests that John's friends do not consider themselves in a position to reason too harshly with him, and that they do not consider it their place to question his decisions. It is perhaps not surprising that John's friends consider him as superior to them, given that it is in his pub that they congregate. But if John is as the narrator describes him,



namely, “slow of apprehension”, then his friends’ unwillingness to guide John in the right direction, begins to look like neglect. John is reminiscent not only of a stubborn child, but also of a child who does not get the support he needs from the adults around him. Through Barnaby, Dickens highlighted the importance of understanding the worth of a childlike mind; but through John Willet, Dickens highlights the dangers of not offering extra support to those in society who require it. Dickens states that the advertisement depicting Joe as a child caused John “a vast expense”, indicating that John literally pays a price for being “slow”, whilst the age of the boys being brought to the Maypole being “from six years old to twelve” is suggestive not only of how young John considers Joe to be, but also of perhaps how old the reader is encouraged to believe John’s mind is. If John is considered as a child in need of support, due to his being “the reverse of fast”, then his purpose in the novel is to raise serious questions about society’s approach to those who require more help and support from those around them.

What is interesting is that despite the differences between John Willet and Barnaby, and society’s approach to their mental health issues, both characters appear to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, after their engagement with the mob. The first indication that John has suffered a traumatic event that will permanently affect him, is when the narrator explains that following the ransacking of the Maypole by the rioters, “John Willet, left alone in his dismantled bar, continued to sit staring about him; awake as to his eyes, certainly, but with all his powers of reason and reflection in a sound and dreamless sleep” (ch.55, p.429). In contrast, for Barnaby, the memory of his involvement with the mob manifested itself in the form “of a terrific dream” (ch.82, p.647). These two descriptions may appear contradictory, but they highlight the differences between the two characters: Barnaby, with his over-active mind and imagination, and John, with his “slowness of apprehension”. Barnaby is haunted by dreams, whilst John is rendered incapable of forming dreams. But what is crucial to recognise is that the reference to dreams in some capacity in both cases is indicative of a disruption of the mind due to a traumatic event, caused by the same mob. It is fitting that the reference to dreams should be present, in the description of John’s post-traumatic stress as well as Barnaby’s, because it highlights that both characters at this point in the novel are suffering from the same mental disorder. The illustration of John Willet by Hablot K. Browne, bound and helpless in the destroyed Maypole, does much

to reinforce the notion that he is a character who requires extra help from those around him.



FIGURE 6. "OLD JOHN AT A DISADVANTAGE". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *BARNABY RUDGE* (1841), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *BARNABY RUDGE*, (WARE: WORDSWORTH CLASSICS, 2010) p.599.

Trapped and surrounded by the devastation that has befallen his tavern, Dickens writes that, "John saw this desolation, and yet saw it not. He was perfectly contented to sit there, staring at it, and felt no more indignation or discomfort in his bonds than if they had been robes of honour" (ch.55, p.429). Browne's illustration however does not depict John looking calm and serene. His facial expression is one of worry and concern, as he looks towards the entrance of the stranger. In the illustration John appears to be very aware of his compromised situation, and he looks almost fearful of the stranger's entrance. The decision to have John's eyes locked on the stranger, does indeed give the impression that with regards to the destruction of the bar, "he saw it not", but it is anxiety rather than his "slowness" that appears to fuel John's blindness to the devastation of the tavern. The presence of apparent anxiety hints at the post-traumatic

stress disorder John is to develop as a result of the attack on the Maypole. Wary of and concerned by the stranger's presence, John appears like a child who understands he is dependent on the adult in this scene, but is unsure whether to trust him. The title of the illustration reaffirms that John is caught between childhood and adulthood, as "old John" indicates he is a man of advanced years, whilst "at a disadvantage" indicates that he is in a compromised situation, and is therefore a dependant in need of help from others, despite being in his own public house.

A dependant in his own tavern is the reality that John is faced with following the riot on the Maypole, for as the narrator explains, "he [John] never recovered the surprise the rioters had given him, and remained in the same mental condition down to the last moment of his life" (ch.82, p.647). The narrator goes on: "Mr Willet still appeared to consider himself a landlord by profession" (ch.82, p.647), and that he "took up his abode in a small cottage at Chigwell, where they [Dolly and Joe] widened and enlarged the fireplace for him, hung up the boiler, and furthermore planted in the little garden outside the front door a fictitious maypole; so that he was quite at home directly" (ch.82, p.646). We see a complete role reversal take place after the riots, with Joe assuming a parental role over his father. John is reminiscent of a child, living in a playhouse that replicates his parents' home. Once again Dickens exhibits an understanding of post-traumatic stress that is unprecedented for the time in which he is writing, for as John Wilson explains, "following traumatic events, regression and reversion are common" (2007, p.187). Describing John as "quite at home directly" is indicative of more than his satisfaction with his new abode. Traumatized to the point that he "never recovered the surprise the rioters had given him", John relishes the support afforded him by his son. But given the "slowness of apprehension" that John has suffered with all his life, Dickens appears to be implying that the extra support required by John from those around him, was needed long before the riots ever happened. It has taken the development of post-traumatic stress disorder for those around John to provide him with support, but Dickens can be understood as suggesting that it should not take such a traumatic event for society to recognise individuals who possess reduced mental faculties, and who therefore require extra support from those around them.

*David Copperfield* is another of Dickens's novels that engages with the notion of providing more support to those in society who are afflicted with mental health issues.

In this novel, Dickens turns his attention to the infamous institution of the insane asylum. I discussed in my introduction to this chapter how “Dickens had praised the Hanwell Asylum in *American Notes* in 1842” (Boehm, 2013, p.113), but Dickens had also been extremely critical of other asylums in *American Notes*. Paul Schlicke explains that, Dickens “sought out establishments for the insane in his travels, recording in *American Notes* disapproval of New York’s asylum. In his view, this institution failed to promote either purposeful activity or even an orderly and clean environment for its inmates” (2011, p.370). Dickens’s disapproval of the way some asylums conducted themselves is apparent in *David Copperfield*, through the character of Mr Dick, as I will go on to explain. Schlicke writes that, “there was widespread debate in the nineteenth-century about the care of the insane [...] Dickens’s reading public would have been aware of the concern, even if not acquainted with the minutiae of such discussion” (2011, p.370). It would appear that Dickens was keen to engage with the subject of the insane asylum, not only in America, but in Britain as well, and it is through the medium of Mr Dick in *David Copperfield* that he does this.

Describing Mr Dick following their first meeting David recalls “his vacant manner, his submission to my aunt, and his childish delight when she praised him” (ch.13, p.165), and admits that this behaviour caused David to “suspect him of being a little mad” (ch.13, p.165). This is an interesting statement from David, because it is Mr Dick’s childish behaviour that initially causes him to consider Mr Dick as not completely sound of mind, and it is an early indication that Mr Dick’s childlike behaviour will often be what Dickens uses to illustrate that Mr Dick has been perceived as mad. Childlike in mannerisms and behaviour, Mr Dick is reminiscent of Barnaby Rudge, and like Barnaby, Mr Dick faced prejudices as a result. Betsey Trotwood explains that Mr Dick’s brother considered Mr Dick to be “a little eccentric – though he is not half so eccentric as a good many people – he didn’t like to have him visible about his house, and sent him away to some private asylum-place” (ch.14, p.174). This statement from Betsey gets to the heart of the social issue that Dickens is engaging with through Mr Dick. It also indicates how Mr Dick is to be considered throughout the novel as occupying not only the liminal space in between a child and an adult, but also the space between sanity and madness. Betsey goes on to explain that she confronted Mr Dick’s brother, declaring:

Your brother's sane – a great deal more sane than you are, or ever will be, it is to be hoped. Let him have his little income, and come and live with me. *I* am not proud. *I* am ready to take care of him, and shall not ill-treat him as some people (besides the asylum-folks) have done (ch.14, p.174).

It appears to be lack of compassion and kindness on the part of Mr Dick's brother that causes Betsey to consider him as less sane than Mr Dick. Evidence for this claim can be found in the fact that she does not provide a definitive reason for considering Mr Dick's brother as lacking in sanity, and furthermore, when she speaks of Mr Dick's sister and her attitude towards Mr Dick she states "he had a favourite sister" [...] "a good creature, and very kind to him" (ch.14, p.174). As for Mr Dick, Betsey describes him as "the most friendly and amenable creature" (ch.14, p.174). It appears that to Betsey Trotwood, one's ability to be kind and compassionate towards others is what determines how sane one is. But kindness and compassion were qualities not necessarily associated with the insane asylum. Denise Tischler Millstein points out:

By the mid-century, almost all insane asylums, both private and public, had modified their regimes by eschewing punitive treatments and mechanical restraints such as manacles, straightjackets and even the infamous scold's bridle, in favour of the system known as moral treatment. Broadly, moral treatment was the rejection of the perceived cruelty of these methods of physical containment (2016, p.99).

However, as Marlene Ann Arieno states, "moral treatment in the nineteenth century generally meant mildly humane treatment, in contrast to previously inhumane treatment of the insane" (1989, p.67). Indeed Dickens explicitly refers to fear of the insane asylum in *The Old Curiosity Shop* when Nell's grandfather fears being admitted to one exclaiming "they will shut me up in a stone room, dark and cold, and chain me up to the wall, Nell – flog me with whips, and never let me see thee more!" (ch.19, p.157). Grandfather Trent's understanding of the insane asylum is that it is a cruel place exercising anything but "moral treatment", and whilst we do not know what sort of treatment Mr Dick experienced during his time in the asylum, Arieno's less than complimentary description of "moral treatment" coupled with Nell's grandfather's understanding of the institution, suggests that Mr Dick was likely to have suffered as a

result of his incarceration. Betsey Trotwood certainly believes this to be the case, for she declares that she “shall not ill-treat him as some people (besides the asylum-folks) have done” (ch.14, p.174). The use of the phrase “besides the asylum-folks” indicates that abuse and mistreatment in an asylum setting is almost a given. Furthermore, when discussing Mr Dick’s full name, she explains, “he can’t bear his name. That’s a peculiarity of his. Though I don’t know that it’s much of a peculiarity, either; for he has been ill-used enough, by some that bear it, to have a mortal antipathy for it” (ch.14, p.171). While Betsey appears to be suggesting that Mr Dick’s aversion to his own name is a result of his brother’s unkindness towards him, it can be inferred that what she is particularly referring to is the placement of Mr Dick in an asylum by his brother, and the subsequent mistreatment he experienced as a result that has caused him to reject his own name. But Mr Dick’s hatred of his own name does more than signify the mistreatment he has experienced. Rejection of one’s own name can be understood as a loss of identity, and Mr Dick’s preference of a title in front of a nickname is evidence of him possessing an identity somewhere between a child and an adult. “Mr” is formal, adult and professional, but “Dick” is very much the opposite, being informal, unprofessional and in Mr Dick’s case essentially a pet name one might give to a child. Betsey explains, “Babley – Mr Richard Babley – that’s the gentleman’s true name” (ch.14, p.171) and it is evident that Dickens chooses this unusual surname for Mr Dick on purpose. “Babley” is arguably reminiscent of “babbles” a term that might perhaps be used to describe a madman’s confused babbling, or even the unintelligible babbling of a baby. Indeed, at the beginning of *Nicholas Nickleby*, we learn that Nicholas Nickleby senior on being taken ill finds “that his reason went astray” (ch.1, p.13) and that as a result “he babbled, for a long time” (ch.1, p.13), which indicates that Dickens uses the term “babbles” to suggest madness. By rejecting this name, Mr Dick can be seen to reject both the concept of being mad and the concept of being completely childlike. “Mr Dick” therefore is a truer representation of his character, as it allows for his childlike personality, without rendering him mad because of it. Furthermore, “Babley” is also arguably not dissimilar to “Barnaby”. Bringing Barnaby Rudge to the reader’s mind may be a technique employed by Dickens to remind his readership of one of his earlier characters who was afflicted by a mental health issue, and to remind them how Barnaby was a character whose true worth often went unrecognised. The reminder of Barnaby then, indicates to the reader that Mr Dick may well also turn out to be a character who possesses more worth than one might initially think.

What is interesting is that whilst Betsey may insist on considering Mr Dick as perfectly sane, she also reveals that she does not consider him capable of looking after himself. By claiming “*I am ready to take care of him*” (ch.14, p.174), Betsey is acknowledging the childlike nature of Mr Dick, and is ready to assume a motherly and a protective role towards him, because she is aware that he requires it. Just as Gabriel Varden recognised Barnaby’s childlike nature, without considering him an “idiot”, Betsey recognises Mr Dick’s childlike nature, without considering him insane. Whilst Betsey may choose to believe that Mr Dick is sound of mind, we as readers may be forgiven for differing in opinion. Mr Dick’s continual wonder at how following the beheading of King Charles the First in 1649, “the people about him have made that mistake of putting some of the trouble out of *his* head, after it was taken off, into *mine*?” (ch.14, p.172), strongly suggests his mental faculties are not what they ought to be. Indeed, as Edwin Fuller Torrey and Judy Miller declare when discussing Mr Dick, “such beliefs, called thought insertion, are a common symptom of schizophrenia” (2001, p.65). It is perhaps not surprising that Mr Dick had been sent to an asylum, for in Richard Noll’s words “the history of schizophrenia is the history of psychiatry. The earliest clear description of this disease dates to only 1809 – at about the time that the very first psychiatric textbooks were being written by dedicated physicians who worked in ‘madhouses’ and ‘asylums’ with the ‘insane’” (2009, p.ix). Dickens is demonstrating an acute understanding of those in society who are likely to be deemed fit only for the insane asylum, but he is desirous to show through Mr Dick, why this need not necessarily be their only fate. Despite his submissive and childlike nature, Mr Dick also exhibits some very adult behaviour, principally his desire to work. This desire manifests itself in his continued attempts to write his Memorial. As Betsey Trotwood explains, “he is memorialising the Lord Chancellor, or the Lord Somebody or other” (ch.14, p.174), to which information David adds, “I found out afterwards that Mr Dick had been for upwards of ten years endeavouring to keep King Charles the First out of the Memorial; but he had been constantly getting into it” (ch.14, p.175). His determination to keep working on the Memorial is an indication that Mr Dick does not belong in an asylum; for when writing about work in Victorian insane asylums, Mark Stevens declares that, “most work performed by patients is unskilled” (2014, p.76) and that asylums often claimed that “many patients complain they should not have to work” (2014). Indeed, Mr Dick may be understood as possessing the complete opposite to this mind-set, being

described by David as having “begun to fret and worry himself out of spirits and appetite, as having nothing useful to do” (ch.36, p.443) when Betsey Trotwood finds herself in financial difficulties.

But Dickens goes one step further than depicting Mr Dick as just desirous to work and be useful, he demonstrates through Mr Dick how those deemed fit only for the insane asylum may actually become working and useful members of society. As David explains, he and his friend Traddles “concocted a scheme in virtue of which we got him [Mr Dick] to work next day, with triumphant success” (ch.36, p.444). David states:

On a table by the window in Buckingham Street, we set out the work Traddles procured for him – which was to make, I forget how many copies of a legal document about some right of way – and on another table we spread the last unfinished original of the great Memorial. [...] My aunt reported to us, afterwards, that, at first, he was like a man playing the kettle-drums, and constantly divided his attentions between the two; but that, finding this confuse and fatigue him, and having his copy there, plainly before his eyes, he soon sat at it in an orderly businesslike manner, and postponed the Memorial to a more convenient time. (ch.36, p.444).

Mr Dick being described as conducting himself “in an orderly and businesslike manner” is a far cry from “looking very deferentially and seriously at Traddles, and sucking his thumb” (ch.36, p.444) which is how he was described prior to being given employment. By being given work and a sense of purpose, there is actually a marked improvement in Mr Dick’s mental condition. Being treated as an adult and given some responsibility enables Mr Dick to be perceived more as an adult, and less like a child. Indeed, David goes on to state that:

He earned by the following Saturday night ten shillings and ninepence; and never, while I live, shall I forget his going about to all the shops in the neighbourhood to change this treasure into sixpences, or his bringing them to my aunt arranged in the form of a heart upon a waiter, with tears of joy and pride in his eyes. He was like one under the propitious influence of a charm, from the moment of his being usefully employed [...] “No starving now, Trotwood” said Mr Dick, shaking hands with me in a corner. “I’ll provide for her sir!” ch.36, p.444-45).



Mr Dick still expresses some undeniably childlike behaviour, such as arranging his money “in the form of a heart”, but the message Dickens is conveying is that despite his childlike traits, Mr Dick is still able to be a functioning and a useful member of society. There is even a sense of role reversal, with Mr Dick wanting to provide for Betsey, indicating that he himself recognises the change in his situation as a chance to assume a more adult role. Furthermore, the “heart” reminds the reader that like Barnaby, Mr Dick has a kind and loving nature, and his liminality rather than rendering him “socially segregated” (Joseph, 2011, p.138) is actually what draws others like Betsey and Pip towards him. Mr Dick is not necessarily cured of his schizophrenia, for as David explains he only “postponed the Memorial to a more convenient time” (ch.36, p.444) and there is no suggestion that King Charles the First would cease to plague the progress of the Memorial. What is important however is that Mr Dick was able to cope with this mental hindrance in the working world, and that is what Dickens wants his readers to recognise. David explains that with regards to the amount of work supplied Mr Dick, “we took great care that he should have no more to do than was good for him” (ch.36, p.444), and that “he did not begin with the beginning of the week” (ch.36, p.444). David is aware that Mr Dick will require more support than others may do in order to fulfil his assigned task; and David’s willingness to provide Mr Dick with the support he needs can be understood as Dickens demonstrating how society should behave towards those with mental health issues. Rather than shutting away and abusing individuals who suffer from mental health conditions such as schizophrenia in asylums, society should instead exercise some kindness and compassion towards them, supporting them in becoming valued and useful members of society.

Troubled minds and the liminal spaces they produce are also engaged with in *Bleak House*, through the character of Krook, the rag and bottle merchant. Dickens uses Krook to discuss how the inability to learn to read and write can seriously affect one’s mental health. Krook reveals to John Jarndyce that he is “trying to learn myself to read and write” (ch.14, p.236). His use of the verb “learn” rather than “teach” may well be used to highlight Krook’s cockney accent, but it can also be understood as the first indication that he has a confused approach to learning. Krook explains that his learning is going, “slow, bad” (ch.14, p.236), and he attributes this to it being “hard at my time of life” (ch.14, p.237). This reference, coupled with the fact that Dickens explicitly refers to

him as “the old man” (ch.14, p.236) indicates that Krook is to be recognised as a character who occupies the space in between a child and an adult. His desire to learn to read and write is reminiscent of a school child, but Dickens has ensured that the reader understands Krook is very much an adult in age. Krook is adamant that he will teach himself to be literate, rather than taking lessons from someone else, stating, “I don’t know what I may have lost, by not being learned afore. I wouldn’t like to lose anything by being learned wrong now” (ch.14, p.237). His deep distrust of being “learned wrong” suggests that he is suffering from paranoia, and indeed it causes Mr Jarndyce to enquire of Mr Woodcourt, “whether Mr Krook were really, as his lodger represented him, deranged?” (ch.14, p.237). Woodcourt replies that “he did not think him mad, yet” (ch. 14, p.237). Indeed, Krook is not mad, instead it can be argued that he is suffering from a learning difficulty. As James Doyle argues; Krook “is almost certainly dyslexic” (2008, p.215). When describing the traits of dyslexia, Dr Risha Mishra and Dr Mohammed Ashraf Shah explain that dyslexia “can affect anyone attempting to decode a printed alphabetic language [...]. It is a specific learning disability which is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities” (2016, p.95). Dickens refers to Krook’s difficulty with the alphabet through Esther’s description of his shop in which “against the wall, were pasted several large printed alphabets in several plain hands” (ch.14, p.236). Krook has evidently attempted multiple times to master the learning of the alphabet, and yet as Mr Weevle states later in the novel, Krook “can make all the letters separately, and he knows most of them separately when he sees them; he has got on that much, under me; but he can’t put them together” (ch.32, p.512). Krook appears to possess “difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition” and has poor “decoding abilities”; traits that Mishra and Shah link explicitly to dyslexia. Dickens displays an acute understanding of the condition despite it not having been officially recognised or diagnosed during the time in which he was writing, for as Marta Zapala-Kraj writes, “the first stage, the actual origins of dyslexia, identified the first subjects with reading and language deficits, who were generally acquired aphasic patients, and lasted until the end of the nineteenth century [...] modern theories from 1970 created the foundations of our current knowledge about dyslexia” (2014, p.6). Dickens may have been writing during a time in which there was a growing interest in language-based studies and research, but his interpretation of dyslexia and the way it affects those who suffer from it is decidedly modern.

Despite his clear difficulty in learning to read and write, Krook meets with no sympathy from the characters around him. Considered as “deranged” by John Jarndyce, Krook is also accused by other characters of hindering his own learning due to being an alcoholic. Woodcourt states that Krook is “always more or less under the influence of raw gin” (ch.14, p.217), a sentiment that is seconded by Mr Weevle later in the novel when he says of Krook, “read! He’ll never read [...] he’s too old to acquire it now – and too drunk” (ch.32, p.512). Mr Weevle holds the opinion that Krook’s alcoholism is the reason he will never learn to read, but this opinion is not representative of Dickens’s own view on alcoholism. Charles Kevin Robertson declares:

As one of Dickens’s biographers puts it, “The widespread assertion that drunkenness was the cause of many evils rather than a result of already existing ones angered him [Dickens], as if eradication of a symptom in any way dealt with the disease [...]. Beginning with his earliest sketches, he had unequivocally claimed that societies with high levels of poverty and ignorance created the conditions that encouraged high levels of crime and alcoholism” (2004, p.191).

It is far more likely therefore that Dickens is suggesting that being unable to lift himself out of ignorance, by failing to learn how to read, has resulted in Krook’s drunkenness, rather than his being illiterate because of his alcoholism. Mr Weevle claims Krook is “too old” to learn to read, and this statement indicates that whatever the reason for his inability to become literate, Krook exists in an indeterminate liminal space. Childlike in his desire to learn to read and write, he also possesses the identity of an old alcoholic man, whose brain is incapable of processing the information it is required to. Indeed, when discussing the consequences of alcohol abuse Jennifer Peters declares that:

Emotionally, you may find yourself feeling more anxious or depressed [...] alcohol is a depressant and can lower your mood once it’s fully in your system. You might also notice that you have a cloudier mind and have a hard time focusing on things or concentrating on your work (p.17, 2018).

Krook certainly possesses a “cloudier mind” than others when it comes to learning, and he does express acute anxiety at not being able to read, meaning that whilst his

alcoholism doesn't cause his assumed dyslexia, it does play a part in reaffirming his liminality. Dickens's decision to have Woodcourt question Krook's sanity is in keeping with a popular nineteenth-century opinion, namely that drunkenness leads to madness, and this opinion is depicted clearly in George Cruikshank's "The Bottle" (1847). As Cohen and Rabb explain, "The Bottle" depicts the downfall of a respectable household due to drink" (p.32, 1980). The final plate in the sequence depicts the father of the household having gone mad as a result of his alcoholism.

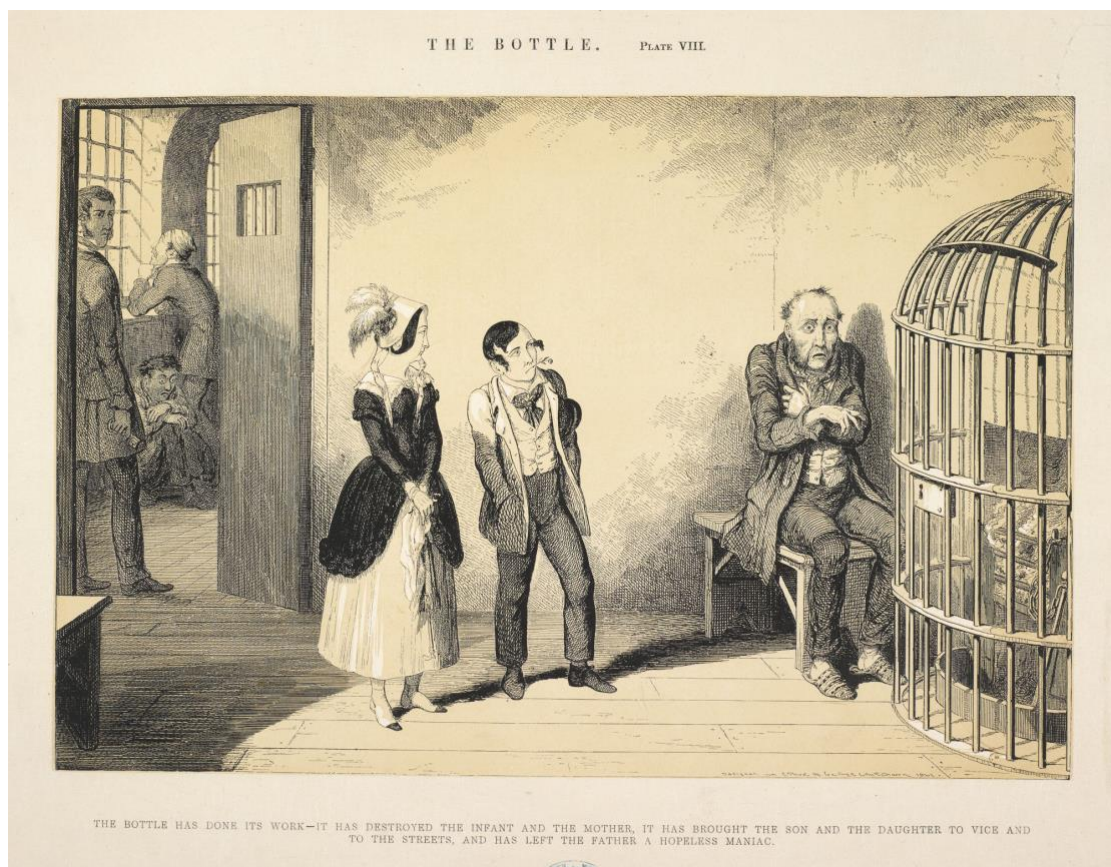


FIGURE 7. "PLATE EIGHT". ILLUSTRATION FROM GEORGE CRUIKSHANK'S *THE BOTTLE* (1847), ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE CRUIKSHANK. [ONLINE] AVAILABLE AT:<[HTTPS://WWW.BL.UK](https://www.bl.uk)> [ACCESSED 24 AUGUST 2020].

As Cruikshank declares in the commentary that accompanied this illustration, "the bottle has done its work — it has destroyed the infant and the mother, it has brought the son and the daughter to vice and to the streets, and has left the father a hopeless maniac" (1847). The father's dependency on "The Bottle" can be likened to an infant's dependency on bottled milk, but whereas the bottle which feeds the infant allows it to

grow and develop, the father's bottle has the opposite effect, reducing him to a regressed state. One of the earliest purchases [of "The Bottle"] in the late summer of 1847 was Dickens himself [...] Dickens considered "The Bottle" powerfully drawn, but philosophically erroneous" (Cohen and Rabb, p.32, 1980). Unlike the father in "The Bottle", Krook, has a reason to turn to drink; his frustration at being unable to read means alcohol becomes his only form of relief.

But Krook's frustration at his inability to learn to read manifests itself in more than just alcoholism. Krook is perhaps best known in *Bleak House* as being the character who suffers a terrible death, that of "Spontaneous Combustion" (ch.32, p.519). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines spontaneous combustion as "the fact of taking fire, or burning away, through conditions produced within the substance itself; *spec.* the alleged occurrence of this fact in persons addicted to the excessive use of alcohol" (2017). Considering that Krook is "always more or less under the influence of raw gin" (ch.14, p.217), spontaneous combustion may seem like a fitting way to kill him off, but if we consider the argument that Krook's alcoholism is a result of his frustration at being unable to read, his death takes on new relevance. Rather than simply being the result of alcoholism, Krook's spontaneous combustion can be understood as the ultimate consequence of his being unable to learn to read. The narrator explains that "here is a small burnt patch of flooring; here is the tinder from a little bundle of burnt paper" (ch.32, p.519), indicating that right up until the moment of his death, Krook was plagued and tormented by possessing documents whose contents he could not access because of his illiteracy. His being consumed by flames is symbolic of him being consumed by frustration. "The Lord Chancellor" being Krook's nickname throughout the novel, Dickens writes of his death, "The Lord Chancellor of that Court, true to his title in his last act, has died the death of all Lord Chancellors in all Courts, and of all authorities in all places under all names soever, where false pretenses are made, and where injustice is done" (ch.32, p.519). Perhaps the injustice that Dickens is referring to in Krook's case, is actually society's inability to recognise the complex and deeply frustrating condition that has always plagued him. Hablot K. Browne's illustration depicting Krook's untimely death can be interpreted as representing the state of his mind at the moment of his spontaneous combustion.





FIGURE 8. "THE APPOINTED TIME". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *BLEAK HOUSE* (1852-53), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *BLEAK HOUSE*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) P.518).

The thick smoke that engulfs the room in the illustration blurs the image, making it impossible to understand what is truly happening and where the source of the smoke originates from. Guppy leaning forward and straining to see through the smoke indicates its density, while the smoke itself represents the confusion and the frustration of Krook's mind at the moment of his death. Browne's illustration provides a visual image of the state of Krook's mind where literacy was concerned, and it allows the reader to better understand why Krook's progress in learning to read was "slow [and] bad" (ch.14, p.236). Watching over the chaos in the illustration is a rag doll, hanging from the ceiling. The presence of this doll is a reminder of the childlike identity that Krook never escaped as a result of being unable to learn to read. It signifies that Krook

is to be remembered as a character who only ever existed in the space between a child and an adult, because he never completed the rite of passage of becoming literate. When talking about Krook's death in *Bleak House*, S. Askwith argues that "Dickens did actually believe in spontaneous combustion, but its inclusion – even in a fictional piece – opened him up to a barrage of ridicule from a considerable body of scientific opinion, which recognised spontaneous combustion as patent nonsense" (2009, p.189). Spontaneous combustion may indeed appear to be a farfetched theory, but when it is considered as a way to illustrate the level of frustration that Krook suffered as a result of being unable to learn to read, its place within the novel becomes easier to understand. Krook can be understood as the embodiment of the argument that "poverty and ignorance created the conditions that encouraged high levels of crime and alcoholism" (Robertson, 2004, p.191). Unable to lift himself out of ignorance, despite his continued efforts, Krook finds solace in alcohol, whilst his name "Krook" makes reference to crime. The real crime with Krook however, is that he is judged by society and regarded as being responsible for his inability to learn, rather than regarded with empathy. Through Krook, Dickens is advocating that society should not be so quick to judge those who struggle to learn to read. Rather than simply assuming that illiteracy is the fault of the individual, a better understanding of why it occurs is needed, and more recognition is needed of how deeply frustrating it can be for those suffering from such a condition. Once again, Dickens is ahead of his time in identifying and demanding sympathy for a condition which is as yet not formally recognised.

### **Consequential Mental Health Issues**

So far, I have discussed how innate mental health issues are presented in several of Dickens's novels, and how they are experienced by characters who inhabit the liminal space between a child and an adult. But Dickens also created characters who possess mental health issues as the result of a specific event or series of events. Much has been written about Trauma Studies in relation to literature, and as J. Roger Kurtz argues "While literary scholars began to engage the language and concepts of trauma in an intensive way beginning in the mid-1990s, it is clear that the roots of this engagement date from a much earlier period" (2018, p.2). Kurtz also explains that:

Fundamentally, trauma is a wound. This, at least, is its Greek origin, where it denotes a physical injury from an external cause [...] Today, however, we more frequently use the term *trauma* to describe emotional or psychological injury as opposed to bodily harm [...] We think of trauma as a pathological mental and emotional condition, an injury to the psyche caused by catastrophic events (p.1-2).

Dickens engages with the theme of trauma in his fiction. Barnaby Rudge and John Willet exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress disorder after their engagement with the Gordon Riots is an example of psychological trauma, but as I have already explained, Dickens took pains to ensure that the reader recognised that these characters possessed mental conditions, prior to their involvement with the mob. However, the effects of suspected PTSD are also evident in *Great Expectations* through Miss Havisham, who appears to develop the condition following the trauma of being jilted on her wedding day. Herbert explains that after her wedding was cancelled, she suffered a “bad illness” (vol.2, ch.3, p.182) and that “she has never since looked upon the light of day” (vol.2, ch.3, p.188). On seeing Miss Havisham for the first time, Pip explains “I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone” (vol.1, ch.8, p.58). Caught in the liminal space between being a youthful bride, and a “withered” old lady, Miss Havisham is reminiscent of a child playing dress-up; whilst her desire to have a child come to her home because “she wanted him to go and play there” (vol.1, ch.7, p.52) suggests she yearns for the family environment that fate has denied her. Crucially, it is important to note that unlike John Willet, Miss Havisham does not receive any help after the traumatic event which befalls her; instead her mind is left to deteriorate until her physical person resembles “waxwork and skeleton” (vol.1, ch.8, p.58). When discussing Miss Havisham, Laurence Talairach suggests that “the narrative highlights tensions regarding Miss Havisham’s body, particularly in the way it uses Gothic paraphernalia to metaphorise the villainess’s corporeality” (2019, p.84). Left unaided Miss Havisham’s PTSD has lasting and devastating effects as she struggles to be a mother figure to Estella. Herbert says of Estella “That girl’s hard and haughty and capricious to the last degree, and has been brought up by Miss Havisham to wreak revenge on all the male sex” (vol.2, ch.3, p.177). In need of care herself, and unable to make the transition into womanhood because of her PTSD, Miss Havisham has a child placed in her care, despite being unfit to assume a parental role. But rather than seeing



her as a “villainess” as Talairach describes her, Dickens is in fact encouraging his readership to see her as a victim of neglect. Through Miss Havisham, Dickens highlights how abandoning people to their mental illness affects not only the sufferer, but those around them, and appears to advocate that rather than allowing them to suffer alone, those who experience life-changing trauma should be protected rather than neglected by society.

Trauma and its effects are present elsewhere in Dickens’s fiction. In *Bleak House*, through Miss Flite and Richard Carstone, Dickens engages with the topic of obsession, presenting it as a deeply damaging and even fatal mental health condition, which can be attributed to the trauma of the ongoing Jarndyce v. Jarndyce court case. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is the mental health condition most associated with obsession. In Michael Poyurovsky’s words: “OCD is associated with disturbances of thoughts, affect, somato-sensory perception, and motor function [...] OCD is most commonly characterized by the occurrence of both obsessions and compulsive rituals” (2013, p.4). Len Sperry declares that “obsession is a persistent and intrusive, thought, image, or impulse, that creates considerable distress or discomfort” (2015, p.776). This definition is relevant to Miss Flite, who declares, “I find the nights long, for I sleep but little, and think much” (ch.5, p.73), indicating that she is continually plagued by her obsession with the Jarndyce v. Jarndyce case and her expectation of a judgement from it. According to Robert Hudak, “Pierre Janet first provided clinical descriptions of OCD in 1903” (2011, p.1), meaning that during the time in which Dickens was writing it was not a recognised medical condition, and yet, through Miss Flite we are given an insight into the damaging effects of living with obsession and what it means to be unable to escape it. Her entrapment is ironically highlighted by her name, because despite what her name suggests, she is unable to take flight and flee from her obsession. Her wits may have taken flight, but she herself remains trapped. Having met “the wards in Jarndyce” (ch.3, p.47) as she calls them, Miss Flite states, “I expect a judgement. Shortly. On the Day of Judgement. This is a good omen for you. Accept my blessing!” (ch.3, p.49). This prophecy by Miss Flite is an example of cruel irony on the part of Dickens, for as is revealed towards the end of the novel, the judgement that “the whole estate is found to have been absorbed in costs” (ch.65, p.975) comes on “the Day of Judgement” for Richard, as it is on the day that the court case finally ends, that Richard,

“with one parting sob began the world. Not this world, O not this! The world that sets this right” (ch.65, p.979). Far from blessing them with good luck or being a good omen, Miss Flite’s purpose in the novel is to act as a warning to the young wards of the misery that is to come if they become too involved in the seemingly hopeless and never-ending case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Miss Flite reveals how dangerous it can be to become obsessed with expecting “a judgement” when she reveals her own family history. She explains, “my father expected a Judgement, [...] my brother. My sister. They all expected a Judgement. The same that I expect” (ch.35, p.566). She goes on to tell her story:

“We all lived together. Ve-ry respectably, my dear! First, our father was drawn – slowly. Home was drawn with him. In a few years, he was a fierce, sour, angry bankrupt, without a kind word or a kind look for any one. He had been so different, Fitz-Jarndyce. He was drawn to a debtor’s prison. There he died. Then our brother was drawn – swiftly – to drunkenness. And rags. And death. Then my sister was drawn. Hush! Never ask to what! Then I was ill, and in misery” (ch.35, p.567).

What is most poignant about Miss Flite’s story, is her awareness that she too has been overcome by the Chancery obsession that has caused the ruin and the death of her loved ones. Dickens is depicting obsession like a disease for which there is no cure, and nobody appears to know this better than Miss Flite herself. Whilst she recognises that there is no hope of her overcoming her obsession with Chancery, she strives to protect those newly acquainted with the court case from following suit. When speaking about Richard she states, “I know what will happen. I know, far better than they do, when the attraction has begun. I know the signs [...] I saw them beginning in our friend the Ward in Jarndyce. Let some one hold him back. Or he’ll be drawn to ruin” (ch.35, p.567). Richard is of course drawn to ruin in the end, but what is interesting is that despite failing to heed Miss Flite’s warning, he instantly recognised in her, the presence of a mental health issue, as the following conversation between Richard and Miss Flite reveals:

“Mad!” whispered Richard, not thinking she could hear him.

“Right! Mad, young gentleman,” she returned so quickly that he was quite abashed. “I was a ward myself. I was not mad at that time,” curtsying low, and smiling between every little sentence. “I had youth, and hope.” (ch.3, p.47)

Richard is essentially looking upon his own fate when he looks upon Miss Flite, but on their first meeting, he represents the “youth, and hope” that Miss Flite has long been without. At this early point in the novel, Esther says of Richard, “he was very young; not more than nineteen then, if quite so much” (ch.3, .44). Richard appears very much a child, who whilst he recognises Miss Flite as having a mental health issue, does not understand at this point the severity of her obsession, and how he is in danger of following in her footsteps. Miss Flite on the other hand appears the older and wiser character, whose purpose is to warn Richard of getting involved in the doomed court case. She is an example of how someone can develop obsession, but Richard does not seem to recognise that this means he could also develop the same condition if he goes down the same path.

On meeting Miss Flite for the first time, Esther refers to her as a “little old woman” (ch.3, p.47), and the description of Miss Flite as an old woman is one that is continually repeated throughout the novel. However, it is Esther’s description of her as “little” which is particularly interesting, for it is the first indication that Miss Flite is also to be considered as a character who inhabits the space in between a child and an adult. The original illustration of “The Little Old Lady” by Hablot K. Browne is somewhat misleading in its depiction of her as “little”.



FIGURE 9. "THE LITTLE OLD LADY". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *BLEAK HOUSE* (1852-53), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *BLEAK HOUSE*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) P.48.

Depicting her as standing in the shadows whilst the three youthful characters stand in the light, Browne highlights the darkness that has descended upon Miss Flite as a result of the court case, but she does not particularly fit the description of "little". Already standing at a distance from the three companions, Miss Flite does not appear much smaller in stature than Esther herself. She does appear to be of a slighter frame than the other three characters, but Ester is wearing a heavy shawl wrapped around her, and

Richard and Ada are both wearing coats, whilst Miss Flite appears to have no such garments about her person; it is therefore not surprising that she appears slighter in build than the other three. Perhaps then, having Esther describe Miss Flite as “little” refers less to her physical frame, and more to the capacity of her mind. Dickens intends his readers to consider Miss Flite as having the mind-set of a little child, despite her being “an old woman”. Further evidence for the claim that Dickens intends Miss Flite to be recognised as a childlike character can be found in the way other characters within the novel speak to her. Following her meeting with “the wards in Jarndyce” (ch.3, p.47), Mr Kenge speaks firmly to her, assuming an authoritative air over her, the way one might do with a child who is expected to obey instructions, stating, “now don’t be troublesome, that’s a good soul!” (ch.3, p.49). Despite being an “old lady”, in the presence of “Youth. And hope. And beauty” (ch.3, p.49) as Miss Flite calls the wards, Mr Kenge speaks to her as if she were a child, whose presence among adults has become irritating. Mr Krook on the other hand, rather than adopting a stern approach with Miss Flite, appeases and humours her, the way an adult might indulge a child in a game; by encouraging the wards to look in on her chambers, stating, “aye, aye! Please her! It won’t take a minute!” (ch.5, p.69). The obsession with Chancery may have driven her family members to debt, drunkenness and prostitution, but for Miss Flite it has rendered her mind childlike. When Miss Flite learns that Miss Jellyby is not connected with the Jarndyce suit, she states; “she does not expect a judgement? She will still grow old. But not so old.” (ch.5, p.66). This is an interesting statement from Miss Flite, because it indicates that she considers herself one who has grown old waiting for the Chancery case to end, and that whilst she recognises her obsession with the case, she does not recognise how childlike that obsession has rendered her. She is like a child waiting to grow up, but never achieving it; essentially, she grows old, waiting to grow up. Even when the Chancery suit finally comes to an end, the reader is given no indication that Miss Flite finds any peace with the arrival of her long-awaited judgement. In Esther’s words, “when all was still, at a late hour, poor crazed Miss Flite came weeping to me, and told me that she had given her birds their liberty” (ch.65, p.979). This is the last we hear of Miss Flite; she appears in the novel no more. The last image we have of Miss Flite is of her “crazed” and “weeping”; her birds may have been given their liberty, but Miss Flite appears as troubled and as haunted by her obsession as ever. Richard A. Posner says of *Bleak House* that “the novel was intended as a serious criticism of a particular legal institution” (2009, p.188). Through Miss Flite and other characters,

Dickens exposes just how damaging the legal system can be, as it is the Chancery case which causes Miss Flite's obsession. Furthermore, he highlights that obsession is more than just a fixation on something, it is a deeply troubling mental health issue, which destroys lives and permanently alters the sufferer's mind.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed how alcoholism can be recognised as the consequence of Krook's inability to learn to read, but Dickens also engaged with the topic of alcoholism as a mental health issue in its own right. Alcoholism would have been a contemporary issue that Dickens's readership would have been aware of, due to the Temperance Movement that occurred in the nineteenth-century. According to Lilian Lewis:

When the temperance reformation came to England in the late 1820s it did not come directly to London, but was first established, almost prophetically, in the north [...] it did not take long, however, for it to spread throughout the country and to find support among many individuals who were committed to other reforming causes. [...] The first English temperance reformers did not regard alcoholic drink itself as evil or its consumption as wrong; they drank wines and fermented beverages quite freely and condemned only the excessive use of distilled spirits. [...] Drunkenness was what the reformers aimed to discourage, not social drinking (2016, p.9-10).

Despite the Temperance Movement having its origins in the promotion of controlled drinking only, in Sally Mitchell's words, "by the 1840s temperance usually meant teetotalism" (2011, p.788). An initial reading of *Barnaby Rudge* may be inclined to convince the reader that Dickens was in support of teetotalism, given his damning depiction of drunkenness throughout the novel, but as stated earlier in this chapter, there is evidence to show Dickens believed "poverty and ignorance created the conditions that encouraged high levels of crime and alcoholism" (Robertson, 2004, p.191). It is for this reason that we can recognise Dickens's depiction of alcoholism in *Barnaby Rudge* as something other than advocating teetotalism. Dickens depicts alcoholism in the novel as a serious addiction caused by poverty and continued hardship. We see this most distinctly through the character of Hugh, whom John Willet describes as "bottled up and corked down" (ch.11, p.95), before going on to recount Hugh's tragic backstory. John describes Hugh as "that chap, whose mother was hung when he was a little boy [...] that chap that was then turned loose, and had to mind cows, and frighten birds

away, and what not, for a few pence to live on” (ch.11, p.96). John’s description of Hugh as “a little boy” when his mother was executed is an indication that Hugh is a liminal character who inhabits the space between child and an adult. From the traumatic moment of his mother’s death, child though he was, Hugh became an adult who had to work for his living and his survival. Hugh’s alcoholism then, can be understood as a result of his desperate situation; drink became his sole means of comfort. Just as Krook found comfort in alcohol when he struggled to read, Hugh found comfort in it when he struggled to survive. Hugh himself offers evidence for this claim when later on in the novel his response to Mr Chester’s accusation that “you were drinking before you came here” (ch.23, p.187) is:

“I always am. Why not? Ha ha ha! What’s so good to me as this? What ever has been? What else has kept away the cold on bitter nights, and driven hunger off in starving times? What else has given me the strength and courage of a man, when men would have left me to die, a puny child? I should never have had a man’s heart but for this [...]. I drink to the drink, master” (ch.23, p.187).

For Hugh, alcohol has taken the place of his mother, providing him with comfort when there was no one else to provide it for him. Hugh refers to having “the strength and courage of a man” despite being “a puny child”, indicating that as “a little boy”, he possessed the identity of both a child and an adult. But Hugh does not lose his childlike identity despite having now physically grown into a man. Unlike children who grow into adults and become independent of those they have depended on as a child, Hugh remains as dependent on alcohol as ever; he does not lose the attachment that he had for alcohol as a child. The idea that the loss of his mother leads Hugh to develop a mental health issue is a strikingly modern concept for the time in which Dickens was writing. It is reminiscent of Attachment Theory, a psychoanalytical theory which is attributed to the British psychologist John Bowlby in the twentieth-century. In Peter Fonagy’s words:

John Bowlby’s work on attachment theory started when, at the age of 21, he worked in a home for maladjusted boys. Bowlby’s clinical experience with two boys, whose relationships with their mothers were massively disrupted, made a profound impact on him. A

retrospective study he carried out ten years later [in 1944] examining the history of 44 juvenile thieves, formalised his view that the disruption of the early mother-child relationship should be seen as a key precursor of mental disorder (2010).

Hugh fits the description of someone who can be associated with the concept of Attachment Theory. It appears that Dickens had an acute sense of how important the early mother-child relationship is, and what the damaging effects of severing that relationship are, long before it was officially documented by John Bowlby. Hugh's mental health condition is the result of being "turned loose" (ch.11, p.96) as a child into a society that would offer him none of the comforts his mother had provided for him, leaving drink his only option.

The illustration of Hugh passed out from drinking in Chapter Eleven by Hablot K. Browne does much to reinstate Hugh's attachment to drink.





FIGURE 10. "HUGH". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *BARNABY RUDGE* (1841), ILLUSTRATION BY H.K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *BARNABY RUDGE*, (WARE: WORDSWORTH CLASSICS, 2010) P. 97.

Hugh is being depicted in this illustration very much as one who lives without any form of comfort. Browne is emphasising the hardship Hugh has become accustomed to by highlighting his resting place to be nothing more than a hard wooden bench. But depicting Hugh slumped asleep in a sitting position rather than lying down is an interesting decision on Browne's part, as the description of Hugh by Dickens that accompanies this illustration states that Hugh "lay stretched upon the bench" (ch.11, p.95). By depicting Hugh in a sitting position rather than a prostrate one, Browne appears to be accentuating Hugh's dependency on alcohol, indicating that he has fallen

into an unconscious state as a direct result of excessive drinking, rather than as having made the conscious choice to lie down and rest. It is an indication by Browne that Hugh's dependency on alcohol is not by choice, but is in fact the direct consequence of growing up in a society where, as Hugh explains, "men would have left me to die, a puny child" (ch.23, p.187). The size of the empty jug under the bench indicates the amount of alcohol that Hugh has consumed in this illustration. Browne is reiterating that Hugh possesses a serious alcohol addiction, through the size of the jug in which he consumed the alcohol. But what is arguably most interesting about this illustration is Hugh's hand reaching towards the empty jug. Browne is suggesting Hugh's unwavering attachment to alcohol, by depicting him as reaching towards it even in his sleep. Browne is highlighting how Hugh strives to be as near to alcohol as possible at all times, because it is his only source of comfort in the world; just like a child who strives to be always near their mother, because she is their main source of comfort.

It is not just Hugh however who is depicted in *Barnaby Rudge* as having an attachment to alcohol. The mob that attacks Mr Haredale's home is another example of characters that are rendered childlike because of their alcoholism. In the aftermath of the attack on Mr Haredale's home Dickens writes:

There were men who rushed up to the fire, and paddled in it with their hands as if in water; and others who were restrained by force from plunging in, to gratify their deadly longing. On the skull of one drunken lad – not twenty, by his looks – who lay upon the ground with a bottle to his mouth, the lead from the roof came streaming down in a shower of liquid fire, white hot; melting his head like wax (ch.55, p437).

The image of men paddling "as if in water" is reminiscent of a child playing in a puddle, but the reference to "their deadly longing" indicates that this is a far more sinister affair. Furthermore, the reference to the lad "who lay upon the ground with a bottle in his mouth" conjures up images of a baby being fed by the bottle. Described as "the very scum and refuse of London, whose growth was fostered by bad criminal laws" (ch.49, p.385) the men that make up this mob are an example of how "poverty and ignorance created the conditions that encouraged high levels of crime and alcoholism" (Robertson, 2004, p.191). *Barnaby Rudge* may be a historical novel, set in the century prior to the one in which it was published, but Dickens's depiction of alcohol addiction

through Hugh and the mob, allowed for a contemporary discussion of the temperance movement that was occurring during the time in which the novel was published. Indeed, a year after the publication of *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens writes to Jacob Harvey a New York merchant in which he makes his view on the temperance movement clear:

It is commonly one of the weaknesses of my characters, that they drink spirituous liquors – just because that is one of the weaknesses of real men. They do not prosper in their fortunes, because of this taste (far from it), but in spite of it, through their better nature. I certainly do not advocate Temperance Doctrines and on this plain ground [...] I think Temperance may be as immoderate and irrational in its way, as abuse in its way; and what is called Total Abstinence is in my opinion a good thing ridden to death – just as Drunkenness is (1842).

Dickens's rejection of "Temperance Doctrines" indicates that he does not consider them to be useful ways of combatting alcoholism. Furthermore, his depiction of alcohol addiction throughout his novels is a strong argument for the view that alcoholism is not an evil that people should simply refrain from, it is the direct consequence of hardship and suffering, caused often by society's harsh approach to those most desperate and in need.

Both Miss Flite and Hugh developed a mental health issue as a result of desiring something. In Miss Flite's case it was a desire to obtain a judgement that led to obsession, whilst for Hugh it was the desire to be comforted that led to addiction. But desire is not always the root cause of consequential mental health issues, as Dickens demonstrates through the character of Maggy in *Little Dorrit*. When talking about Maggy to Arthur Clennam Amy Dorrit explains, "when Maggy was ten years old [...] she had a bad fever, sir, and she has never grown any older since" (book 1, ch.9, p.98). Maggy is an example of a character inhabiting the space between a child and an adult, for despite never mentally growing beyond the age of ten, 'she was about eight-and-twenty' (book 1, ch.9, p.97). The description of Maggy's physical appearance does much to emphasise that she possesses the identity of both an adult and a child, for Dickens describes her as having "large bones, large features, large feet and hands" (book 1, ch.9, p.97). This description conjures up an image of almost a gigantesque adult, towering above those around her, but Dickens also describes her as having "no hair" (book 1, ch.9, p.97) and goes on to state that Maggy's baldness "made it so very

difficult for her old black bonnet to retain its place upon her head, that it held on round her neck like a gypsy's baby!" (book 1, ch.9, p.97). The image of Maggy with no hair and the reference to a "gypsy's baby" does much to encourage the reader to see that there is something very infantile about Maggy's appearance, indicating that her appearance can be understood as a representation of her childlike mind. The original illustration of Maggy with Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam by Hablot K. Browne does much to reinforce the notion that Maggy is very much a character who possesses the identity of both a child and an adult.



FIGURE 11. "LITTLE MOTHER". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *LITTLE DORRIT* (1855-57), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *LITTLE DORRIT*, (WARE: WORDSWORTH CLASSICS, 2002) P.99.



Maggy is considerably larger than Amy in Browne's illustration, with Amy having to physically tilt her head upwards to look at Maggy's face, and Maggy's ragged and worn-out clothes indicate that she is a character who has known the hardships of poverty for some time. This however is where the reference to Maggy being an adult ends. In this scene Amy is in the act of protectively placing her hand on top of Maggy's, indicating that she is the dominant adult, validating the illustration's title of "Little mother"; furthermore, Maggy's bonnet has been purposely drawn to represent a baby's bonnet with ruffles. Both Arthur and Amy gaze intently on Maggy, but Maggy herself appears to have a far more vacant gaze on her face, staring almost past Amy. This fits with Dickens's description of Maggy's eyes: "her large eyes were limpid and almost colourless; they seemed to be very little affected by light, and to stand unnaturally still" (book 1, ch.9, p.97). Maggy's limited engagement with the other two adults in this scene is a reminder that Maggy is "never to be more than ten years old, however long she lived" (book 1, ch.9, p.98).

The description of the fever that left Maggy with the mental age of a ten-year-old has led critics to different conclusions. Trey Philpotts argues that "Maggy may be suffering from phenylketonuria, a genetic disease caused by the body's inability to metabolize phenylalanine, an essential amino acid of all dietary proteins. Phenylketonuria, [...] was not described medically until 1934" (2003, p.129). Philpott's suggestion that Maggy may be suffering from phenylketonuria or PKU as it is also known is interesting because according to Francjan J. van Spronsen and Robin H. Lachmann, the main treatment for PKU:

Is to lower blood phenylalanine levels by restricting the intake of natural protein [...] In practical terms, being on a low-protein diet means completely avoiding high-protein foods such as meat, fish, eggs, and some dairy products. Staples such as potatoes, rice, wheat, maize, and other grains contain significant amounts of protein, and their intake has to be limited and carefully measured (2016, p.88).

Maggy "earns her own living entirely" (book 1, ch.9, p.98) from her "large basket, filled with potatoes" (book 1, ch.9, p.97) and as Sally Mitchell explains when discussing the diet of the Victorian poor:

Poor people's eating habits reflected their living conditions as well as the expense of food [...] elaborate meals were impossible. Bread is always ready to eat; potatoes can easily be boiled. In cities, a common meal was "bread and dripping". Dripping was the fat from roasted meat; house-hold and institutional cooks sold it to dealers. Used instead of butter, dripping gave bread a tasty meat flavour and supplied some needed fat (1996, p.123).

It would appear then that Maggy was likely to have had a diet that consisted predominantly of potatoes, not only because they were how she made a living, but because they were a common staple of the Victorian poor's diet. Furthermore, when Maggy is asked by Amy Dorrit what she considers a wealthy King to possess Maggy's reply is "plenty of baked potatoes for instance" (book 1, ch.24, p.277). Maggy has elevated the food she is familiar with from something that "can easily be boiled" to something that is baked, a luxury which her humble diet does not much allow for. Maggy's diet of potatoes may well have caused her to suffer the consequences of PKU if it was not "limited and carefully measured" (van Spronsen & Lachmann, 2016, p.88), for as Margaret Semrud-Clikeman and Phyllis Anne Teeter Ellison declare: "When phenylalanine levels are too high they can produce serious negative consequences, including cognitive retardation" (2009, p.330). This would explain why Maggy "was never to be more than ten years old, however long she lived" (book 1, ch.9, p.98). However, considering that PKU "was not described medically until 1934" (2003, p.129) it would be incorrect to suggest that Dickens was purposely representing this disease through Maggy. He may have wished though, to showcase the limited diet afforded to the London poor through Maggy, and the simplicity of her diet can be understood as a representation of the simplicity of her mind. Another explanation offered for the "bad fever" (book 1, ch.9, p.98) that left Maggy permanently with the mental age of "ten years old" (book 1, ch.9, p.98) is that she suffered from meningitis. Steven Wall and Helen Small argue that "the nature of Maggy's illness is unclear. Dickens's first readers might well have recognized many of the symptoms of "brain fever", a semi-clinical term current in the mid-nineteenth century and covering a range of illnesses including meningitis" (note 13, p.935). In the words of Bernard L. Maria and James F. Bale Jr.: "Children who survive bacterial meningitis also have learning difficulties, motor problems, speech delay, hyperactivity, blindness, obstructive hydrocephalus, and recurrent seizures" (2006, p.442). It is not just Maggy's learning

difficulties that offer evidence for the claim that she was a victim of meningitis. Dickens's first description of Maggy states, "an excited figure of a strange kind bounced against them [Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam] (still crying, 'Little mother!'), fell down, and scattered the contents of a large basket, filled with potatoes, in the mud" (book 1, ch.9, p.97). Maggy evidently suffers from "motor problems" and "hyperactivity" which it can be argued are a result of her "brain fever".

Whilst it is interesting to consider what medical condition ails Maggy, it is more important to consider what her purpose within the novel is. Trey Philpotts argues that "Dickens is doubtless using Maggy to promote the Hospital for Sick Children in Great Ormond Street" (2003, p.129). This suggestion is not unlikely, for as Magdi El Habbal and Peter K. Smith explain when discussing Great Ormond Street Hospital, "the hospital opened its doors on 14 February 1852 [...]. Charles Dickens was one of its first celebrity supporters and wrote a powerful article in his popular magazine 'Household Words' to publicise the hospital when it opened" (2006, p.12). The article El Haddal and Smith are referring to was titled "Drooping Buds" and in it Dickens describes the visiting Great Ormond Street Hospital stating:

We followed, up the spacious stairs into a large and lofty room, airy and gay. It had been the drawing-room of the old house. A reviving touch had passed over its decorations; and the richly ornamented ceiling, to which little eyes looked up from little beds, was quite a cheerful sight. The walls were painted, in panel, with rosy nymphs and children; and the light laughter of children welcomed our entrance. There was nothing sad here (1852, vol. 5, p.47).

Great Ormond Street Hospital is not named explicitly in *Little Dorrit*, and this is because the novel is set "thirty years ago" (book 1, ch.1, p.5) dating the narrative to 1826, which is twenty-six years prior to the opening of the hospital. Nonetheless, Maggy certainly offers a glowing review of the hospital she was admitted to when she suffered her "bad fever" stating "what a nice hospital! So comfortable, wasn't it? Oh so nice it was! Such a Ev'nly place!" (book 1, ch.9, p.98). Furthermore, hospitals are another luxury Maggy considers a wealthy King to possess, stating "let him have hospitals, because they're so comfortable" (book 1, ch.24, p.277). Maggy's positive experience of the hospital in which she was cared for reflects the positive experience

Dickens had of Great Ormond Street Hospital, making it extremely likely that Dickens wished to refer to and praise the children's hospital indirectly through Maggy.

Maggy's experience of being treated in a hospital may be a positive one, but the rest of her history is far more negative, and it is only when we consider Maggy's backstory as a whole that we truly understand what her purpose within the novel is. When talking to Arthur about Maggy, Amy explains that prior to her illness, "she had never been at peace before sir" (book 1, ch.9, p.98) and that "her old grandmother was not so kind to her as she should have been" (book 1, ch.9, p.98). Maggy verifies this account of her grandmother by making "a drinking vessel of her clenched left hand, drank out of it, and said 'Gin'. Then beat an imaginary child" (book 1, ch.9, p.98). Subjected to beatings as a child, by her sole carer, it is not surprising that Maggy relished the opportunity to be cared for in a hospital environment, as it becomes clear that the care she received whilst in hospital is the only form of care she had ever received in her life. Amy goes on to explain that she "stopped there [in the hospital] as long as she could [...] when she could stop there no longer, she came out" (book 1, ch.9, p.98). Maggy's reluctance to leave the hospital and return home is easily understood, for as Amy explains, on her return from the hospital, "her grandmother did not know what to do with her, and for some years was very unkind to her indeed" (book 1, ch.9, p.98). Despite having suffered a severe illness, Maggy was still subjected to cruelty and neglect. Dickens uses Maggy's history to engage with the topic of child abuse and neglect. Through Maggy, Dickens is arguing that it is not enough to care for children when they are unwell, society has a responsibility to ensure that children are cared for at all times. For Maggy the hospital was a safe haven where for the first time in her life, her best interests were considered. But residing in the hospital was not a permanent option, and society's lack of concern for those children who are forced to return to an abusive home is in Dickens's view unacceptable. It should not take a near fatal fever that results in permanent brain damage before a child experiences what it means to be cared for. It is a tragedy that the happiest memory of Maggy's life is of when she was gravely ill, and it is this that Dickens wished his readers to recognise.

The purpose of this chapter has been to discuss how in several of his novels Dickens presents his readers with characters who have reduced mental capacities and as a result exist somewhere in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. Splitting the



chapter into two sections I began with a discussion of “Innate Mental Health Issues” discussing characters who appear to have always possessed mental health condition or disorder, before moving on to the second part of the chapter which focused on “Consequential Mental Health Issues”, namely characters that have developed a mental health condition as the result of an event or an illness. Throughout I have discussed illustrations where appropriate, finding that they often reinforce the suggestion that a mental health condition was present in certain characters. In both sections I have drawn attention to Dickens’s ability to identify and portray characteristics of mental health issues, even in the absence of a recognised condition. Enabled by his powers of observation, Dickens presents his readers with an array of characters that are afflicted in some way by a mental health condition; he uses these characters to highlight society’s responsibility towards people who are not completely sound of mind. In each case I have focused on, the characters are rendered childlike in some way by their reduced mental faculties, causing them to exist in the liminal space somewhere between a child and an adult. Depicting them as childlike strengthens the very modern argument Dickens is making, namely that rather than being ignored or shunned by society, such people need care and support. Left unattended they remain vulnerable, but aided and supported, they too will be valued members of society.

### Chapter Three: The Infantilised Woman and the Child-Husband

“She was soon my child-wife indeed” (ch.44, p.541). The phrase “child-wife” appears twenty-six times in *David Copperfield* and is always used to describe Dora Spenlow, David’s first wife. Sarah Bilston describes Dora as “the notorious child-wife of *David Copperfield* [who] provided a model of arrested growth and permanent immaturity” (2004, p.47). Dora, however, is not the only woman in *David Copperfield* to be referred to as a child. Betsey Trotwood calls Clara Copperfield a “child” six times in chapter one alone and says of her, “you are a very baby!” (ch.1, p.8). But the image of the liminal child-wife is not confined to *David Copperfield*, it is also referred to elsewhere in Dickens’s fiction, for example, John Rokesmith in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) refers to his wife Bella Wilfer as “my dear child” (book 4, ch.6, p.687). In this chapter I examine how Dickens criticised society’s ideal of the infantilised woman, focussing first on Clara Copperfield and the mistreatment she suffers at the hands of her husband, before moving on to discuss Dora Spenlow, paying particular attention to how her education played a part in keeping her a “perpetual child”. Next I discuss Bella Wilfer, concentrating on why she was able to escape the fate of remaining a perpetual child-wife, when Clara and Dora were not. The second part of the chapter focuses on “The Child-Husband” concentrating on Harold Skimpole from *Bleak House*, Joe Gargery from *Great Expectations* and Matthew Bagnet from *Bleak House*. I suggest that all three men can be considered as child-husbands, but in very different ways. I argue that Harold Skimpole masquerades as a mere “child”, but actually possesses a large amount of slyness and cunning. I suggest that Jo Gargery first having been a victim of abuse as a child, then finds himself in an abusive marriage meaning he doesn’t transition into adulthood, and I discuss how Mathew Bagnet is unwilling to openly appear dependent on his wife’s superior competence. I will argue that these examples of the child-husband are a way for Dickens to highlight the necessity of marriage being an adult affair.

The discussion of the child-wife is a topic which has commanded the attention of Dickens scholars for several decades, for example, in 1963, *The Dickensian* published Jane W. Stedman’s article “Child-Wives of Dickens”, in which Stedman begins to explore the depths of these seemingly “insipid nonentities” (p.112). Stedman states:

In general, Dickens’s child-wives (including such diverse characters as Mercy Pecksniff and Bella Wilfer

as well as the archetype Dora Spenlow Copperfield) are pretty, artless, innocent girls, varying in their degrees of unfitness to cope with adult life, but invariably charming (p.113).

Stedman goes on to explain, “Dickens seems frequently to equate innocence with impracticality, intellectual or emotional immaturity, and sexlessness” (p.115). Whilst such traits do indeed lend themselves to an “unfitness to cope with adult life” it is the very presence of such character traits which indicate these women are integral to the novels in which they appear. Stedman argues that:

The child-wife of Dickens’s last completed novel (Bella Wilfer), less innocent, less naïve than her sisters, comes closer to life on *various* emotional levels than they do, and serves to point a moral as well as adorn a tale, for she does not merely ornament or patheticise the novel in which she appears but also furnishes in her own development one of its major themes (p.118).

I agree that Bella Wilfer “serves to point a moral”, but I would also argue that the “archetype” child-wives of Clara Copperfield and Dora Spenlow do not merely “ornament or patheticise the novel in which they appear”, but rather that they too have an important message to convey. Malcolm Andrews writes: “Clara and Dora, somewhat helpless orphans when they marry (this is part of their appeal to the men who choose them), are manoeuvred into roles which highlight their immaturity, with which they struggle to cope, and in which they finally fail” (p.136, 1994). Both Stedman and Andrews refer to the immaturity and the subsequent consequences of Clara and Dora remaining child-wives, but I will develop their arguments, suggesting that far from being “insipid nonentities”, such characters exist specifically in order for Dickens to critique a society in which middle-class women are expected to exist in the indeterminate liminal space between a child and adult.

It is important to acknowledge that the idea of the infantilised woman was not a new concept during the time in which Dickens was writing. At the end of the eighteenth-century, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft writes in her introduction, “my own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone” (p.73). When discussing the

nineteenth-century in her book *Precocious Children and Childish Adults* (2012), Claudia Nelson makes reference to Wollstonecraft's argument, suggesting that it is still the female sex that are often considered to be "in a state of perpetual childhood" when she writes:

For much of the nineteenth century the child-man tended to be represented in literature as something of a freak [...]. In contrast, Dora and her literary sisters not infrequently represented an ideal type, a form of womanhood demanded by those who surround them, even if their narratives may view this ideal as problematic.

We might therefore ask why child and woman appeared to belong together in a way that child and man did not. One answer, following an understanding promulgated by some Victorian feminists, would be that middle-class Victorian society was ordered in such a way as to keep its females perpetual children, sexually innocent, financially dependent, adorably helpless [...] it provides us with a starting point in *Dora Copperfield*, brought up in such a way that she is unable to run the household or bear children (2012, p.72).

Nelson's discussion of the females being kept as "perpetual children" principally because of their sex, indicates that Wollstonecraft's daring suggestion that women be regarded as "rational creatures" had not yet taken hold in the nineteenth-century. Nelson suggests that society strove to keep middle-class women as "perpetual children" by ensuring they stay "sexually innocent", but female sexuality was a topic of debate in the nineteenth-century, with some arguing that women were completely devoid of any sexual identity altogether. As John D. Garr explains, in "1857, physician William Acton declared that 'the majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally [...] Love of home, children and domestic duties are the only passions they feel'" (2013, p.157). Acton does not direct his argument specifically at middle-class women, but rather refers to the female sex as a whole. Acton's description of women being "not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind" would be better suited to the description of a child, than an adult woman; and it illustrates to the extreme, the idea of the infantilised woman.

## The Child-Wife

Coventry Patmore's narrative poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-62) has become known as the quintessential depiction of the ideal Victorian housewife. According to John Price:

To those in the Victorian middle classes, the idea that "a woman's place is in the home" was an ideal to be actively promoted and pursued. Take, for example, the English poet and critic Coventry Patmore. In a series of four poems published between 1854 and 1862 and known under the collective title of 'The Angel in the House', Patmore expressed his reflections on the nature of ideal femininity (2014, p.179).

Throughout the poem, appearing childlike is connected with the feminine ideal. The narrator says of Honoria:

She grows  
More infantine, auroral, mild,  
And still the more she lives and knows  
The lovelier she's express'd a child (book1, canto V,  
p.21).

Tricia Lootens argues that "Patmore's household angel seems actually to grow younger" (1996, p.54) and it is her "infantine" nature that allows the narrator to consider her "lovelier". The image of the infantilised woman is portrayed positively in *The Angel in the House*, presenting the child-wife as an ideal to be pursued. However, before its publication in 1854, another text had emerged some years earlier, which portrayed the child-wife in a far more negative light. Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* contains two extremely child-like women, Clara Copperfield and Dora Spenlow. These two women are intrinsically linked, not only through their connection to David, but also through their child-like natures. Dickens wastes no time in signalling that Clara is to be considered as a child-wife, as David explains, prior to meeting Clara, Miss Betsey "knew her to be not yet twenty" (ch.1, p.7) and when she does at last meet Clara, she exclaims "you are a very Baby!" (ch.1, p.8). Furthermore, according to David, "my mother was, no doubt, unusually youthful in appearance even for her years" (ch.1, p.8).

Clara's youthfulness however is not to be considered as a positive attribute, for David goes on to say that his mother, "hung her head, as if it were her fault, poor thing, and said, sobbing, that indeed she was afraid she was but a childish widow, and would be but a childish mother if she lived" (ch.1, p.8). Clara is openly apologetic about her childishness, viewing it as flaw in her character. The phrase used by David, "as if it were her fault" suggests that we are encouraged not to consider her childish nature as her own doing; but rather as the way in which society has forced her to be. Her misery at what she considers her own misfortune sets the tone of the novel, and indicates the way in which child-wives will be depicted throughout the narrative.

I referred earlier to Nelson's argument that Dora Spenlow, is "brought up in such a way that she is unable to run the household or bear children" (2012), but through Clara Copperfield we also see a failure to be a successful mother as a result of her childlike nature. Following her marriage to Mr Murdstone Clara becomes unable to protect her child from one who wishes to do him harm. David explains that in an attempt to stop Mr Murdstone from beating him, "I caught the hand with which he held me in my mouth, between my teeth, and bit it through" (ch.4, p.52). David goes on: "he beat me then, as if he would have beaten me to death. Above all the noise we made, I heard them running up the stairs, and crying out – I heard my mother crying out" (ch.4, p.52). Natalie McKnight states that "Clara is delicate and deferential to the point of endangering her son" (2012, p.212). However, rather than "deferential", I would argue that Clara is in fact completely helpless and can in reality do nothing to protect David. By beating her child, Mr Murdstone asserts his authority not only over David, but over Clara as well. He is teaching her a lesson as much as he is David, warning her that he is the dominant party, and like a child, it is her duty to obey and to heed him. But it is not just through brute force that Mr Murdstone asserts his authority over Clara, he also bullies her psychologically. Christine Helfrich argues that "emotional/psychological abuse is an act carried out with the intention of causing emotional pain or injury. Emotional or psychological abuse includes but is not limited to verbal assaults, insults, threats, intimidation, humiliation, and embarrassment. In addition, treating an elder like an infant" (2014, p.143). Mr Murdstone psychologically abuses Clara prior to David's beating, by reprimanding her for acting childishly. He demands "be firm with the boy. Don't say "Oh, Davy, Davy!" That's childish" (ch.4, p.48). Clara is David's elder, but by calling David a "boy" and Clara "childish" Mr Murdstone is insinuating that mother

and child are one and the same; thereby treating her like an infant and humiliating her as a mother figure. The most poignant example of Mr Murdstone's psychological abuse however, is in his ability to influence and control Clara's opinion of her own son. David recounts on his parting from his mother to go to boarding school:

“Oh Davy!” she said. “That you could hurt any one I love! Try to be better, pray to be better! I forgive you: but I am so grieved, Davy, that you should have such bad passions in your heart.”

They had persuaded her that I was a wicked fellow, and she was more sorry for that than for my going away. I felt it sorely. (ch.4, p.55)

Clara's speech is full of the “emotional pain” to which Helfrich refers, but the pain and the grief are misdirected. She refers to Mr Murdstone as one whom she loves, and is aggrieved that David bit and hurt him, but she does not appear to be angered or saddened by Mr Murdstone's ability to severely beat and cause extensive pain to her little child. Clara's mind is now completely dominated by Mr Murdstone and she appears to have abandoned David completely. No longer harbouring any regard for David's welfare, her only concern is Mr Murdstone. Her new husband may have beaten David physically, but he has also beaten her down psychologically. Mr Murdstone's treatment of Clara and David is appalling, but domestic abuse both physical and psychological was extremely common in Victorian society. According to Ian Marsh and his co-authors:

Increased focus on violence within the home (which can range from sexual to physical to mental abuse) gives the impression that this is a new phenomenon that contemporary society has to deal with. However, feminist theory in particular has highlighted that this problem was “institutionalised” during the Victorian era; in other words, given credence through the norms and values which governed everyday life and legalised through the criminal justice system. This was an era when the phrase “an English man's home is his castle” meant just that. The father/husband was the ultimate ruler and could legally chastise his wife and children in any manner he saw fit. (2004, p.114).

When Marsh et al refer to “the father/husband” they are referring to the different roles that a man assumes within a family setting, namely, he is a father to his children and a

husband to his wife. However, “father/husband” can also be understood as a hybrid, a term that defines his role towards his wife, suggesting that he is both father and husband to her. This is the role that Mr Murdstone assumes over Clara, he guarantees ultimate control over her, by treating her as her son’s equal. He denies her an adult status, by calling her childish, thereby ensuring she stays a perpetual child.

The result of Clara’s perpetual childhood is an early death. David recounts, “‘she was never well,’ said Peggotty, ‘for a long time. She was uncertain in her mind, and not happy’” (ch.9, p.113). We do not learn exactly what Clara died of, but Peggotty’s description of her as “uncertain in her mind, and not happy” suggests that she was suffering from depression by the time she died, caused by the psychological suffering she had endured at the hands of her husband. Peggotty goes on to explain:

“When her baby was born, I thought at first she would get better, but she was more delicate, and sunk a little every day. She used to like to sit alone before her baby came, and then she cried [...] I think she got to be more timid and more frightened-like, of late; and that a hard word was like a blow to her” (ch.9, p.113).

It would appear that Dickens possessed an acute sense of how damaging psychological abuse can be, long before it was formally recognised, for as Judith Worell explains:

There is growing evidence that emotional abuse can affect women in ways that are as damaging as the effects of physical abuse [...] women who have experienced emotional abuse in intimate relationships are at increased risk for problems associated with low self-concept and social isolation; these problems include symptoms of depression and anxiety (2001, p.386).

Wanting to “sit alone” and repeatedly crying, Clara displays evidence of the “social isolation” and “depression and anxiety” that Worell refers to. What is noticeable is that the original illustration by Hablot K. Browne of Clara nursing her baby that accompanies the text portrays a marked difference from the troubled and unhappy picture that Peggotty paints of her.



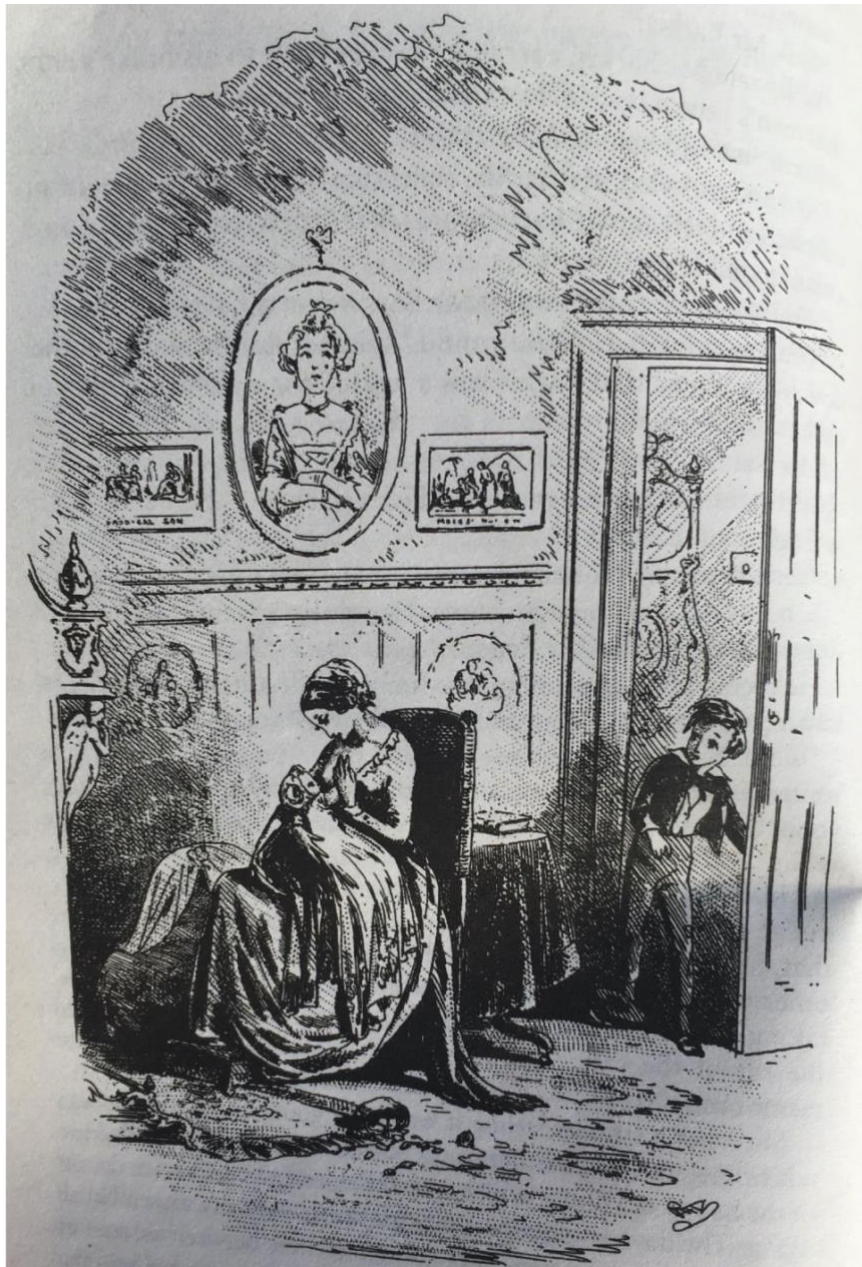


FIGURE 12. "CHANGES AT HOME". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *DAVID COPPERFIELD* (1849-50), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE. RPT IN *DAVID COPPERFIELD*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2004) P.120.

In Browne's illustration, Clara is depicted as contented and peaceful. Nursing her child with the hint of a smile on her face, she represents the ideal vision of motherhood. Youthful and beautiful, there is no hint of unhappiness about the young mother. This image is extremely interesting, because it depicts Clara as an ideal, rather than representing the child-wife who "sunk a little every day" (ch.9, p.113). Browne's illustration of Clara is in complete contrast to the Clara in David's

narrative. As explained in the introduction to this thesis, Dickens was heavily involved in the conception of the illustrations in his novels, falling short only of drawing them himself. By including an illustration that completely misrepresents Clara's desperate situation, Dickens is demonstrating how society's vision of youthful motherhood is nothing more than a vision; it bears little, if any resemblance to the reality of a young woman, stunted in her development and suffering as a result of being kept a perpetual child. The illustration represents the ideal vision of Clara in motherhood, whilst the narrative exposes the sad truth of her situation. Considering the suffering and unhappiness that Clara experiences, her death can be understood as a blessing, releasing her from the marriage that made her life so miserable. Peggotty's parting description of Clara reinforces the image of her as the tragic child-wife, for Peggotty states, "she died like a child that had gone to sleep!" (ch.9, p.114). The peaceful image of Clara in death, is a stark contrast to the sorrowful image of her whilst she was living. The death of her baby shortly after her, "the poor lamb lived but a day beyond her" (ch.9, p.114), further reiterates how damaging perpetual childhood can be for women. Clara was young and fearful of being a "childish mother" before her first child was born. By the time her second child is born she had "got to be more timid and more frightened-like" (ch.9, p.113). Rather than growing in experience and confidence, Clara actually regresses, becoming more childlike and less fit to be a mother than ever she was. Spoken to, and bullied like a child by her husband, Clara is Dickens's frank and unapologetically tragic example of what it can really mean to be a child-wife.

Clara, however, is not the only example in *David Copperfield* of a child-wife. As stated earlier, Sarah Bilston describes Dora as "the notorious child-wife of *David Copperfield* [who] provided a model of arrested growth and permanent immaturity" (2004, p.47). On meeting Dora, David describes her as being "more than human to me. She was a Fairy, a Sylph, I don't what she was" (ch.26, p.328), and he goes on to state, "I could only sit down before my fire, biting the key of my carpet-bag, and think of the captivating, girlish, bright-eyed, lovely Dora" (ch.26, p.324). For David, part of what makes Dora appear "more than human", is her "girlish" manner, and he reiterates this when he explains, "Dora, laughingly, held the dog up childishly to smell the flowers; and if we were not all three in Fairyland, certainly *I* was" (ch.26, p.333). David's reference to "Fairyland" suggests that Dora's captivatingly childlike persona is closer

to something make-believe and fantasy-like, rather than anything grounded in reality. Indeed, the term “fairy” is also used four times in *Edwin Drood* (1870) to describe Rosa “the fairy bride that is to be” (ch.6, p.46) as Mr Crisparkle refers to her. Like Dora, Rosa had been “treated in the beginning as a child much younger than her years” (ch.9, pp.70), but unlike Dora, her marriage never comes to pass. David however, quickly learns that marital bliss with his “pretty little wife” (ch.43, p.531) is in fact something of a fantasy, for he explains, “I doubt whether two young birds could have known less about keeping house, than I and my pretty Dora did” (ch.44, p.533). He goes on to state that “we felt our inexperience, and were unable to help ourselves” (ch.44, p.534). David suggests that he and Dora were equal in their inability to effectively run their home, but it quickly becomes apparent that David is far more capable of recognising where mistakes are being made. He recounts:

“Now, my own Dora” said I, “you are very childish, and are talking nonsense. You must remember, I am sure, that I was obliged to go out yesterday when dinner was half over; and that, the day before, I was made quite unwell by being obliged to eat underdone veal in a hurry; today, I don’t dine at all – and I am afraid to say how long we waited for breakfast – and *then* the water didn’t boil. I don’t mean to reproach you, my dear, but this is not comfortable” (ch.44, p.535).

David is reminiscent of Mr Murdstone, calling his wife “childish” and reproaching her for it. The difference however is that rather than scolding his wife in order to repress and belittle her, David does it hoping that it might help improve Dora’s character. Unlike Mr Murdstone, who desires a wife who can be easily bullied and dominated, David desires a wife who can be of use to him in the growth of his character. He explains, “I did feel, sometimes, for a little while, that I could have wished my wife had been my counsellor; had had more character and purpose to sustain me and improve me by” (ch.44, p.543). Becoming bored of Dora’s “girlish” character, and appearing to desire a wife more closely resembling a woman than a child, David’s main complaint about Dora is that she is not useful enough to him. He appears to want a wife who can provide him with regular and satisfying meals, and who can be an advantage in the development of his character. David’s opinion of what a successful wife should be, leads back to Coventry Patmore. In Jennifer Phegley’s words, “Patmore is known for his worship of the domestic goddess who selflessly serves her husband [...] today he is

often criticised for perpetuating a sexist view of woman as completing the man” (2012, p.5). It would appear that the sentiments expressed in *The Angel in the House* are echoes of David’s wishes in *David Copperfield*, for David also desires a wife who will serve and complete him. The opinion that a woman’s purpose is to serve a man is also referred to in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) “‘Women, after all, gentlemen’ said the enthusiastic Mr Snodgrass, ‘are the great props and comforts of our existence’” (ch.14, p.160). Snodgrass attributes a great deal of importance to the role of women, but his claim that they are “props” indicates that he believes they are only important when they serve the purpose of a man. Phegley goes on to explain that Patmore’s “vision of marriage was also reliant on the ideal of an equivalent meeting of souls” (2012, p.5). Phegley is right to use the term “ideal” for it is difficult to comprehend how in reality, two souls can be “equivalent” if one’s purpose is to “selflessly serve” the other. And yet, this is exactly what David alludes to when he laments Dora’s inadequacies. He wishes she “had had more character”, but only so that it would “sustain” and “improve” him. Nolan describes Dora as “a model of arrested growth” (2004, p.47) and through David’s depiction of the ideal wife, we gain an understanding of why this is the case. She is desired initially for her “girlish” traits, but then she is criticised for her “childish” behaviour, and is considered as lacking in “character and purpose” because she cannot assume the role of one who is equal yet still subservient to her husband. Dora’s growth is arrested because it is not possible to be the “girlish” child-wife and the capable “counsellor” at the same time; assuming the former character means that the latter must be sacrificed.

The illustration by Hablot K. Browne titled “Our Housekeeping” further highlights David’s frustration with his marital home.





FIGURE 13. "OUR HOUSEKEEPING". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *DAVID COPPERFIELD* (1849-50), ILLUSTRATION BY H.K BROWNE. RPT. IN *DAVID COPPERFIELD*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2004) P.649.

The chaos of the marital home is portrayed to the extreme, with nothing being in its rightful place, even the books on the bookshelf having been placed there in a hap-hazard fashion. But what is key about this illustration are the facial expressions worn by David and Dora. David looks positively angry as he attempts to carve the mutton, his frown indicating he is completely out of patience with the state of his marital home. It is not difficult from this illustration to gain an understanding of how frustrated David is, but what is interesting is that the description David gives of his dinner with Traddles does not match the illustration at all. David states:

I could not have wished for a prettier little wife at the opposite end of the table, but I certainly could have wished when we sat down for a little more room [...]. There was another thing I could have wished, namely, that Jip had never been encouraged to walk about the table-cloth during dinner [...]. However, as I knew how tender-hearted my dear Dora was, and how sensitive she

would be to any slight upon her favourite, I hinted no objection. For similar reasons I made no allusion to the skirmishing plates upon the floor (ch.44, p.539-40).

David's statement that he "hinted no objection" or "made no allusion" to the chaos around him, contradicts the intense frown and the look of exasperation that are present on his face in Browne's illustration. The contradiction between the illustration and the narrative indicates that Browne represents David's true feelings towards the marital home. David's narrative might try to downplay his frustration, but Browne's illustration makes it plain to see. Marianna Torgovnick states, "in 'Our Housekeeping', Dora is identified with her dog, Jip, who sits untidily amidst the untidiness of the Copperfield's dining table and room. Like Dora, Jip has long, shiny dark hair, and his central location suggests that all the disorder in the Copperfield household radiates from the child-wife" (2014, p.91). Torgovnick's discussion of Dora being at the centre of the chaos and disruption complements my argument that despite David claiming both he and Dora were to blame for the unsuccessful housekeeping, it is Dora in particular that is inept and incapable of running a home. What Torgovnick fails to mention however, is the dejected and almost sorrowful look that resides on Dora's face in the illustration. Browne depicts her as seeming to be very aware of her unsuccessful home-making, and with her eyes being cast downwards, it appears that she cannot bring herself to look at her dissatisfied husband. David's narrative describes Dora as being "sensitive", and indeed she looks very sensitive to her surroundings in "Our Housekeeping", as Browne depicts her as being aware she is failing in her duties as a wife.

Dora is undoubtedly a complex character. Her character traits are contradictory because whilst she exhibits very childlike behaviour, she also has the capacity to understand that this behaviour is a detriment to herself. Just as Clara recognised her childishness was a flaw, so does Dora. Evidence for such a claim can be found not only in Browne's depiction of her in "Our Housekeeping", but also in the fact that she herself desires to be called a "child-wife". She says to David:

"When you are going to be angry with me, say to yourself, 'it's only my child-wife!' When I am very disappointing, say 'I knew, a long time ago, that she would make but a child-wife!' When you miss what I should like to be, and I think can never be, say 'still my foolish child-wife loves me!' For indeed I do." (ch.44, p.541).

Dora's request to be referred to as a "child-wife" is interesting because it indicates her acceptance that she is incapable of possessing the attributes required to be a successful housekeeper, and by extension, a successful wife. She uses the term "foolish child-wife", as if she is aware that to be so childlike is nonsensical. Her expectation that David will be angry at her domestic failings suggests that she is aware he already views her as a "child-wife". Rather than developing her character, David reprimanding Dora results only in her resigning herself to what she knows he does not approve of. Dora's inability to improve her housekeeping skills is evident when David explains:

Dora told me, shortly afterwards, that she was going to be a wonderful housekeeper. Accordingly, she polished the tablets, pointed the pencil, bought an immense account-book [...] but the figures had the old obstinate propensity – they *would not* add up [...]. Then I would commence a practical demonstration, to which Dora would pay profound attention, perhaps for five minutes; when she would begin to be dreadfully tired (ch.44, p.542 -43).

It would seem that Dora does in fact have the desire to better herself, but does not have the drive to achieve it. Paying "profound attention, perhaps for five minutes" suggests that Dora does not enjoy the task of account management, and therefore it is lack of interest in housekeeping rather than lack of ability that results in her remaining a perpetual child-wife. She is made to feel inadequate by David because she is not interested in account management, but it is perhaps not surprising that Dora struggles to apply herself. She may have recently returned "from finishing her education in Paris" (ch.26, p.325), but as a middle-class Victorian woman, being educated did not necessarily mean learning anything practical that could be applied to the running of a home. Therefore, dry and time-consuming subjects such as book balancing and other essential housekeeping tasks would have been completely alien to Dora. In Lydia Murdoch's words, "In comparison to girls from the aristocracy and upper-middle classes, middle-class girls received instruction that was notoriously uneven and often superficial - a smattering of piano, embroidery, watercolours, and poor French, meant to make them enticing wives" (2013, p.163). The moulding of women into "enticing wives" is something which Edith in *Dombey and Son* speaks angrily about when she says of Mr Dombey "He sees me at the auction, and he thinks it well to buy me. Let him! When he came to view me – perhaps to bid – he required to see the roll of my accomplishments. I gave it to him!" (ch.28, p.367). Edith recognises that her whole

existence revolves around “laying snares for men” (ch.28, p.365). Her reference to “snares” indicates that she knows the men who marry “enticing wives” will come to regret their decision, just as we see David lament over Dora’s shortcomings. Edith’s anger was directed at her mother, but being educated away from the home setting didn’t necessarily increase the chances of learning anything practical or useful. According to Murdoch:

If not educated at home, girls from middle-class commercial families attended private day schools or, after they reached adolescence, secondary boarding schools. The number of day and boarding schools for middle-class children increased dramatically during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the quality of girls’ schools generally lagged far behind those for boys, so that the gap in academic training for boys and girls remained greatest among middle-class children. Girls’ schools typically gained prominence for their social networks and emphasis on cultivating female respectability, rather than for their academic programmes. (2013, p.163).

Murdoch’s description of the education Dora would be likely to have received goes a long way to explaining why she struggles with the task of managing finances, and why David does not. It also indicates the point Dickens is making through Dora. Rather than developing and enriching her mind, the education which Dora received has actually hindered her ability to successfully run a home. Nelson referred to the way in which “middle-class Victorian society was ordered in such a way as to keep its females perpetual children” (2012, p.72), and we see this most prominently through its education system. It is therefore understandable that Dickens uses finance management as a way to highlight Dora’s ineptitude as a housekeeper. According to Yaffa Draznin:

Managing family finances, like handling the servants, was a function the middle-class married woman learned on the job, but in this case it was something about which she had neither prior knowledge nor experience before she married. Moreover, managing the money in the Victorian household, as perhaps is true today, gave rise to anxieties of a special kind. (2001, p.81).

For Dora, the anxiety Draznin refers to comes in the form of being unable to successfully learn “on the job”. Through David’s narrative and his opinion of Dora as inadequate in her duties as a wife, Dickens is making reference to the education of middle-class women, which focussed primarily on creating as Murdoch explained,



“enticing wives” (2013, p.163); but which in reality only hindered a woman’s chance of actually becoming a successful or even a useful wife.

Influenced by David’s opinion of her, Dora experiences anxiety about not being a successful wife up until the moment she dies. Like Clara, Dora has been broken down by her husband and his disapproving opinion of her. The effect of being made to feel not good enough is evident when on her death-bed she states to David, “Oh, Doady, after more years, you never could have loved your child-wife better than you do; and after more years, she would so have tried and disappointed you that you might not have been able to love her half so well! I know I was too young and foolish” (ch.53, p.645). Once again Dora refers to herself as “foolish” indicating that she is aware that to remain in the liminal state of a child-wife is a detriment to both herself and to her husband. Even her understanding of their marriage is childlike, highlighted by her innocence in assuming that it would only have been “after more years” that David would have grown “tired and disappointed” in her. She is not aware that shortly after marrying her David had wished, she “had had more character and purpose to sustain me and improve me by” (ch.44, p543). When discussing Dora, Hannah Decker declares, “this is not a suitable girl for a wife, and the reader clearly sees that she is a hindrance to David as he tries to make his way in life. Luckily for David she sickens and dies” (1992, p.133). Suggesting that it is lucky Dora dies indicates that Decker has misinterpreted the meaning behind Dora’s death. It is not simply a lucky plot twist that Dora dies young, it is central to the point Dickens is making through her character. As with Clara, Dora’s death represents her failure to develop into an adult woman. Decker suggests she is “not a suitable girl for a wife”, but through Clara and Dora Dickens demonstrates that it is not reasonable to expect any girl to be a wife; for being a wife is the role of a woman. Decker lays blame on Dora, arguing that “she is a hindrance to David”, but in actuality, it is society’s unrealistic attitude towards middle-class women (in which David actively partakes), desiring them to be at once “girlish” and an adult, that is the real hindrance, and it is this that Dickens is alluding to through the liminal characters of Clara and Dora.

When discussing the role of women in Dickens’s novels Michael Slater suggests that in the decade 1847 to 1857 Dickens was “Apparently preoccupied with women as the insulted and injured of mid-Victorian England” (1983, p.144), whilst Jean Ferguson

Carr argues that “The proliferation of child-wives in his novels and his portrait of Esther Summerson’s strained narrative have often been sighted by critics as signs of Dickens’s preference for coy, idealised and subservient women (1989, p.64). The argument that Slater makes can be challenged. He does not make any reference to class when discussing Dickens’s representation of women, but as I have shown through my discussion of Clara and Dora Copperfield, the class that a woman belongs to has much to do with the ways in which she is “insulted and injured”. Furthermore, whilst *David Copperfield* falls into the 1847-1857 period which Slater refers to, his argument that Dickens voiced “no general condemnation of prevailing patriarchal beliefs” is problematic. I have shown how Dickens uses Clara and Dora for the explicit purpose of criticising patriarchal beliefs and expectations of middle-class women. Both are the “child-wives” that Ferguson Carr refers to, and both are portrayed negatively, so it is difficult to comprehend how this is evidence of “Dickens’s preference for coy, idealised and subservient women”. Ferguson Carr goes on to state that Dickens’s “advocacy of the domestic values of hearth and home has similarly been dismissed as a sign of a peculiar weakness, a bourgeois sentimentality aimed at pleasing or appeasing his readers” (p.164). The suggestion that Dickens “advocacy of the domestic values of hearth and home” was linked to a “bourgeois sentimentality” is disputable. This argument does not allow for the wider social context in which Dickens was writing. As Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair argue:

One of the most potent discourses of the nineteenth century, and one which is generally deemed to have reached its apogee in the Victorian period, is that of ‘separate spheres’ [...]. The key component of this ideology was the notion that men and women inhabited separate spheres: women the private world of home and family; men the public world of the market place, citizenship and civil society (2003, p.1).

Rather than “pleasing or appeasing his readers” Dickens’s focus on “separate spheres” presents his readers with a recognisable reality, and one which they can identify with as the norm.

Allowing his readers to identify with the social context of his novels, does not mean that Dickens was not using his narratives to advocate change. Clara and Dora Copperfield represent unsuccessful housewives, and their failure is caused by society’s

desire to keep them as child-wives. But Dickens also creates a character in one of his later novels who defies the notion of the child-wife, thereby enabling herself to develop into a woman; I refer to Bella Wilfer from *Our Mutual Friend*. Bella's husband refers to her as "my precious child" (book 4, ch.11, p.744), and on the day of her wedding the narrator explains how her father "was convinced that he was the father of one of the most charming of girls, and that Rokesmith was the most favoured of men" (book 4, ch.5, p.679). Having Bella described as a "girl" and Rokesmith as a "man", Dickens is setting the scene for another child-wife scenario, but it is Bella herself who suggests that she will be more than a child-wife. She states, "I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house" (book 4, ch.5, p.679). Bella's reference to being a doll is a signifier that she is not yet a woman. The image of dolls appears repeatedly throughout Dickens's novels. There is for example, Jenny Wren, the "dolls' dressmaker" (book 2, ch.1, p.214) also in our *Mutual Friend*, Dolly "a pretty, laughing girl" (ch.4, p.41) in *Barnaby Rudge*, Lucie Manette, the "golden-haired doll" (book 2, ch.11, p.145) in *A Tale of Two Cities* and Esther Summerson talking to her Dolly, when she was "a very little girl indeed" (ch.3, p.27) in *Bleak House*. In each case, the reference to dolls in some capacity is used to suggest a youthfulness and a childish element to the female character in question. When discussing Esther Summerson's doll, Janice Allan declares, "the doll functions like a mirror that reflects an image of Esther back to her, an image that provides the basis for subjectivity" (2004, p.89). Bella Wilfer employs a similar technique to Esther, but rather than having a physical doll, she uses the description of a "doll in a doll's house" to reflect back an image of herself, an image which she is quick to dismiss. Her desire to be "so much worthier" indicates that like Clara and Dora, Bella also considers the notion of a child-wife as something negative; but in Bella there is a sense of decided determination which was not present in either Clara or Dora. Clara "was afraid she was but a childish widow, and would be but a childish mother if she lived" (ch.1, p.8), whilst Dora actively chose the name "child-wife" for herself. Neither woman saw an escape from the inevitable fate of being a child-wife, but Bella does. We are told that:

Bella was fast developing a perfect genius for home [...] Mrs. J. R., who had never been wont to do too much at home as Miss B. W., was under the constant necessity of referring for advice and support to a sage volume entitled '*The Complete British Family Housewife*', which she

would sit consulting with her elbows on the table and her temples on her hands (book 4, ch.5, p.682).

Unlike Dora who “would pay profound attention, perhaps for five minutes” (ch.44, p.542 -43). Bella is dedicated to the task at hand. Sitting with her “temples on her hands” indicates that she is engaged in a mentally taxing task that requires all her concentration. When discussing the manual that Bella continually refers to, Chris Louttit says:

In glossing this fictional domestic book, editors of various paperback editions of the novel tend to make a cursory nod to Isabella Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* (1861), or attempt a reference to the broad context of household manuals. No one, however, has speculated upon a specific source – or the wider significance of that source – for Bella’s fictional manual (2009, p.101).

Arguably however, the real significance of Bella’s fictional manual lies not in its specific source, but in the fact that Bella chooses to use it. Unlike Dora who “would pay profound attention, perhaps for five minutes; when she would begin to be dreadfully tired” (ch.44, p.542 -43), Bella “was under the constant necessity of referring for advice and support”. Dora is reminiscent of a child struggling to concentrate on their lesson, whereas Bella is reminiscent of a child studying hard in an effort to develop and enrich their mind. When discussing the *Book of Household Management*, Sarah Amato describes it as “a popular resource for middle-class wives (and those aspiring to middle-class status)” (2015, p.37). Amato’s distinction between women who are middle-class and those who are aspiring to be, is ultimately what separates Dora and Bella, and their difference in status is what contributes to their success as housewives. Dora had recently returned “from finishing her education in Paris” (ch.26, p.325), indicating that she comes from a financially comfortable family, whereas Bella’s family “were of such commonplace extraction and pursuits that their forefathers had for generations modestly subsisted on the Docks, the Excise Office, the Custom House, and the existing R, Wilfer was a poor clerk” (book 1, ch.4, p.32). Bella herself remonstrates about her poverty early on in the novel: “I am one of the most unfortunate girls that ever lived. You know how poor we are” (book 1, ch.4, p.36). However, it becomes clear as the narrative unfolds, that it is ultimately being poor that allows Bella to develop into a woman. Elizabeth Langland argues that, “when the novel opens, Bella Wilfer is unfitted to take her position as the wife of John Harmon. Her deficiencies in character promise misery for him rather than domestic bliss. She is as ignorant and childish as Dora

Spenlow” (1995, p.105). But unlike Dora, Bella’s class does not expect her to remain a perpetual child, and therefore, by applying herself to her studies, Bella is able to become “a perfect genius for home” (book 4, ch.5, p.682). Janice Carlisle argues that:

Bella does not need to learn the household management that would allow her to run a comfortable home on a small income because Harmon has known that he will be rich long before Bella marries him, nor presumably does Bella need to learn to manage a large staff of servants since Mrs Boffin may have that function in their Eminently Aristocratic Mansion (2004, p.186).

Carlisle misinterprets the purpose of Bella’s character when she suggests that in reality Bella “does not need to learn the household management”. It is not how relevant Bella’s household management skills are that is important, rather it is Bella’s ability to learn them in the first place which is key. So often she is referred to, and categorized as the woman who must be tested in order to prove her worth, but Bella’s biggest achievement is in educating herself to ensure that she develops into a woman, and that she does indeed become “so much worthier than the doll in the doll’s house” (book 4, ch.5, p.679). For Claire Tomalin however, Bella does escape the fate of being a doll:

When she [Bella] declares, ‘I want to be so much worthier than the doll in the doll’s house’, we prick up our ears, as Ibsen did, so that it is a let-down to find her settling into life as a devoted married doll with her nose in a cookery book, a baby to keep her busy and never questioning the husband she has made an idol (2012, p.343).

For Tomalin, Bella can be considered as a “doll” because she is going through the motions of married life; doing the cooking, raising the baby and being devoted to her husband. But given Dickens’s tendency to associate the term “doll” with girlish and childlike traits, it is not appropriate to consider Bella as a “doll” specifically because she settles into, and adjusts to married life. A doll is a plaything, an object which is intrinsically linked to notions of childhood; arguably then, it is more fitting to consider Clara and Dora as “dolls” because they never fully escaped childhood, they remained in an indeterminate liminal state never fully making the transition into womanhood.

Tomalin does however make an interesting suggestion when she states that Ibsen’s ears “pricked up” at Bella’s reference to “a doll in a doll’s house”. Michael Hollington explains that:

Ibsen was notoriously cagey as to revealing literary inspirations and his reading habits in general, but there are traces of the reading of Dickens and a few signs of probable influence [...]. There are possible signs of a Dickensian influence in works such as the early *The League of Youth* (1869), *Pillars of Society* (1877), and in the Dora-Nora and David-Thorvald parallels in *A Doll's House* (1897). In relation to this last play, there is also, perhaps, even more uncertainly, Bella Wilfer/Rokesmith's lines in *Our Mutual Friend*: 'I want to be something so much worthier than a doll in a doll's house' (2013, p.414).

Hollington's suggestion of "Dora-Nora" parallels is disputable, and it is arguable that Nora bares little, if any resemblance to Dora. Whilst Dora struggles, as previously mentioned, with basic household accounts, Nora displays an in-depth understanding of complex accounting, stating "I may tell you that there is something that is called, in business, quarterly interest, and another thing called payments in instalments, and it is always so dreadfully difficult to manage them" (Act 1, p.23). Nora better resembles Bella, being "a perfect genius for home" (book 4, ch.5, p.682), her genius being in the ability to manipulate her accounts in order to be the one "who saved Thorvald's life" (Act 1, p.20). Furthermore, Bella herself also speaks knowingly on topics of business, as the narrator explains, "wonderful was the way in which she would store up the City Intelligence, and beamingly shed it upon John in the course of the evening, incidentally mentioning the commodities that were looking up in the markets, and how much gold had been taken to the bank" (book 4, ch. 5, p.682). Hollington claims that Bella's reference to a "doll's house" is uncertain evidence of a Dickensian influence in Ibsen's play, but Bella's determination to do what is needed to make her marriage a success, can also be understood as evidence of Ibsen being influenced by Dickens. Bella sets herself the task of educating herself in business and housekeeping affairs, Nora sets herself the task of procuring money that is desperately needed; both are motivated by their marriage to be proactive. The acts themselves may be very different, but the recognition that they must act is the same.

For Bella, the best example of her character developing beyond a child-wife, can be found in her becoming a successful mother. The narrator describes her as being "in a musing state of happiness, seated in a little low chair upon the hearth, with her child in

her fair young arms” (book 4, ch.13, p.778). The illustration by Marcus Stone that depicts Bella in her nursery does much to reinforce the narrator’s description.



FIGURE 14. "MR BOFFIN DOES THE HONOURS OF THE NURSERY DOOR". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND* (1864-65), ILLUSTRATION BY MARCUS STONE. RPT. IN *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*, (LONDON: VINTAGE BOOKS, 2011) P.776.

Bella may still be referred to as young, but she is no longer referred to as a “child”, now she nurses her own child, signalling to the reader that she has made the successful transition into womanhood. When discussing the illustrations in *Our Mutual Friend*, Michael Cotsell argues that, “they add little to the enjoyment and nothing to the understanding of the novel” (2013). A bold statement, and one that appears to overlook

the interesting connection that “Mr Boffin does the Honours of the Nursery Door” has with a much earlier illustration by Hablot K. Browne. Bella depicted contentedly nursing her baby, is reminiscent of “Changes at Home” in *David Copperfield*. Both mothers sit nursing their child, unaware that they are being watched from behind. Depicting them as being unaware they that are being watched, gives the impression the viewer is being treated to a private moment between mother and child, not intended to be witnessed by anyone. But the witnesses in both illustrations are key signifiers of what the illustrations are alluding to. Clara is watched by her young son, whereas Bella is watched by Mr Boffin, an old man. Browne’s illustration portrays youth, and encourages the reader to consider there being an absence of adulthood in the picture, whilst Stone’s illustration portrays aging, indicating that Bella herself has grown into the adult role of a mother. Furthermore, as explained earlier, Browne’s illustration intentionally depicts an ideal, rather than a reality, whereas Stone’s illustration is intended to be an accurate portrayal of the transition Bella has made from child-wife to adult mother.

The act of becoming a mother and not existing as a perpetual child-wife is also evident in *David Copperfield*, but it is not through either Clara or Dora that we see it displayed. When David states “my domestic joy was perfect, I had been married ten happy years” (ch.63, p.727) he refers not to his marriage with Dora, but to his second marriage with Agnes. Given that David had “wished my wife had been my counsellor; had had more character and purpose to sustain me and improve me by” (ch.44, p.543) when he was married to Dora, it is not surprising that with Agnes his “domestic joy was perfect”. David describes his second wife as “Agnes! Ever my guide, and best support” (ch.62, p.725). He goes on to state that during his childhood, “you were so much better than I, so necessary to me in every boyish hope and disappointment” (ch.62, p.725). Agnes is everything Dora failed to be, she is able to sustain and improve David in ways that Dora was not able to, most notably it would seem, by turning him into a father. David explains, “I see myself, with Agnes at my side, journeying along the road of life. I see our children and our friends around us” (ch.64, p.734). For David, it would appear that children are a large contributory factor to his “domestic joy”, but they are in the form of offspring, rather than in the form of a child-wife. It is perhaps surprising that Agnes does not portray the qualities of a child-wife, when it is considered that her father was in the same profession as that of Dora’s, for as David explains, “Mr Wickfield – for I



soon found that it was he, and that he was a lawyer” (ch.15, p.186). Their fathers being in the same profession, it would not be unreasonable to assume that Dora and Agnes had experienced similar educations; however this is not the case, and it quickly becomes clear that Agnes’s upbringing is part of the reason she does not exist in the liminal state of a child-wife. On meeting Mr Wickfield’s child for the first time David says:

This was his little housekeeper, his daughter Agnes. Mr Wickfield said. When I heard how he said it, and saw how he held her hand, I guessed what the one motive of his life was.

She had a little basket-trifle hanging at her side, with keys in it; and she looked as staid and as discreet a housekeeper as the old house could have (ch.15, p.189).

Whereas wealthy middle-class girls like Dora received an education that was “meant to make them enticing wives” (Murdoch, 2013, p.163), Agnes escaped the fate of being a perpetual child, by assuming housekeeping duties when she was yet a child herself. As a child, Agnes discusses not being sent off to school when she explains “Papa couldn’t spare me to go anywhere else [...] his housekeeper must be in his house you know” (ch.16, p.195). The irony with Agnes is that in some ways she does experience being a child-wife, for as she explains, “Mama has been dead ever since I was born” (ch.15, p.189). Agnes assumes the role her mother would have occupied, with regards to running the family home. According to Elizabeth Langland:, “although the text represents fully Dora’s domestic failures, implicitly challenging the ideology of the Angel in the House, it ultimately refuses to name the source of Agnes’s success” (1995, p.87). Langland does not appear to attribute Agnes’s success as a wife to her upbringing as a housekeeper when yet still a child, but it is arguable that this is indeed the case. Rather than a doll, Agnes as a child “had a little basket-trifle hanging at her side”, indicating that in place of play things, Agnes was armed with the tools necessary for work within the home. It is not that Dickens’s intention was to encourage his readers that middle-class girls should be put to work early if they intend to develop into women, only that at some point within their lives they must learn the skills needed in order to run a successful home. The close of *David Copperfield* sees a thought-provoking reference to a doll made, when David is talking about his children. He speaks of “a favourite story Agnes used to tell them, introductory to the arrival of a wicked old Fairy [...] little Agnes (our eldest child) left her doll in a chair to represent her, and thrust out

her little heap of golden curls from between the window-curtains, to see what happened next” (ch.63, p.728). “Little Agnes” can be understood as possessing the care-free childhood that her mother did not have, owning a doll rather than a set of housekeeping keys. But looking out of the window “to see what happened next” it is as if the child is watching to see what happens next in her own story. Dickens is encouraging his readers to consider whether the doll will always “represent her”, or whether she will be allowed to relinquish being a child in due time. Dickens may have written about “separate spheres” (Gordon and Nair, 2003, p.1) but it is clear that he criticised society’s view of the child-wife, and strove to encourage a change in attitude.

### **The Child-Husband**

As stated earlier, Claudia Nelson claims that “for much of the nineteenth century the child-man tended to be represented in literature as something of a freak” (2012). Nelson is intentionally vague with “something of a freak”, nonetheless her decision to use the word “freak” is interesting. In his book *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (2014), Robert Bogdan argues that when studying “freaks” he was “studying the practice of exhibiting human beings with physical, mental, and behavioural anomalies” (2014, p.viii). He goes on to state that “‘Freak’ is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something that we created: a perspective, a set of practices – a social construct” (p.xi). Bogdan places the Freak Show’s greatest popularity between “approximately 1840 to 1940” (p.ix) and explains that “Although freak shows contributed to the imagery of disability” (p.viii) there were also “large numbers of people who feigned physical and mental abnormalities to qualify for the business” (p.viii). Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*, it can be argued, fits Nelson’s description of “somewhat of a freak” for although he is not part of a freak show, his appearance is unusual, and he also feigns “mental abnormalities”. Esther declares on meeting him:

He was a little bright creature, with rather a large head; but a delicate face [...] he had more the appearance, in all respects, of a damaged young man, than a well-preserved elderly one. There was a negligence in his manner, and even in his dress (his hair carelessly disposed, and his neck-kerchief loose and flowing) (ch.6, p.89).

Skimpole's unusual appearance takes the form of youthfulness in an elderly man, hinting that he possesses an eccentric personality, but Esther's reference to him as "damaged" and her instant awareness of his "negligence" also hints at there being a more sinister side to Skimpole. The first illustration of Skimpole by Hablot K. Browne does much to depict him as youthful in appearance, but it also makes a subtle reference to the notion that he may in time, prove to be an unsavoury character. As Pete Newbon argues "Beneath his whimsical façade [...] Skimpole is a cynical, calculating and callous – albeit, somewhat foppish, villain" (2019, p.296).



FIGURE 15. "COAVINSES". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *BLEAK HOUSE* (1852-53), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE, RPT. IN *BLEAK HOUSE*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) P.96.

Skimpole does not look at all like an elderly man in this illustration, for his face is decidedly youthful, but it is the expression he wears that is most interesting. Considering that "Coavinses" depicts Skimpole as having been "arrested for debt" (ch.6, p.94) he exhibits little if any concern; indeed, there can be detected the faintest of smiles upon his face. Whilst his apparent lack of concern may seem fitting for one

who claims, “I am a child, you know!” (ch.6, p.92), it also hints at the darker side of his character. By adopting such a persona, Skimpole consciously removes responsibility from himself. As Esther says, “he observed us with a genial interest; but there seemed, if I may venture on such a contradiction, nothing selfish in it. He had entirely washed his hands of the difficulty, and it had become ours” (ch.6, p.95). His easy expression then, is perhaps not caused by his lack of understanding, but by the knowledge that his debt is far from being his own problem. As Esther explains, she and Richard “would have the pleasure of paying his debt” (ch.6, p.98). Skimpole’s manipulation is well-documented among critics, for according to Robert Terrell Bledsoe:

Through narcissistic manipulation, Skimpole “creates” the possibility of ideal ethical roles for other characters to perform: that is, he perceives them as being noble or base in relation to their responses to his own needs. According to their reactions to his perpetual financial distress, they may choose to perform the roles of benefactors or persecutors of his self-proclaimed unworldly innocence. (2012, p.7).

Skimpole’s manipulation can be offered as evidence that he does not possess “unworldly innocence”, but is in fact extremely calculating and self-aware. In Pete Newbon’s words, “There are many detailed biographical parallels between Skimpole and [Leigh] Hunt, and there was little doubt among Dickens’s friends that Skimpole was Hunt” (p.297). Newbon goes on: “He [Dickens] had initially named his character ‘Leonard Skimpole’ – a name closer to Leigh [...] Dickens may have perused Byron’s published *Letters* (1834) in the period of creating Skimpole and might have gleaned from them Byron’s castigation of Hunt as an unworldly child and parasite” (2019, p.297).

Stephen Fogle makes an interesting point when discussing the similarities between Hunt and Skimpole:

In a letter to Forster, Dickens tells, on March 7, 1852, that ‘Browne has done Skimpole, and helped to make him singularly unlike the great original. Look it over and say what occurs to you’. Actually Dickens’s description of Skimpole in the text of *Bleak House* brings the outward figure quite close to what we know of Leigh Hunt, and the drawing of which Phiz’ illustrates the scene is false to the text in certain details. The description of Skimpole calls for a man who is youthful in figure [...] Browne has

made Skimpole very definitely middle-aged, with a comfortable paunch on which to display his watch and chain (952, p.4).

It is true that Esther describes Skimpole as “being of a more slender figure than Mr Jarndyce, and having a richer complexion, with browner hair, he looked younger” (ch.6, p.89). However, it is in fact rather fitting that Browne depicts Skimpole’s body as “definitely middle-aged” because it is the decidedly adult way in which Skimpole uses his body that is particularly distasteful, given that he refers to himself as “a child” (ch.6, p.92).

Much has been written about Skimpole’s manipulative powers and his being reminiscent of Leigh Hunt, but far less criticism has tackled the unpleasant notion of him being a “child” in a sexual relationship. He repeatedly declares his “unworldly innocence”, including using the exact phrase “I am a child” no fewer than four times throughout the novel, and therefore, perhaps the most uncomfortable aspect of Skimpole’s character is the fact that he “fell in love, and married, and surrounded himself with rosy cheeks” (ch.6, p.90). His wife is described as one “who had once been a beauty, but was now a delicate high-nosed invalid suffering under a complication of disorders” (ch.43, p.676). The exact disorders that Mrs Skimpole suffers from are never made explicit, leading the reader to consider whether perhaps the biggest cause of her suffering is her child-husband. Introducing the reader to Skimpole’s sexual partner reminds us of the adult side to Skimpole’s nature, despite his desire to be considered as a “child”. But how could Dickens expect the notion of a “child” in a sexual relationship to be so disagreeable to his readers, when society valued the ideal of the child-wife? It would appear that Dickens does not intend to present the opposite (in this case the child-husband) in order to validate the norm, aka the child-wife; but in order to reveal the uncomfortable reality of the accepted norm, which is desiring individuals who can be identified as childlike, to engage in sexual activity. By using Skimpole in this way, Dickens builds on a technique known as “Ironic Style”; in Michel Delon’s words:

In traditional rhetoric irony was first defined as style, notably by Cicero and Quintilian. For these orators it meant the general intention to reveal a truth hidden by an obvious falsehood – a falsehood that was presented as such. Irony was therefore an oblique mode of discourse, based on stylistic figures such as the innuendo and the

antiphrasis, which tend to make the hearer understand the opposite of what is said. (2013, p.710).

Dickens uses heavy irony not only through Skimpole's depiction of himself as a "child", but also through the way in which he talks about one of his daughters. He states, "I dare say her marrying another child, and having two more was all wrong in point of political economy; but it was very agreeable" (ch.43, p.677). The image of a family of children, where the parents do not appear to be discernible from the offspring is a bizarre notion, and Skimpole's use of the phrase "all wrong" hints to the reader that this is in fact the opinion they should have on such a situation. Offering support to the notion that families made up entirely of children is undesirable, is Esther's opinion. She says of Skimpole's daughter, "she looked very young indeed, to be the mother of two children; and I could not help pitying both her and them" (ch.43, p.677). Skimpole then is the falsehood, masquerading as a "child" and his description of his own child's marriage as "very agreeable" indicates that in reality it is anything but. Skimpole's opinion of "children" as he sees them, engaging in sexual intercourse is unsettling, and whilst the reader is aware that Skimpole himself is not in actuality a "child", the same cannot be said of his daughter. It is never revealed how old the young mother is, or indeed how old any of Skimpole's daughters are; they are referred to by Esther only as "three young ladies" (ch.43, p.676). The reference to her being a "child" and marrying a "child", coupled with Esther's opinion that she looked "very young", encourages the reader to consider her as being closer in age to a child than to an adult; which in turns makes the realisation that she is sexually active very uncomfortable. Furthermore, from a legal perspective, it would have been distinctly possible for both her and her husband to have been children, for as Paul Thomas explains, "The Age of Marriage Act 1929 set the minimum age for contracting a marriage at 16 [...] Before 1929 the age of marriage had been the age of puberty, which in law was 12 for girls and 14 for boys" (2017, p.95). When discussing his family Skimpole states "in this family we are all children, and I am the youngest." (ch.43, p.676), and Esther acknowledges that "the daughters, who appeared to be very fond of him, were amused by this droll fact" (ch.43, p.676). However, she also remarks that, "it was evident that the three daughters had grown up as they could, and had had just as little hap-hazard instruction as qualified them to be their father's playthings in his idlest hours" (ch.43, p.677). Calling his daughters his "playthings" Esther reminds us of the childish nature that Skimpole is so keen for people to believe he possesses. But the fact that they are his daughters in the first place,

reminds the reader that despite being a “child” he also has the capacity to exhibit very adult behaviour. The realisation that he can engage in sexual intercourse, whilst claiming to be a “child” is a troubling and an unpleasant concept. It would appear then that although Skimpole may claim to be a child-husband and a child-father, Dickens uses him and his family to highlight that desiring childlike attributes in any marital partner, be it husband or wife, is in reality an unsavoury notion. Skimpole’s repeated references to childhood and sexual maturity coexisting bring to the reader’s attention the more distasteful side of what it truly means to be a child-wife, whilst Skimpole’s daughter, pitied by Esther for being exactly that, acts as evidence for why marriage and reproduction should be a strictly adult affair.

Skimpole might feign being a child-husband, but Joe Gargery’s childlike persona in *Great Expectations* is anything but put on. Pip says of Mrs Joe, “knowing her to have a hard and heavy hand, and to be much in the habit of laying it upon her husband as well as upon me” (vol.1, ch.2, p.8). Whilst of Joe he says, “He was a mild, good-natured, sweet-tempered, easy-going, foolish, dear fellow – a sort of Hercules in strength, and also in weakness” (vol.1, ch.2, p.8). Joe Gargery and his wife, although of a lower social standing, can be understood as Mr Murdstone and Clara in reverse, for in Joe’s marriage it is the wife who is the abuser and “ultimate ruler” (Marsh et al, 2004, p.114). Joe, like Clara, is viewed as a child in the relationship, made clear by Pip declaring “Joe and I being fellow-sufferers” (vol.1, ch.2, p.8) and claiming that “We were equals” (vol.1, ch.7, p.50). Furthermore, like Clara, Joe is powerless to protect Pip from the physical abuse carried out by Mrs Joe, in the same way Clara cannot stop Mr Murdstone from beating David. Pip explains that Joe lamented “I wish there warn’t no Tickler for you, old chap; I wish I could take it all on myself” (vol.1, ch.7, p.50). Joe wishing that the beatings were reserved only for him, indicates that he too considers himself Pip’s equal, as opposed to his wife’s. His Herculean strengths and weaknesses are clear to see in the way he reluctantly accepts Mrs Joe’s treatment of Pip. His strength of character in being willing to accept more beatings if it meant Pip would be spared is commendable, but his inability to put a stop to Pip’s suffering shows his beaten down character, and as a result, like Clara, he is unable to offer protection to a child sorely in need of it. It is perhaps not surprising that Joe is accustomed to physical abuse for he explains to Pip:

“My father, Pip, he were given to drink, and when he were overtook with drink, he hammered away at my mother, most onmerciful. It were a’most the only hammering he did, indeed, ‘xcepting at myself. And he hammered at me with a wigour only to be equalled by the by the wigour with which he didn’t hammer at his anwil.”  
(vol.1, ch.7, p.46).

As a husband Joe is treated the same way he was as a child, meaning he has not transitioned into adulthood, but remains in a liminal space, appearing like a defenceless child in his own marriage. Like Clara, Joe escapes an abusive relationship through death, only fortunately for him it is his spouse that dies and not him. In his second marriage Joe finds “charity and love” (vol.3, ch.58, p.479), leading Pip to declare, “Dear Joe, I hope you will have children to love” (vol.3, ch.58, p.479). Joe’s second marriage offers him the opportunity to finally transition into adulthood, leaving his abused childlike persona behind and becoming a father himself. Pip’s hope that Joe will “have children to love”, is well meaning, but it is also a reminder that children deserve to be loved and protected, and it is the job of parents to shield their children from abuse and harm. In order to do this, they cannot possess childlike identities themselves.

Matthew Bagnet in *Bleak House* is not a victim of abuse like Joe, nevertheless he is still submissive to his wife, for he explains “You know me. It’s my old girl that advises. She has the head [...]. Whatever the old girl says, do – do it!” (ch.27, p.441). Mrs Joe was a bully who controlled and manipulated her husband, Mrs Bagnet on the other hand possesses not a bullying nature, but a superior intellect, suggested by Bagnet’s claim “She has the head”. Indeed, Mr Bagnet goes as far as to say, “I never saw the old girl’s equal” (ch.27, p.442). The notion of a wife superior in intellect to that of her husband, calls to mind Mary Robinson’s *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), in which she asks:

Supposing that destiny, or interest, or chance, or what you will, has united a man, confessedly of a weak understanding, and corporeal debility, to a woman strong in all the powers of intellect, and capable of bearing the fatigues of busy life: is it not degrading to humanity that such a woman should be the passive, the obedient slave, of such a husband? (2003, p.42).



Robinson's argument that intellectually superior women should not be expected to be "passive" or "obedient" is particularly relevant when discussing Mr and Mrs Bagnet. Matthew is prepared to do as his wife tells him, which suggests she isn't "the obedient slave" that Robinson refers to; but he is however, still keen to at least appear to be the dominant partner in the relationship. When discussing his wife's obviously superior capabilities he uses the exact phrase, "I never own to it before her. Discipline must be maintained" no fewer than five times throughout the novel. It is not convincing however that Matthew is in any way capable of disciplining or controlling his wife, and we see evidence of this most notably when Mrs Bagnet suddenly decides "I'm away into Lincolnshire after George's mother!" (ch.52, p.802). And in response to John Jarndyce's question "do you mean to let her go in that way?" (ch.52, p.802), Matthew simply replies, "can't help it" (ch.52, p.802). It would appear that Matthew is very aware of the subordinate position he occupies within his marriage, and therefore his pretence of being the dominant husband makes him look more like a child playing make-believe. His desire that "discipline must be maintained" suggests that he feels society would judge him for being willing to concede to his wife's will. This, however, makes him appear foolish and insecure, setting him further apart from his wife, who, is the polar opposite of the submissive and delicate child-wife that society had come to revere.

The purpose of this chapter has been to reveal how Dickens used his novels as a platform to criticise society's revered view of the middle-class child-wife that existed in the nineteenth-century. Presenting his readers with the less than successful child-wives, Clara and Dora Copperfield, Dickens not only makes reference to the unrealistic expectations that middle-class women faced, but also highlights the dangers and tragic consequences of not allowing girls to develop into women. Through characters like Bella Wilfer, Agnes Wickfield and Mrs Bagnet, Dickens offers an alternative and altogether more sensible representation of what marital bliss should look like, presenting his readers with women who escaped the fate of being perpetual child-wives, and as a result, not only lived to tell the tale, but altogether thrived as successful wives and mothers. Through Harold Skimpole, Joe Gargery and Matthew Bagnet, Dickens presents his readers with notably different versions of the "child-husband" highlighting the necessity of marriage being a strictly adult affair, where both husband, and indeed

wife are concerned. In doing so Dickens is able to turn societal norms on their head, thereby forcing his Victorian readers to reassess the norms they have come to accept.

## Chapter Four: The Sexualised Child

This chapter reveals how Dickens used his fiction as a platform to engage with one of Victorian society's most distasteful realities – the existence of child prostitution. By creating liminal characters that exist in the void between an innocent child and sexually experienced adult, Dickens is able to highlight how working-class children in the Victorian era were not valued for their innocence and purity in the same way that middle- and upper-class children were. In my first section, "Child Prostitution" I begin with a discussion of Dickens's *An Appeal to Fallen Women* (1849), arguing that this pamphlet is evidence that Dickens was acutely aware of the hardships faced by young women who made their living through prostitution. I then move on to examine *A Christmas Carol* (1843), suggesting that the characters "Ignorance and Want" are visual representations of society's failings as a result of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Next, I move on to discuss *Oliver Twist*, concentrating on how Dickens engages with the theme of child prostitution through the characters of Nancy and Charley Bates. The second subheading of the chapter entitled "The Sex Trade and the Sewing Trade", focuses on the links between seamstresses and prostitutes, using Amy Dorrit from *Little Dorrit* and Jenny Wren from *Our Mutual Friend* as discussion points.

### Child Prostitution

In my previous chapter I discussed Harold Skimpole's "child" daughter, and explained that she could very well have been an actual child when she married. Skimpole's daughter is sexualised because she marries, and as a result is expected to partake in sexual activity with her husband. Marrying however, did not mean that you would automatically be considered as an adult. As Ginger Frost explains when discussing the Victorian era, "the legal age of majority in Britain was twenty-one; at law, then, anyone under that age was an infant" (2008, p.4). Had she therefore been under the age of twenty-one, Skimpole was correct to refer to his daughter as a "child", because in the eyes of the law she would have been exactly that. The marriageable age in Victorian Britain may seem strikingly low by modern standards, but it was in line with an equally low age of consent. Claudia Nelson explains that:

Until 1875, the legal age of consent in England, the point at which a girl was considered competent to

decide to engage in sexual activity, was twelve, and legislation of 1875 raised that number by only one year. Not until 1885 did the Criminal Law Amendment Act set the barrier as high as sixteen (2007, p.19).

Increasing the age of consent essentially increases the length of time a girl can be formally recognised as a child, but this is problematic when as Nelson goes on to explain; “that there was no corresponding law protecting boys reflects the assumption that male sexuality was active rather than passive; boys it was assumed, would be seducers, not victims, and in any case many adults considered their innocence less valuable than girls” (p.19). Nelson is right to suggest that a young girl’s innocence would have been considered as more valuable than that of her male counterpart, but she needed to have clarified that this corresponds only to middle and upper-class girls. No such value was attached to the innocence of the working-class girl. This is apparent in “The Great Social Evil” (1858) an anonymous letter published in *The Times*, when the author of the letter who claimed to be a prostitute, writes, “I was a fine, robust, healthy girl, 13 years of age [...] That which is commonly, but untruly called virtue, I gave away [...] I never lost that which I never had – my virtue” (p.1621). The author of “The Great Social Evil” speaks of her willingness to engage in sexual relations at just thirteen years old, stating, “I had seen much and heard abundantly of the mysteries of the sexes. To me such things had been matters of common sight and common talk” (p.1621). Although such a blasé attitude towards sex whilst a child is arguably an uncomfortable concept for the modern reader, it highlights how little the author valued her virginity and so-called virtue. George Rousseau argues in *Children and Sexuality: From the Greeks to the Great War* (2007): “the sexual lives of children under the age of – approximately – fourteen is not news in the twenty- first century [...] children have always been complicit in sexual forms of expression” (p.3). However, “sexual forms of expression” as a child are arguably very different to engagement in sexual intercourse, which the author of “The Great Social Evil” appears to refer to when she explains she “gave away” her virtue. Rousseau also acknowledges the tension surrounding the scholarship of sexualised childhoods when he states:

No one can doubt the explosiveness of the interface of children and sexuality today [...] Provided that the approach is ‘clinical’ and ‘practical’ (scientific, medical, prescriptive), there has been little impediment to the contemporary discussion of childhood sexuality [...] But

as soon as the discussion turns to ethical, moral, legal and legislative aspects, the topic becomes charged, fraught, and often too delicate to conduct in polite discourse [...] Childhood sexuality lies on the border of taboo and the frontier of suspicion (2007, p.2-3).

Rousseau is principally concerned with the notion that sexuality has always existed in some form during childhood, but suggests that the discussion of it in modern scholarship raises concerns over the appropriateness of having such a discussion due to its delicate nature, unless from a “clinical” and “practical” point of view. The author of “A Great Social Evil” claims ownership over her sexuality and sexual encounters whilst still a child, but it would be wrong to assume that her mind-set represented all young girls who fell into prostitution in the nineteenth-century. Indeed, such a low age of consent for most of the nineteenth-century (and certainly the entirety of Dickens’s life – having died in 1870 he never saw the age of consent reach as high as thirteen) meant that sexual exploitation of the most vulnerable young girls in society was rife. Ronald Flowers explains that, ‘a study in England in 1869 estimated that of 9,000 prostitutes working on a seaport, 1,500 were younger than fifteen years of age, and of these, one-third of these were under the age of thirteen’ (1994, p.54).

The exploitation and the suffering of prostitutes was something of which Dickens was well aware. Grace Moore points out that, “Charles Dickens was sympathetic to the prostitute’s plight, administering Urania Cottage, ‘a home for fallen women’, founded in 1847, on behalf of his friend, the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts” (2012, p.79). In a leaflet entitled *An Appeal to Fallen Women* (1849) distributed to prison cells housing prostitutes, Dickens writes:

You will see, on beginning to read this letter, that it is not addressed to you by name. But I address it to a woman – a very young woman still – who was born to be happy and has lived miserably; who has no prospect before her but sorrow, or behind her but a wasted youth; who, if she has ever been a mother, has felt shame instead of pride in her own unhappy child [...] You know what the streets are; you know how cruel the companions that you find there are; you know the vices practised there, and to what wretched consequences they bring you, even while you are young (p.1-2).

What is interesting about this letter is Dickens's repeated reference to youth. By stating "I address it to a woman – a very young woman still", Dickens is suggesting that there are liminal qualities about the women he is reaching out to. He does not appear to view them as adults, but rather as children that need to be saved. This is evident when in the pamphlet he writes that the women who take up the offer of Urania Cottage "will be treated with the greatest kindness: will lead an active, cheerful, healthy life: will learn many things it is profitable and good to know" (p.2). Dickens claims that "I write as if you were my sister" (p.1), but the tone in *An Appeal to Fallen Women* is predominantly paternal. For Dickens, these women represent the failings of society, they are the children of poverty and hardship. Despite his desire to help 'fallen women' there were nevertheless limitations to Urania Cottage and what it could offer. As Anne Isba explains in *Dickens's Women: His Great Expectations*:

For Dickens, of all the initiatives on which he worked, with Miss Coutts, none was more important than what came to be known as the Urania Cottage project for 'fallen women' – a home where, after a year's training, destitute girls would learn the skills necessary to make them good domestic servants, at least, and, at best, suitable wives for good men in the colonies (2001, p.86).

Dickens's reform project was of a practical nature, as it recognised the challenges of reintroducing these "fallen women" into society. The decision to relocate the women to the colonies indicates Dickens's awareness that British society may have been unwilling to see the "fallen women" as reformed, and therefore a fresh start would only really be possible on foreign shores. His aim was to entice women into a life away from prostitution, by offering them a realistic, albeit not ideal, alternative.

Dickens portrays the children of poverty and hardship in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) when he describes the children hiding beneath the skirts of the Ghost of Christmas Present:

They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish, but prostrate, too, in their humanity. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds (ch.3, p.58).

Just like the women Dickens is appealing to in *An Appeal to Fallen Women*, these children possess liminal qualities; their “wasted youth” has been succeeded by the “shrivelled hand, like that of age”. The premature transition from innocence to experience has left its mark on the children in *A Christmas Carol*, and as the Spirit explains “They are Man’s [...] and they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want” (ch.3, p.59). The illustration “Ignorance and Want” by John Leech does much to reinforce the message that these children inhabit the space between childhood and adulthood.



FIGURE 16. "IGNORANCE AND WANT". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* (1843), ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN LEECH. RPT. IN *A CHRISTMAS CAROL AND OTHER CHRISTMAS WRITINGS*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) P. 93.

The only indication that "Ignorance and Want" are children is their size. Their stature may indicate that they are not yet adults, but little else points to them being children. Both possess haggard and worn expressions, more synonymous with someone older, and the sunken eyes of "Want" suggest the notion that too much has been seen too early by this young child. However, what is most interesting, is the way Leech depicts them as standing apart from both the Ghost of Christmas Present, and Scrooge. This is at



odds with how Dickens describes them in the text. He writes, “they knelt down at its [the Ghost’s] feet, and clung upon the outside of its garment” (ch.3, p.58). Whereas in the text, “Ignorance and Want” exhibit a sense of desperation, a need to be always in contact with the spectre, the children in Leech’s image stand resolutely alone, as if they are aware no help will be afforded them. “Want” vacantly stares at “Ignorance”, as if looking at him as the source of her hardship. There is a relevance to this, for the spectre explains in the text, “beware of them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased” (ch.3, p.59). The foreboding message to Scrooge is intended to resonate with all of humanity; these children, like the women Dickens later writes to in *An Appeal to Fallen Women*, are the responsibility of, and the product of society. Rabb and Cohen explain that John Leech “contributed immeasurably to the success of the Christmas books. There, as elsewhere, he introduced a measure of beauty into his caricatures, lending refinement to a formerly crude genre that too often equated ugliness with evil and grace with weakness” (p.141). Leech’s refinement is apparent in “Ignorant and Want”; ugly and warning of impending doom, these two small children depicted standing alone, are a visual representation of the many children scorned and ignored by society, and who as a result have no one to turn to. The image of them reinforces the point that only by opening your heart to those suffering, and offering them refuge, can the path that humanity is on be altered. When Scrooge asks “Have they no refuge or resources?” (ch.3, p.59) the spirit responds “Are there no prisons? [...] Are there no workhouses?” (ch.3, p.59) thereby echoing Scrooge’s earlier sentiment towards the poor and the needy. Scrooge’s initial narrow-minded and blindsided approach to those worse off than him indicates to the reader how far society as a whole has left those in need behind, and how drastically their attitude needs to change.

“Ignorance and Want” together may be a clear personification of society’s failings, but what is more ambiguous is exactly what “Want” represents on her own. Is she wanting, or is she wanted? Though she be a “yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling” (ch.3, p.58) child, “Want” could in fact represent the darkest element of society, that of child prostitution. Wanted by men for sexual gratification, “Want” may well represent the many children forced into prostitution at an early age. Clearly part of “Want’s” suffering can be attributed to the Poor Law; she represents society’s desire to use and abuse poor children, rather than to help them, but *A Christmas Carol* is not the first time

Dickens makes a link between the 1834 Poor Law and child prostitution. I explained in “The Carer” chapter that *Oliver Twist* is often recognised as a brazen critique of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, but what is less talked about is the direct link he makes between the Act and the prostitution of poor children. Certainly, prostitution is a prominent theme in *Oliver Twist*, and Dickens’s description of Nancy makes it abundantly clear what her profession is. He describes her as “burdened with the sense of her own shame [...] the miserable companion of thieves and ruffians, the fallen outcast of low haunts, the associate of the scourings of the jails and hulks, living within the shadow of the gallows itself” (ch.39, p.370). The language Dickens uses to describe Nancy is reminiscent of the language he will later use in *An Appeal to Fallen Women*. He encourages his readers to feel empathy rather than disgust for Nancy, by referring to the sense of her own shame”. For Dickens, it is important that the reader is aware Nancy does not choose this lifestyle, she does not condone or defend it, but rather she has “fallen” into it through lack of choice. Grace Moore points out that:

Dickens’ decision to include a prostitute in *Oliver Twist* scandalised some of his early readers and he acknowledged in his preface to the third edition in 1841 that ‘it seems a very coarse and shocking circumstance that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded of London’s population...that the boys are pickpockets, and the girl a prostitute’ (2012, p.79).

Dickens’s decision to address the reader directly over his inclusion of “the girl a prostitute” indicates his awareness that respectable society may need warming up to the idea that a prostitute is someone who deserves sympathy. Drew D. Grey explains that, “middle-class attitudes towards prostitution were underpinned by a fear that it was a corrupting influence that would pollute respectable lives, wreck marriages, break up the family home and destroy the very fabric of the nation” (2016, p.175). Dickens then, attempts to alter society’s attitude towards prostitution, by creating a character not intent on destroying “the very fabric of the nation”, instead, her only desire is to survive. If no help be afforded to the likes of Nancy by respectable society as a result of the Poor Law - society then, is not in a position to judge her way of life; this is the underlying point Dickens is making through Nancy and Bet.

What is particularly interesting about Dickens's address to his readers in the third edition of the text, is his decision to refer to Nancy as a "girl". Throughout the novel, Dickens repeatedly refers to Nancy as a "girl" rather than a woman; he also uses the term "young ladies" (ch.9, p.79) to describe Nancy and Bet when Oliver is first introduced to them. Dickens appears keen to ensure that readers are aware Nancy and Bet are youthful, without daring to be so bold as to call them children. However, it is possible to calculate Nancy's age, and it does reveal her to be little more than a child. Nancy complains to Fagin, "I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this!" pointing to Oliver. "I have been in the same trade, and in the same service, for twelve years since" (ch.16, p.145). We learn early on in the novel that "Oliver Twist, is nine year old to-day" (ch.2, p.9), meaning that Nancy was no more than four years old when she began working for Fagin; making her sixteen when the reader meets her. Working out her age sheds light on why Dickens repeatedly refers to her as a "girl" rather than a woman, despite the decidedly adult profession she is involved in. Fagin, however, is one character in particular who does not appear to consider Nancy as a "girl". Following an outburst from Nancy that sees her "held down by force" (ch.44, p.413) courtesy of Bill Sikes, Fagin blames her outburst on "obstinacy; woman's obstinacy" (ch.44, p.418). Fagin's view of Nancy as a woman indicates that youth and childhood can be easily disposed of in order to make money. Having employed her when she was such a small child, Fagin is himself the reason why Nancy has no childhood to speak of. In his eyes it would seem, she has always been a woman.

The narrative may reveal that Nancy is not yet an adult, but the illustrations of her by George Cruikshank appear to depict her as anything but childlike.



FIGURE 17. "OLIVER CLAIMED BY HIS AFFECTIONATE FRIENDS". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *OLIVER TWIST* (1837-39), ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE CRUIKSHANK. RPT. IN *OLIVER TWIST*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) p.121.

The above illustration is the first time as readers we get a visual representation of Nancy, and Cruikshank makes it abundantly clear that she is not to be considered as possessing anything akin to youthfulness. Rather than a teenager, Nancy appears more reminiscent of a middle-aged woman. When discussing this illustration, Richard A. Vogler states that "Nancy is certainly not in harmony with Dickens' concept of her" (1979, p.150). Vogler appears to be criticising Cruikshank's illustration, but what may appear to some as an inaccurate depiction of a young girl, could in fact be a very conscious and deliberate decision. By drawing Nancy as far older than she actually is, the illustration hints at the premature aging of young girls who spend a life in prostitution. Cruikshank, therefore, is applying the same technique that John Leech will

apply later in his illustration of “Ignorance and Want” for *A Christmas Carol*. Evidence for it being a conscious decision by Cruikshank to depict Nancy as older than she is, can be found in his depiction of Bill Sikes in the same illustration. Vogler explains that “Sikes is described in Dickens’ text much as he is pictured in Cruikshank’s illustration” (1979, p.150). It would appear then, that Cruikshank is capable of accurately drawing a character based on the text. If this be the case, it is unreasonable to suggest that Cruikshank was incapable of drawing Nancy as a young girl; but rather that he purposely chose not to. As explained in my introduction, Dickens was actively involved in the illustration process, which suggests he was satisfied with Cruikshank’s depiction of Nancy. Arguably, the most interesting element of “Oliver claimed by his affectionate friends” is Nancy’s height. She appears only slightly taller than Oliver (who we know is only nine years old) and shorter than all those who crowd around her. Nancy’s height then, is an indication of her liminality. She may look older than her sixteen years, but her height is a subtle reminder to the reader that she is still a young girl. Nancy’s height can be understood then as an indication of arrested development. Unable to pass into adulthood because she was prematurely forced out of childhood, Nancy exists somewhere in the void between the two. When discussing poverty in the nineteenth-century, Lucy Bending explains “stunted children abounded in the slums of Victorian England, and their lack of growth became intimately related to over-work, to poor nutrition, and to their environment” (2002, p.206). Nancy in essence then, becomes a visual representation of the children Bending refers to, and highlights Dickens’s acute awareness of how suffering and hardship can permanently stunt a child’s development both in physical growth and growth into adulthood. Indeed, Nancy can be understood as suffering from psychosocial short-stature, a condition directly linked to hardship and suffering during childhood. Dorota Iwaniec points out that:

“Growth failure, as a rule, begins in infancy during the first few months of a child’s life, but stunting of growth can occur much later, even at 6 or 8 years of age. All psychosocial short-stature children are severely emotionally abused, rejected and unloved. The late commencement of growth failure is also often associated with sexual abuse and acute emotional trauma (2004, p.51).

Nancy certainly fits Iwaniec’s description of psychosocial short –stature children, but the term itself is a modern one, and therefore not one Dickens could have known about

when writing *Oliver Twist*. As Iwaniec makes clear “This type of failure to thrive acquired various labels over the years; e.g. it was named ‘deprivation dwarfism’ by Silver and Finklestein (1967), ‘psychosocial short-stature’ by Spinner and Siegal (1987)” (p.50). Psychosocial short-stature may not have been a recognised condition in the nineteenth-century, but it is clear that Dickens was aware that children who suffered hardship from an early age often bore the effects in their physical appearance.

It is not however, just the depiction of Nancy that hints at child prostitution in this illustration. The sign above the door “to be drunk on the pre-misses” appears to be a very deliberate decision by Cruikshank. When discussing this element of the illustration, Richard A. Vogler explains that “it is safe to say the artist found ironic humour in the required outside sign for a tavern – here with double-entendre interest” (1979, p.150). What Vogler does not explain is exactly what the “double-entendre” he refers to might be. With the inclusion of an extra “s” in “premises” and the break-up of the word, causing it to appear as “pre-misses”, Cruikshank makes reference to being drunk on young girls who are “pre-misses” or “pre-Mrs”, in other words, not yet adults. Far from being “ironic humour”, the sign above the tavern hints at the dark reality of child prostitution, and its apparent links with drunkenness and alcoholism. It is not surprising that Cruikshank’s illustration appears critical of the so-called taverns or “gin shops”, for as John Stewart wrote in 1864, “Mr. George Cruikshank, who for so many years was the prince of English caricaturists, has in later times devoted himself to the support of the Temperance movement” (p.24). Dickens did not have such a strong view on the consumption of alcohol, but he acknowledged its dangers. Such sentiments are evident in *Sketches by Boz* (1836) when he writes:

Well-disposed gentleman, and charitable ladies, would alike turn with coldness and disgust from a description of the drunken besotted men, and wretched broken-down miserable women [...] Gin-drinking is a great vice in England, but wretchedness and dirt are greater; and until you improve the homes of the poor, or persuade a half-famished wretch not to seek relief in the temporary oblivion of his own misery, with the pittance which, divided among his family, would furnish a morsel of bread each, gin-shops will increase in number and splendour (p.139).

Dickens's choice of language is interesting in this extract. Whilst the term "sot" can refer to "one who dulls or stupefies himself with drinking" (OED, 2019), Dickens's decision to use "besotted", particularly in relation to "broken-down miserable women" hints arguably at sexual violence. Published a year before *Oliver Twist*, this extract from *Sketches by Boz*, paints a similar picture to "Oliver claimed by his affectionate friends", in that much misery can be attributed to misuse of the gin shop. Furthermore, it is fitting that the first time we get a visual representation of Nancy she is outside a gin-shop, because a reference to spirits is made the first time we meet Nancy in Chapter Nine. The narrator explains "spirits were produced, in consequence of one of the young ladies complaining of a coldness in her inside" (ch.9, p.78). No explanation is given for the cause of the "coldness", but as Patricia Knight explains, in the nineteenth-century, spirits, (in particular gin), were used to try and eradicate the most common consequence of prostitution, that of unwanted pregnancy. She states that in order to cause a miscarriage:

A wide variety of herbs and drugs were tried, singly or combined, which were easily and cheaply available without prescription from herbalists and chemists' shops. They included colocynth (commonly known as 'bitter apples'), hiera picra ('hikey pikey in popular terminology), tansy, pennyroyal, apiol (combined with steel), gin and gunpowder (the latter brought from iron mongers), gin and salts" (1977, p.60).

The subtle reference to gin when we first meet Nancy, and the depiction of her outside a gin shop when we get our first visual representation of her, can be understood as reminders that to be drunk on "pre-misses" can have severe consequences for child and adult prostitutes alike.

Dickens may have made it clear in his preface to the third edition of the text that Nancy is a prostitute, but what is less clear is when she made the transition from thief to prostitute; begging the question, was there ever a transition to be made? In Selina Schuster's words: "Nancy had worked for Fagin for many years – first as a pick-pocket and later on as prostitute [...] it is left open by Dickens whether Sikes is Nancy's pimp but it is very likely that he is" (2014, p.26). Whilst this is indeed a popular opinion regarding Nancy and her relationship with Sikes, there are issues with it. Nancy herself sees little difference between thieving and prostitution; she says to Fagin "I thieved for

you when I was a child [...] I have been in the same trade and the same service for twelve years since” (ch.16, p.145). Her declaration of being in “the same trade” alludes to thieving and prostitution being one and the same, there is no distinction and no transition between the two. The only thing that is abundantly clear from her speech is that the original theft was from Nancy herself. Robbed of her childhood by Fagin, Nancy was destined for a life of crime, whether that be through thieving or prostitution. As readers, we have already seen the technique of applying a gentler term to disguise a more sordid truth, when Fagin asks Oliver earlier in the novel, “you’d like to be able to make pocket-handkerchiefs as easy as Charley Bates, wouldn’t you, my dear?” (ch.9, p.77). We know that Charley is not making the handkerchiefs, but is in fact stealing them, and the same logic can be applied to Nancy when she speaks of thieving. Perhaps however, the biggest indication that Nancy and the boys are in the same profession, is the way Fagin treats them. On Oliver’s first meeting with Fagin, the narrator explains “the Dodger, and Charley, and the two young ladies, went away together, having been kindly furnished by the amiable old Jew with money to spend” (ch.9, p.79). The mocking tone of the narrator (apparent by the description of Fagin as “amiable” and “kindly”) indicates that all is not quite as it would appear.” Their joint dependence on Fagin for money, coupled with the description that they “all went away together” hints at Fagin in fact being their collective pimp.

As Marc Napolitano explains, “Dickens does not directly identify Nancy as a prostitute, though he would later do so in the preface to the 1841 edition. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to pick up on the fact that Nancy and Bet are streetwalkers” (2014, p.147). Indications within the text that they are “streetwalkers” can be found when Dickens describes Nancy as “the miserable companion of thieves and ruffians, the fallen outcast of low haunts” (ch.40. p.370). The language Dickens uses here is similar to the language he will use later in *An Appeal to Fallen women*, when he speaks of women who have “lived miserably” (p.-2) and their knowledge of “how cruel the companions” (p.1-2) of such women like them are. In both texts Dickens purposely makes a link between misery and companionship, thereby indicating that women like Nancy experience companionship of the lowest and most debased kind. However what Napolitano does not explain is that it is not just through Nancy and Bet that Dickens alludes to prostitution. It is also possible to pick up on hints that allude to Fagin’s boys being involved in prostitution too. Whilst a surface reading of the text, that the boys are just



pickpockets is plausible, it is possible to find evidence that suggests they are involved in sex work too. The hints may be subtle, but they are there. Amy E. Ritcher and Joseph S. Pagano point out that “one of the great pleasures of reading literature is discovering the meaning of characters’ names. Authors often give their characters names to tell us something important about who they are and about what they will do in the story. The great master of giving characters names is Charles Dickens” (2014, p.48). They are right to call Dickens a “great master”, for there are countless examples of Dickens using this literary technique throughout his career. In *Oliver Twist*, it is the Dodger’s comrade Charley Bates, whose name suggests that pick-pocketing is not the only profession that Fagin’s boys are involved in. Charley is referred to as “Master Bates” no less than fifty times in the novel, and far from being a “pleasure” to work out the significance of his name, it hints at the disturbing subtext within the narrative. A surface reading would suggest that “Master Bates” is a way to remind readers that Charley lacks the middle-class respectability which sees young boys referred to as “Master”. But a more in-depth reading would be that his name is reminiscent of “masturbates”, and the repeated use of it points towards the sex work these boys were inevitably involved in. William A. Cohen argues “When, as sometimes happens, he is called ‘Master Bates,’ we are assured of not being able to lose sight of the pun” (1993, p.217-18). *The Oxford English Dictionary* sites the word “masturbation” as being in use as early as 1609 and defines it as “the stimulation, usually by hand, of one’s genitals for sexual pleasure; the action or practice of masturbating oneself or (less commonly) another person; an instance of this” (2018). The fact that masturbation can be used to describe an act carried out on another person gives validity to my argument. But it is not just his name that indicates Master Bates is involved in sex work. When asked by Fagin, “And what have you got, my dear?” (ch.9, p.76) Bates simply replies “wipes” (ch.9, p.76) referring as the narrator explains to “four pocket-handkerchiefs” (ch.9, p.76). Although “wipes” can be understood as a colloquial term for handkerchiefs, wipes are also a necessary part of sex work, and therefore Dickens’s decision to have Master Bates call the pocket handkerchiefs “wipes” can be understood as a subtle reference to the darker side of their employment. Cohen suggests that “he [Master Bates] delivers the gear for cleaning up whatever mess his name might imply” (p.218). We see a similar discourse between Fagin and Dodger when Fagin asks, “I hope you’ve been at work this morning, my dears?” (ch.9, p.76), to which Dodger simply replies “hard” (ch.9, p.76). The link

between “hard” and sex is easy to make, and like the reference to “wipes” it hints at another side to the boys’ employment. In Larry Wolff’s words:

There is certainly some sociological plausibility to the idea that runaway boys, living in a big city under the guardianship of an unscrupulous old criminal, may end up being sold, or selling themselves for sex. There is also important textual evidence for considering *Oliver Twist* in the light of this hypothesis, the boys not only as pickpockets, but also as prostitutes, Fagin not only as a fence, but also a pimp. In fact, although one cannot definitely conclude that the boys are prostitutes, not as definitely as Dickens declares that “the girl is a prostitute” one can establish the radical indeterminacy of the novel in this regard, following from Dickens’s confessed reliance on implication and inference [...] In *Oliver Twist* such strategies tame and contain the text’s almost explosive sexual and criminal energies, and permit to emerge out of representational chaos and crisis Dickens’s most delicately contrived, tautly balanced and ambivalently inflected ideological contribution to Victorian culture; the innocence of childhood (1996, p.228-29).

Wolf argues that the implied references to child prostitution in *Oliver Twist* allow Dickens to discuss the notion of innocence in childhood, because by creating characters that appear to have had their innocence taken away, Dickens is able to highlight the vulnerability of “runaway boys, living in a big city”. Jeannie Duckworth explains that “life for the street children was arduous and brutal and only the toughest survived. These youngsters could occupy a place in society anywhere between pauper and convict, and the authorities regarded them as a social nuisance” (2002, p.19). It would appear then, that by hinting at exactly what lies between “pauper and convict” – namely, prostitution, Dickens aimed to create sympathy for these children, depicting them as victims of society rather than a “social nuisance”. Their liminality is a direct result of their loss of innocence, and Dickens is keen to ensure that his readers realise this is not an issue reserved for working-class girls, but that street boys are also at risk of falling into prostitution in order to survive. Towards the end of the nineteenth-century in 1889, the issue of young boys selling themselves for sex in London would be exposed with the Cleveland Street Affair, in which, according to Morris B. Kaplan, “telegraph delivery boys employed at the central post office admitted to moonlighting as prostitutes at 19 Cleveland Street, a brothel patronised by middle – and upper-class

men” (2012, p.1). However, through Fagin’s boys in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens makes references to the prostitution of young boys fifty years prior to the Cleveland Street Affair, thereby highlighting that child prostitution was a prevalent issue throughout the nineteenth-century. I referred to at the beginning of this chapter Claudia Nelson’s statement that Victorian society held the “assumption that male sexuality was active rather than passive; boys it was assumed, would be seducers, not victims” (2007, p.19). Dickens challenges this opinion through Fagin’s boys. They are not seducers, but instead are used by Dickens to allude to the dangers of sexual exploitation faced by poor working-class children in the real world. And sexually abused children it would seem, were a common part of life for the duration of the century. As George Watt points out, in 1888, the anonymous author known only as “Walter” published a “pornographic, eleven-volume ‘autobiography’, *My Secret Life* [...] one of the best-known Victorian despoilers of the innocent” (2016, p.6). As Watt points out, in his memoir Walter defends the need for prostitutes claiming that a “Gentleman had better fuck them for money than a butcher boy for nothing” (p.6). Walter’s alarmingly blasé approach to the rape of children is deeply disturbing, but it highlights Victorian society’s apparent acceptance that children can be used for sexual gratification.

### **The Sex Trade and the Sewing Trade**

The theme of child prostitution is not only present in *Oliver Twist*, it also appears elsewhere in Dickens’s novels. *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* both make references to it through the inclusion of characters who work as seamstresses. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) Mary Wollstonecraft writes about “poor abandoned creatures who live by prostitution” (p.63) and asks, “for are not milliners and mantua-makers reckoned by the next class?” (p.63). Anna Clark declares that “Mary Wollstonecraft lamented that the genteel trades of mantua maker and milliner had been made synonymous with prostitution because wages were so low” (1997, p.50). Indeed, Wollstonecraft argues that “the few employments open to women, so far from being liberal, are menial” (p.63) suggesting that women who are required to support themselves instead of relying on husbands are often forced into prostitution to supplement their income. Although Wollstonecraft is publishing at the end of the eighteenth-century, her words are still as relevant as ever in the mid-nineteenth-century. When talking about the mid-Victorian period, Jamieson Ridenhour explains that “by mid-century there were an estimated 80,000 prostitutes in London, many of whom were

supplementing incomes earned through work as milliners, seamstresses, laundresses and so forth” (2013, p.23). The author of “The Great Social Evil” points out the link between seamstresses and prostitution in London when she states, “and of this 80,000, poor hardworking sewing girls, sewing women, are numbered in by thousands and called indiscriminately prostitutes” (p.1623). The author speaks of both “sewing girls” and “sewing women”, which suggests that it is not only adult seamstresses – but also children working in this trade, that have to turn to prostitution in order to make ends meet.

I discussed Amy Dorrit in “The Carer” chapter, focussing on the care she provides her father, but what is also interesting to consider is how Dickens uses Amy as a way to refer to the links between the sewing trade and the sex trade. Although Amy herself is not a prostitute, he uses her as a way to highlight how possible it would have been that someone in her circumstances might fall into prostitution. When describing Amy’s employment, the narrator states “Little Dorrit let herself out to do needlework. At so much a day – or at so little – from eight to eight, Little Dorrit was to be hired [...] what became of Little Dorrit between the two eights was a mystery” (bk. 1, ch.5, p.54). Like a prostitute, a seamstress is to be hired for a service, but more important is that the narrator makes it explicit that Amy is paid poorly for her work. The suggestion that after eight in the evening, “what became of Little Dorrit [...] was a mystery”, indicates that a seamstress in her position may well have had to have another profession, one she would be less than willing to disclose to her employers. But it is not just Amy’s poor pay which suggests there are links between the sewing trade and the sex trade, her own clothing is also significant. We know that Amy is “a woman, probably of not less than two and twenty” (bk.1, ch.5, p.52) and yet the narrator explains “Arthur found that her diminutive figure, small features, and slight spare dress gave her the appearance of being much younger than she was” (bk.1, ch.5, p.52). In her case, Amy’s childlike appearance is an indicator of her innocence, but her dress which makes her appear younger than she is, also hints at the pressure prostitutes were under to look youthful. When discussing child prostitution in the late-Victorian period Jessica Cox explains:

A House of Lords select committee in 1882 reported that child prostitution was ‘increasing to an appalling extent’, and claimed that one of the consequences of the high demand for young girls was that adult

prostitutes in the West End had to dress as little girls in order to attract clients (2012, p.120).

The select committee may have been discussing the issue of child prostitution in 1882, but Amy's clothing giving her "the appearance of being much younger than she was" hints at the notion of adult prostitutes dressing as juveniles also being a mid-Victorian issue. Amy is easily one of Dickens's most liminal characters, with it being difficult to know whether to consider her as a child or a woman, despite her age of twenty-two. The narrator explains that whilst she was "worldly wise in hard and poor necessities, she was innocent in all things else. Innocent in the mist through which she saw her father, and the prison" (bk.1, ch.8, p.77). It is not made clear what the "hard and poor necessities" are that Amy is "worldly wise" in, and it would therefore be presumptuous to suggest that she is involved in sex work. Nevertheless, prostitution is indirectly referred to in relation to Amy, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer explains when discussing Amy's father. She argues that he:

Attempts to manipulate her [Amy's] affections, making a devious attempt to get her to allow the affections of the turnkey's son John Chivery, and so to provide Dorrit with special favour from the prison authorities. In effect he desires to prostitute his daughter for the sake of his own comfort (2012, p.48).

Bodenheimer refers to the scene in Chapter Eighteen where Mr Dorrit tells Amy a fictitious story about an inmate's sister who was required by her family to encourage unwanted affections from a suitor:

"Captain Martin (highly respected in the army) then unhesitatingly said that it appeared to him that his – hem! – sister was not called upon to understand the young man too distinctly, and that she might lead him on [...] I think he said tolerate him – on her father's – I should say, brother's account" (bk.1, ch.18, p.216).

Clearly intended as a message to Amy that she should encourage the affections of John Chivery, Mr Dorrit's willingness to "prostitute his daughter" in order to increase his comfort, supports the claim that a woman in Amy's position may well have been expected to sell herself in order to provide for her family.

The author of "The Great Social Evil" also refers to the connection between one's family and prostitution:

In the commencement of my fifteenth year one of our beribanded visitors took me off, and introduced me to the great world, and thus commenced my career as what you better classes call a prostitute [...] I gained money, dressed gaily and soon agreeably astonished my parents and old neighbours, by making a descent upon them (p.1622).

That the author “agreeably astonished” her family after becoming a prostitute, indicates that when gaining money and dressing gaily can be obtained, poor families were in some cases not adverse to the notion of their children selling themselves for sex. Furthermore, the fact that the author was only fifteen when she became a prostitute indicates why a prostitute closer to Amy’s age of twenty-two, would need to dress in a way that “she might have been passed in the street for little more than half that age”, the street after all, being where she would have met potential clients. Indeed, in Chapter Fourteen we do see Amy passed in the street and mistakenly taken to be a child, interestingly enough, by none other than a prostitute. Although never explicitly called a prostitute, it is made plain by the narrator that this is exactly what this woman is. She is described as being in the part of town where Amy and Maggy “had shrunk past homeless people, lying coiled up in nooks. They had run from drunkards. They had started from slinking men, whistling and signing to one another at by-corners” (bk.1, ch.14, p.166). The narrator goes on to explain of the prostitute “she was young – far too young to be there, Heaven knows!” (bk.1, ch.14, p.166). Stephen Hancock explains:

Amy is at first mistaken for a child, and the woman berates Maggy, her childlike companion, for keeping her out so late. When she leans closer to kiss the child’s face she learns her mistake [...] Little Dorrit replies that she is not afraid of the woman, but this is not the problem. The woman is afraid of her (2013, p.147).

Hancock goes on to state that “The incident reveals a few things about Dickens’ diminutive character. First of all, Amy is not beautiful. The effect of her appearance is almost grotesque. Her smallness as a woman inspires fear” (2013, p.147). Whilst Hancock is right to claim that Amy inspires fear, it is perhaps not just her stature that frightens the woman, but rather the idea of what she represents. Described herself as “young – far too young to be there”, readers are encouraged to consider the prostitute as youthful, perhaps a child herself, and perhaps younger by some years than Amy, a woman of twenty-two. An older prostitute would have been accustomed to women

desiring to look younger in order to attract clients; this prostitute's apparent unawareness of such things suggests she is little more than a juvenile – not yet in need of feigning youthfulness. Standing there together, amongst the drunkards and the “slinking men at by-corners”; a prostitute “young – far too young to be there”, a woman looking “little more than half” her true age of twenty two, and Maggy who had “never grown any older” (bk.1, ch.9, p.98) than ten years in age, Dickens is able to create a scene which hints at the theme of child prostitution. When Maggy asks the prostitute what she is doing with herself, the prostitute replies “killing myself” (bk.1, ch.14, p.166). Such a rhetoric can be understood as implying that to be a prostitute, particularly as a child, is ultimately a death sentence for those forced to do it; either as Dickens explains in *An Appeal to Fallen Women* “from terrible disease, or your own maddened hand” (1849) and therefore it is society's responsibility to see these individuals as victims rather than criminals. The narrator describes the prostitute as “neither ugly nor wicked-looking” (bk.1, ch.14, p.166). Far from inspiring fear, these liminal characters caught somewhere between a child and an adult, are meant to inspire only sympathy for those who make their living on the streets of London.

But *Little Dorrit* is not the only Dickens novel in which a connection between seamstresses and prostitution is being made. We see it again in *Our Mutual Friend*, through the character of Jenny Wren, the dolls dressmaker. As is the case with Amy Dorrit, Dickens uses Jenny as a way to highlight how closely linked the sewing trade and the sex trade are, without actually depicting Jenny as a prostitute herself. There are clear similarities between Amy and Jenny, not least that in both cases the cause of their hardships can be clearly attributed to their fathers. However, Dickens appears to grow bolder in regards to his engagement with the subject of child prostitution as his career progresses, for where Amy was only childlike, Jenny Wren is still very much a child – “twelve, or at the most thirteen” (bk.2, ch.1, p.224). As in *Little Dorrit*, the low wages connected with the sewing trade are made explicit in *Our Mutual Friend*. Jenny Wren explains that her work is “poorly paid. And I'm often so pressed for time! I had a doll married, last week, and was obliged to work all night” (bk.2, ch.1, p.223). However, Jenny's definition of working all night takes several forms, for as she explains to Riah:

I have to scud about town at all hours. If it was only sitting at my bench, cutting out and sewing, it would be comparatively easy work; but it's the trying-on by the

great ladies that takes it out of me [...] There's a Drawing Room, or a grand day in the Park, or a Show, or a Fete [...] I squeeze among the crowd, and I look about me [...] Evening parties are severer work for me, because there's only a doorway for a full view, and what with hobbling among the wheels of the carriages, and the legs of horses, I fully expect to be run over some night (bk.3, ch.2, p.435-436).

Jenny refers to her wandering the streets as “the trying-on by the great ladies”, but this is pure fabrication. Reminiscent of Fagin's gang in *Oliver Twist*, who “make pocket handkerchiefs” (ch.9, p.77), Jenny Wren dresses up her street wanderings to make them sound more pleasant than they actually are. Placing herself amongst fashionable society, Jenny is not distancing herself from prostitution by any means. According to Dennis Grube, whilst street prostitution was a London wide issue, “there were several brothels in the West End specifically aimed at gentlemen of means. Discreet and fashionable, they represented the respectable face of prostitution” (2013, p.110). That fashionable society should strive to create a “respectable face” for prostitution, indicates the high demand for the sex trade, even among the most respectable men of society. Jenny may not be a prostitute herself, but by putting herself amongst fashionable society during the hours of night-time, she can be understood as being in a vulnerable position. The illustration “Trying on for the Dolls' Dressmaker” by Marcus Stone offers further evidence for this claim.





FIGURE 18. "TRYING ON FOR THE DOLLS' DRESSMAKER". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND* (1864-65), ILLUSTRATION BY MARCUS STONE. RPT. IN *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*, (LONDON: VINTAGE BOOKS, 2011) p.416

The main focus of this illustration is on the woman in the forefront of the picture. Dressed in what appears to be a white cloak, she represents purity and femininity; this is in striking contrast to the much darker scene behind her. Shrouded in darkness, Jenny Wren appears hunched over, possessing the stature more akin to an elderly woman than a young girl. Looking extremely fragile, Jenny is surrounded by men

dressed in dark clothes and wearing distinctly unfriendly expressions on their faces. The top hats and bow ties indicate that Jenny is indeed amongst “fashionable society”, but the men in close proximity to her do not look like amicable society. It is difficult to discern whether the man standing directly behind Jenny is looking at her, or at the woman in the front of the illustration, but one thing is certain, he wears a threatening expression on his face. By placing Jenny amongst seemingly unsavoury characters, Stone is able to hint at the dark side of fashionable society. The woman in the front of the illustration represents the perceived image of high society – namely beautiful and exempt from scandal; whilst Jenny shrouded in darkness amongst “slinking men at by-corners” (*Little Dorrit*, bk.1,ch.14, p.166) indicates the unsavoury side of fashionable society, and hints at the vulnerability of children who find themselves “about town at all hours” (bk.3, ch.2, p.435-436).

It is not however, just Jenny’s street wanderings that highlight her vulnerability; the narrator describes her as:

The person of a house full of sordid shames and cares, with an upper room in which that abased figure was infecting even innocent sleep with sensual brutality and degradation. The dolls’ dressmaker had become a little quaint shrew; of the world, worldly; of the earth, earthy. Poor dolls’ dressmaker! How often so dragged down by hands that should have raised her up; how often so misdirected when losing her way on the eternal road, and asking guidance! Poor, poor, little dolls’ dressmaker! (bk.2, ch.3, p.243).

Dickens is clearly trying to evoke sympathy for Jenny Wren in this passage, seen by the repeated use of the adjective “poor”. He wants his reader to understand that Jenny is poor not only financially, but also poor when it comes to love and affection. However, what is most interesting about this passage, is the sexual undertone of the language used to describe her situation, caused explicitly by her father. With her “sordid shames and cares” and the description of “innocent sleep” being “infected” with “sensual brutality and degradation” Jenny figuratively represents children in society who are more literally sensually degraded, or perhaps more fittingly, sexually abused by society as a result of a parent’s alcohol addiction. To be “dragged down by hands” gives a clear picture of Jenny being used where she should be being cared for. “Worldly” and a “shrew” at no more than thirteen years old, the “little dolls’ dressmaker” is a poignant

image of suffering. The use of the verb “infect” is a very interesting decision by Dickens, as it hints at the potential consequences of prostitution. In Ginger Frost’s words:

Many Victorian authorities argued that girls whose parents deserted or abused them, or girls who had been the victim of sexual molestation, were especially at risk of going on the streets [...] Girls could also become pregnant, adding another illegitimate child to the population, or they could spread venereal disease. (A Parliamentary Select Committee in 1852 heard horror stories of twelve-year-olds with such illnesses, due to child prostitution). (2008, p.138).

Jenny fits the profile of the girls that Frost speaks of, even if she is not actually a prostitute herself. She is financially deserted and emotionally abused by her father, and by continually referring to her father as her “bad child” throughout the novel, she can even be seen to represent many of the young girls who became a parent before they were old enough to be one. Furthermore, Jenny consistently complains “my back’s so bad and my legs are so queer” (bk.2, ch.1, p.222) which were often symptoms of venereal disease. As Tolu Oyelowo declares “Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), as described by the Centers for Disease Control, is a general term that refers to infection of the uterus, fallopian tubes, and other reproductive organs. It is a common and serious complication of some sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), especially chlamydia and gonorrhea” (2007, p.168). Judy Norsigian explains that symptoms of pelvic inflammatory disease can include “lower back or leg pain, feelings of weakness, tiredness, depression” (2011, p.589). Although PID was not officially recognised as a condition until the twentieth century, Gonorrhea was a known venereal disease in the nineteenth-century. In Michael waugh’s words “There are records of STIs – most notably urethral discharge that was probably gonorrhea – from the earliest of times [...] During the Middle Ages in Europe, advances in the knowledge of gonorrhea were made [...] The contagiousness of gonorrhea was generally recognised” (2011, p.xxi). Dickens appears to have had an acute understanding of the diminished state of health that many prostitutes experienced as a result of venereal disease. Aside from the physical symptoms of PID that Jenny exhibits, she also shows signs of depression, evidenced by her desire to die. Explaining to Fledgeby how she thinks she would feel if she were dead, she says:

“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 pity them so! And such a chain has fallen from you, and such a strange good sorrowful happiness comes upon you!” (bk.2, ch.4, p.281).

Jenny’s belief that she should be thankful if she were dead because she would no longer be in “the close dark streets” suggests to the reader that she has much to fear in the streets below. Her claim that she would “pity them so!”, namely those who remained in the streets, reflects Dickens’s belief that those who make their living on the streets, are to be pitied, rather than scorned and considered as criminals. The link between working on the streets and death, is reminiscent of the prostitute in *Little Dorrit* who claims she is “killing myself” (bk.1, ch.14, p.166) when asked by Maggie what she is doing there. For both the prostitute in *Little Dorrit*, and Jenny Wren, the only escape from the life they lead appears to be death, which highlights plainly to the reader that no help is provided for those in society most in need.

Jenny is described by the narrator as being as “bright and watchful as the bird’s name she had taken” (bk.2, ch.11, p.347), but it is likely that it is not just through observation that Jenny has become “of the world, worldly” (bk.2, ch.3, p.243). When talking to Lizzie Hexam about what it would be like to be courted by a man she explains, “I know his tricks and his manners, and I give him warning to look out [...] my dear, they don’t care for you, those fellows, if you’re *not* hard upon ‘em” (bk.2, ch.2, p.234). Jenny’s confident speech regarding the treatment of men appears at first humorous given that she is no more than a child, but the subtext of her declaration “they don’t care for you, those fellows” is considerably darker. Jenny’s apparent distrust of men, and the desire to let any man who tries to court her know that she is aware of “his tricks and his manners” indicates that Jenny’s experience of men is anything but positive. She has learnt to consider men as untrustworthy and unkind. Her father is undoubtedly both of these things, but Jenny is speaking about any man that would wish to court her, and who would therefore in time come to have sexual dominion over her should she marry him. Rather than considering such a man in a romantic or a tender sense, Jenny is convinced of the need to be “hard” towards him, which suggests to the reader that she is drawing on how she has seen men behave towards women. No clarification is given, either by Jenny or the narrator on what Jenny considers such a man’s “manners” to be,

but as Louise A. Jackson explains, juvenile prostitution and abuse in Victorian London went hand-in-hand:

It is clear, however, if we examine the details of the parliamentary debates and committee reports, that the problem of the sexual assault of children, by fathers, neighbours or employers, as well as by strangers, was an issue of concern, that was closely related to the issue of 'juvenile prostitution' (2013, p.16).

Dickens alludes to the abuse suffered by juvenile prostitutes through Jenny's words, and her apparent acute awareness that men can be "hard" and unkind.

Jenny is described as having "her personal vanities" (bk.2, ch., p.234) for assuming that a man may wish to court and marry her, but these vanities are not without a certain amount of validity. One of Jenny's key liminal qualities is her hair, which transforms her from noticeably disabled child, to aesthetically pleasing woman. Her locks are described as "the bright long fair hair which grew luxuriant and beautiful on the head of the doll's dressmaker" (bk.2, ch.2, p.233). Indeed, it is her hair that causes Miss Abbey to ask of her, "Child or woman?" (bk. 3, .ch.2, p.439), for as the narrator explains, when Jenny "untied a band, and the golden stream fell over herself and over the chair, and flowed down to the ground, Miss Abbey's admiration seemed to increase her perplexity" (bk.3, ch.2, p.439). It is not surprising that Miss Abbey seems transfixed by Jenny's hair, for as Joanna Pitman explains "In the paintings, poems, novels and other frantic outpourings of their period, the Victorians indulged in wild and fantastic images of hair, investing it with magical and symbolic powers. In the pecking order of obsessions, it was the blonde that triggered the most flamboyant responses" (2014, p.137). She goes on to explain that blonde hair has particular relevance in Dickens's novels:

The innocent blonde is easy to spot in the novels of Charles Dickens. More than most other writers of the period, Dickens used the universal lessons of fairy tales in his novels and created on his young girl characters a wealth of blonde hair signalling their spiritual integrity. His blonde women, cited by Elisabeth Gitter as the nearest descendants of the golden-haired fairy tale princess, are doll-like creatures identified by their transcendence and purity (2014, p.139.)

Pitman's description of golden-haired fairy tale princesses and doll-like creatures seems strangely at odds with the physically disabled, worldly little shrew that is Jenny Wren. Her hair symbolises what she ought to be, namely beautiful and innocent, but her body and her personality suggest a life of hardship. Even in her admiration of Jenny's hair, Miss Abbey's rhetoric seems to suggest that such "luxuriant and beautiful" hair should not belong to Jenny; for she exclaims it is "enough to make wigs for all the dolls in the world" (bk.3, ch.2, p.438). Even in what could be interpreted as a compliment, a reference to prostitution is being made. By selling her hair, Jenny would effectively be selling a part of her body for the enjoyment of others. Ruth Goodman explains that in the nineteenth-century:

For the poor and destitute, selling your hair was an option. It could fetch a good price, particularly if it was of a fashionable shade. The makers of wigs and hair pieces were only interested in long hair, as the sorting and forming work invariably resulted in some loss of length. Blonde hair was in shortest supply (2013, p.115-116)

Essentially then, far from depicting her as a fairy tale princess with "spiritual integrity", Jenny's hair actually reinforces her position as one whose body can be bought. The link between the selling of one's hair and the selling of one's body, is seen elsewhere in nineteenth-century literature, in particular Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) published three years earlier than *Our Mutual Friend*. In a review of Hugo's novel in 1862, *Blackwood's Magazine* focused on the "poor and destitute" protagonist Fantine, writing, "at one time she sells her lovely hair for ten francs, at another she sells two of her front teeth [...] he [Hugo] makes Fantine degraded as well as wretched; he intensifies her prostitution" (p.179). Unlike Fantine, Jenny does not sell her hair, so whilst there was no hope for Fantine, there is still hope for Jenny. Jenny's hair represents her innocence, and she has not lost it yet. Fantine's "degraded as well as wretched" situation then, serves as a strong indicator of what Jenny's life could well turn out to be if no help is provided for her.

She may not be a fairy tale princess, but there is undoubtedly a fairy tale element to Jenny Wren. She is rescued from the fate of Fantine because of her relationship with Riah who takes Jenny under his protection. Jenny explains to Sloppy at the end of the novel following her father's death, "[I] live here with my fairy godmother [...] with my

second father. Or with my first, for that matter” (bk.4, ch. 16, p.809). Her admission that she considers Riah to be her first father indicates that for the first time in her life, Jenny feels safe and secure, under the protection of an adult who will not cause her harm. According to David L. Gold, Riah “is the good Samaritan in sharp contrast to the Poor Law” (2009, p.808). Gold is right to contrast Riah with the Poor Law, for as I argued earlier in this chapter, Dickens holds the 1834 Poor Law accountable for much of the suffering he portrays throughout his novels. In the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend* he writes:

But, that my view of the Poor Law may not be mistaken or misrepresented, I will state it. I believe there has been in England, since the days of the Stuarts, no law so often infamously administered, no law so often openly violated, no law habitually so ill-supervised. In the majority of the shameful cases of disease and death from destitution, that shock the Public and disgrace the country, the illegality is quite equal to the inhumanity – and known language could say no more of their lawlessness. (p.822)

It is clear from the language Dickens uses that he abhors the 1834 Poor Law and considers it nothing but a disgrace. Riah in contrast, is a shining light created by Dickens in order to guide society to the right path. Riah’s protection of Jenny Wren is what allows her to feel like a child for the very first time. Through Riah, we learn that where the Poor Law fails the most vulnerable members of society, we as individuals must learn to protect rather than to use and abuse them.

The purpose of this chapter has been to discuss how Dickens used his fiction as a platform to engage with the darkest of subject matters, that of child prostitution in the nineteenth-century. Embedding subtle references to it in his novels throughout the length of his career, it is clear that Dickens believed this to be one of the darkest and most shameful elements of Victorian society. One key element that all the characters I have discussed in this chapter have in common, is liminality. By highlighting that they are in a world where child prostitution is a real threat, Dickens essentially removes their childhood, placing them in the liminal space between a child and an adult. Intent on re-educating his readers, he creates characters that are deserving of sympathy rather than disgust, and aims to show his readership that child prostitution cannot continue to be a necessary evil or a sordid secret not to be mentioned. Instead, society as a whole has a

duty to view those who make their living on the streets as individuals to be pitied and helped, rather than scorned and ignored.



## Chapter Five: The Blakean Element

Andrew Radford explains in his book *Romantic Echoes in the Victorian Era* (2017), that the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837 “marked for many critics a decisive rupture between the Victorian era and its Romantic antecedents. Her coronation became a seminal historical event and convenient shorthand for dividing nineteenth-century cultural sensibilities into two distinct camps” (p.1). However, as the title of his book suggests, the commencement of the Victorian era did not mean a sharp change in “cultural sensibilities”, but rather that the Romantic period and the literature that it produced, would have an inevitable influence on the writers that would come to dominate and represent the Victorian era. Peter Cook states in his book *The Romantic Legacy of Dickens* (2018) that “Dickens was indeed an important legatee of the Romantic movement” (p.2), but he also acknowledges that the Romantic influences present throughout Dickens’s fiction have often been overlooked by previous Dickens scholars. He explains that “Charles Dickens’s debt to his Romantic Period predecessors is far more significant than has previously been recognised” (p.264) and goes on to state “Dickens’s fiction constitutes a peculiarly Dickensian Romanticism [...] Dickens retains features of his predecessors and turns them into something new and strikingly relevant [...] an appreciation of his engagement with Romanticism is essential in order to comprehend his overall achievement as a writer of fiction” (p.264). Whilst Cook draws comparisons to several Romantic writers, in this chapter I argue that Dickens’s fiction contains similar trends and ideas to those found particularly in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. How much exposure (if any) Dickens had to Blake’s poetry is a subject widely debated amongst Dickens scholars. Samantha Matthews explains: “*The Chimney Sweeper’s Friend and Climbing Boy’s Album. Arranged by James Montgomery*, (1824) [is] remembered for giving early exposure to William Blake’s ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ (*Songs of Innocence*)” (2020, p156). Montgomery’s work provides a potential opportunity for Dickens to be made aware of Blake’s poetry, as did William Hone’s *Every Day Book* (1830). Kyle Grimes explains that “During the 1820s, Hone gradually retreated from the contentious arena of political criticism [...] he was chiefly occupied in writing and compiling those ‘literary kaleidoscopes.’ *The Everyday Book*, *Table Book*, and *The Year Book*. He died in 1847, having befriended Lamb and the young novelist Charles Dickens” (2009, p.267). John Gardner states “William Hone was hugely famous between 1815 until 1830 [...] [he]

publishes Keat's poems and John Clare's – he even publishes Blake during the poet's lifetime" (2011, p.33). Dickens's friendship with Hone provided an opportunity for him to become acquainted with Blake's poetry, yet it is not possible to know for sure whether Dickens read any of Blake's work.

When thinking about which works influenced Dickens Leon Litvik argues:

In order to assess what Dickens read from childhood onward, and to determine how this vast and varied storehouse contributed to his imaginative output, journalism, speeches, and other forms of public pronouncement, it is reasonable to consider the records of volumes he purchased and possessed at various points in his life. Evidence comes primarily from three sources: the inventory of contents of his house in Devonshire Terrace, completed in 1844 [...] the 'book accounts' with his publishers, stretching from 1844 to 1858 [...] and the catalogue of the library at his last home, Gads Hill, compiled before the final sale in 1878" (2018, p.25).

However, Litvik goes on to state "These three sources, while significant, do not provide a comprehensive picture of the wealth of printed material that Dickens absorbed, then employed intelligently and imaginatively, to create those monumental works for which he is best remembered" (p.25-26). Furthermore, Phillip Collins declares "the Gad's Hill Catalogue contains, however, only one item by Lamb (the two-volume *Letters* of 1837). This is one instance among many of the inadequacy of the Catalogue in defining Dickens's reading interests." (1964, p.140). It is not only the inventories that fail to provide a "comprehensive picture", for as Valerie Gager and Valerie L. Gager explain, "Unfortunately Dickens's letters reveal little about his reading as an adult" (1996, p.36).

As it is impossible to know the full extent of the works which influenced Dickens's writing, it would be unwise to suggest that Blake was a direct influence. Instead, I will suggest that several of Dickens's child characters possess what I consider to be a "Blakean" element, suggesting that Dickens and Blake had similar ideas concerning the importance of children in society.

I am not the first to identify similarities between Blake's work and Dickens's; Richard Gravil argues:

Blake's vision of London and Dickens's are much the same; both writers perceive massive systems of exploitation and disease: Blake's symbolic syphilis in the poem 'London' becomes Dickens's typhus [...] Dickens also shared with Blake and Wordsworth the Romantic cult of the child [...] One of the worst evils of Victorian society, as it appears in Dickens's novels, is the assassination of childhood (2013, p.20).

Peter Coveney argues in *The Image of Childhood* (1967) that "With Blake we have the first coordinated utterance of the Romantic Imaginative and spiritually sensitive child" (1967, p.51). There are multiple examples in Dickens's fiction of child characters whose purpose in the novel is to be the deliverer of the message and the moral; such characters can be understood as "Blakean" because they are there to guide the adult characters within the narrative to the truth, making them "spiritually sensitive". Coveney suggests that Dickens's characters "sometimes exist in a too straightforward world of innocence and villainy. His 'innocence' and 'experience' have not always the richness of emotional definition we find in Blake's" (p.161). I challenge this view, suggesting that the "emotional definition" of Dickens's "Blakean" characters is highlighted by the liminal space in which they exist. The "Blakean" element is what makes these child characters decidedly liminal, because despite being children, they already possess a knowledge and an understanding that is withheld from, or inaccessible to, the adults around them. They are more informed or enlightened than the adults, meaning it is the adults in the narratives and not the children who have lessons they need to learn. The child characters I focus on in this chapter are able to guide the adults to truth, thereby illuminating what had previously been obscured to them. As a result, their liminality, rather than just revealing their suffering, also highlights their worth and importance in the novel, and reminds us how much we can learn from children if only we are willing. In my first section, "Desired Information" I begin with a discussion of Jo the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House*, suggesting that far from being ignorant of everything around him, Jo holds the answers to Lady Dedlock's mystery. Then I move on to discuss Jenny Wren in *Our Mutual Friend*, and the importance of her ability to decipher Eugene's message following his attack from Bradley Headstone. The next part of the chapter, "Teaching A Lesson" considers the role of Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times* and the positive influence she has on the Utilitarian individuals who surround her. Lastly, I discuss *A Christmas Carol*, focussing on the significance of the Ghost of Christmas

Past and Tiny Tim as they advocate the importance of showing kindness and mercy to mankind.

In order to fully understand the Blakean elements of these child characters it is first necessary to consider the plate for Blake's poem "London" published in his collection of poems *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. This plate provides a visual representation of a child leading an elderly man through the streets of London. Coveney argues "'London' is perhaps the most vehement and inclusive outcry that any city or society has had levelled against it" (p.65). Likewise, Cook suggests, "Blake's famous poem 'London' is a stark warning of the corrosive effects of the city, as it then was, on humanity" (2018, p.37). The plate for "London" highlights that the old man's experience of the "corrosive city" has taught him to be blind to the suffering and hardship which surrounds him, and it is only the child's innocence that allows him to see London as it truly exists.



FIGURE 19. "LONDON". ILLUSTRATION FROM WILLIAM BLAKE'S *SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE* (1794), ILLUSTRATION BY WILLIAM BLAKE. RPT. IN *SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE*, (LONDON: TATE PUBLISHING, 2019) P.46.

The illustration that accompanies the poem suggests that the voice in the poem is a child's. What is particularly interesting about this plate is the light that is shining down upon the child as they lead the adult through the street. With the darkness behind the adult, the illustration portrays the child illuminating the path for the adult, as they guide them from ignorance to knowledge. Delivering the adult to the light, the child acquires what can be understood as divine qualities; a messenger of God, they teach the adult to see the suffering of their fellow men. The importance of light is present elsewhere in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, as Stanley Gardner explains when discussing the plates for "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found" in *Innocence*.





FIGURE 20. "THE LITTLE BOY LOST" ILLUSTRATION FROM WILLIAM BLAKE'S *SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE* (1794), ILLUSTRATION BY WILLIAM BLAKE. RPT. IN *SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE*, (LONDON: TATE PUBLISHING, 2019) P.13.

Gardner states that "the light, which lightens the darkness of the forest and leads the boy through the night [...] is transformed into the radiant relationship between God and the little boy in the next design" (2014, p.70). It is not a significant amount of light which the child desperately reaches towards in the illustration, but nonetheless the child appears to instinctively trust its power and presence, and as a result is rewarded in the subsequent plate.



FIGURE 21. "THE LITTLE BOY FOUND" ILLUSTRATION FROM WILLIAM BLAKE'S *SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE* (1794), ILLUSTRATION BY WILLIAM BLAKE. RPT. IN *SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE*, (LONDON: TATE PUBLISHING, 2019) p.14.

As Gardner states "The child's fear is dispelled when God steps down into Innocence in human form, and holds out a hand" (2014, p.70). In trusting in "the wand'ring light" (ll.2) the child has formed a sacred and a direct connection with God. Religious belief is a theme which is present throughout *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and according to Jennifer Jesse in her book *William Blake's Religious Vision: There's a Methodism in His Madness*, (2013) "Readers of Blake would be hard-pressed to identify a work of his poetry, prose, or painting that does not address religious themes, either explicitly or implicitly" (p.3). In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, it is the children who are depicted as being closest to God and God's love.

Tiffany K. Wayne points out that “All of the poems, of ‘innocence’ and of ‘experience’ are written from the point of view of children, who were believed to gauge more perceptively and accurately both the beauty and the injustices of the world” (2014, p.23). To Blake, childhood meant innocence, but it did not mean ignorance. The same sentiment is present in Dickens’s essay “Gone Astray” (1853) in which he speaks about becoming separated from the adult looking after him, when he was still a small boy, and realising that he was lost. He was subsequently helped by a watchman. Dickens explains, “This venerable man took me to the nearest watch-house; I say he took me, but in fact I took him, for when I think of us in the rain, I recollect that we must have made a composition, like a vignette of ‘Infancy leading Age’” (p.19). Indeed “Infancy leading Age” is a prominent theme in several of Dickens’s novels, suggesting that Dickens also believed children were able “to gauge more perceptively and accurately both the beauty and the injustices of the world”. Using “London” and several other poems from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* I will highlight throughout this chapter the similarities between Blake’s poems and Dickens’s fiction, regarding the notion that children can be understood as messengers of God.

### **Desired Information**

When Blake speaks of “How the chimney sweeper’s cry” (ll.5) in the third stanza of “London”, he is referring to the hardships faced by working-class children. Rather than a childhood filled with laughter and learning, these children spend their days toiling away, desperately trying to earn enough money to survive. Blake’s anger at the suffering such children experience is made clear to the reader; the tone of the poem is cynical and designed to make the reader question how blind they themselves have been to the struggles of such children. The image of a lowly working-class child who sweeps for a living also appears in Dickens’s *Bleak House*, but rather than a chimney sweeper, Jo is a crossing- sweeper. Like Blake, Dickens uses the image of Jo, a lowly crossing-sweeper to draw his reader’s attention to the hardships faced by those in society that are so often ignored. At first glance, Jo is the epitome of ignorance. He claims seven times throughout the novel “I don’t know nothink”, and when he is first introduced to the reader the narrator reports his words:

Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don’t know  
that everybody has two names. Never heerd of sich a



think. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name. Thinks it long enough for *him*. – *He* don't find no fault with it. Spell it? No. *He* can't spell it. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What's home? Knows a broom's a broom, and know it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom, or about the lie, but knows both. Can't exactly say what'll be done to him arter he's dead if he tells a lie to the gentleman here, but believes it'll be something wery bad to punish him, and serve him right – and so he'll tell the truth (ch.11, p.177).

It is interesting to note that in Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Innocence*, the narrator speaks of "thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack" (ll.11), meaning that Jo in *Bleak House* shares his simple and common name with one of Blake's chimney sweepers, Jo's being even more simple though because it is spelt without an "e". The narrator takes great pains to ensure the reader understands that Jo has little to no understanding of the world around him; he is aware of his existence and the broom with which he sweeps the streets, but everything else is a mystery to him. However, what is striking is that despite his apparent ignorance, he appears to have an innate understanding of one of the Ten Commandments, "you shall not give false testimony against your neighbour" (Exodus. 20:16). Jo's understanding of the sanctity of the Ten Commandments is not surprising when we consider it from a Blakean perspective. According to Wayne, "The innocence of childhood represented to Romantic poets, following Blake's lead, the beginnings of all humanity, the freedom and potential of humanity before the fall of Adam and Eve" (2014, p.23). Dickens also creates a character who is seemingly ignorant of everything save the sanctity of the Lord's word. Jo's innate understanding that to lie is a sin, transforms him from ignorant crossing-sweeper, to enlightened individual whose place in the novel is to guide those around him to truth. Jo physically spends his time at a crossroads, but he can also be understood as existing at a metaphorical crossroads – he appears to be somewhere between ignorance and enlightenment. The word of God being a guiding light is also present in Blake's "The Chimney-Sweeper" poem in *Innocence* as the narrator explains "And the angel told Tom if he'd be a good boy / He'd have God for his father and never want joy" (ll.19-20). Both Jo and the narrator in "The Chimney-Sweep" have a clear understanding of what is expected of them by God. They may spend their days among dirt and ash, but their souls are pure and unmarred by the sins of the adults around them.

Dickens himself certainly valued the teachings of Christ, for in the opening of *The Life of Our Lord* (1934) he writes:

My dear children, I am very anxious that you should know something about the History of Jesus Christ. For everybody ought to know about him. No one ever lived who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in any way ill or miserable, as He was (p.17).

Although never intended for publication, it clearly highlights the importance of understanding Jesus's kind and merciful nature. The publisher's note to the 1999 Simon and Schuster edition of *The Life of Our Lord* states that: "his [Dickens's] purpose was to teach his children about the life and history of Jesus Christ, championing the virtues of mercy and forgiveness" (p.5). Dickens also acknowledges the importance of Jesus's teachings in a letter to Rev. David Macrae in 1861 when he writes:

With a deep sense of my great responsibility always upon me when I exercise my art, one of my constant and most earnest endeavours has been to exhibit in all my good people some slight reflections of the teachings of our great Master, and unostentatiously to lead the reader up to those teachings as the great source of all moral goodness (Hughes Gibson, 2015, p.42).

Dickens's admission that he saw the teachings of Jesus as a "great source of all moral goodness" means it is not surprising that we find "the virtues of mercy and forgiveness" championed above all else in *The Life of Our Lord*. Furthermore, as Valentine Cunningham argues "Dickens is, of course, a Christian writer. A very English, Protestant, and Anglican-inflected one. He is steeped, as most Victorian writers were, in the knowledge, the words, the stories, the rhetoric, the practices of the national religion" (2008, p.255). Cunningham is right to call Dickens a Christian writer, but it is important to remember that Dickens saw the teachings of Jesus as a moral guide above all else. As Dick Keith Hooper argues when discussing the role of the Church in Victorian England:

The role of the Church, many believed, was to maintain the divine order. The poor should accept their lowly position and be content, and those of a higher social position need not intervene on their behalf [...] Secondly, many within the Church believed that the suffering experienced by those living in poverty was a

direct result of their immorality [...] Dickens's faith, however, was of a practical nature. He was convinced that individuals, and society as a whole had a Christian responsibility to care for the underprivileged (2017, p.14).

For Dickens, "Christian responsibility" meant caring for the underprivileged rather than considering their plight as "a direct result of their immorality". The Church depicted as unsympathetic to the plight of the poor is referred to in Blake's "London": "How the Chimney-sweeper's cry / Every blackning Church appalls" (ll.9-10) The notion of the Church being blackened is suggestive of its impurity and its hypocrisy regarding its attitude towards the poor and the needy. The narrator in "London" criticises the Church's failings, and therefore is suggesting that as an institution it has forgotten the simple teachings of Christ, namely the need for "mercy and forgiveness". The Church's position is also criticised in "The Chimney-Sweeper" in *Experience* where the narrator declares that his mother and father "are gone to praise God and his priest and king, / Who make up a heaven of our misery" (ll.11-12). Christopher Rowland suggests that Blake offers a "critique of divine monarchy" (2020, p.24), and this is apparent in *Experience's* version of "The Chimney-Sweeper". Abandoning their "little black thing among the snow" (ll.1), the child's parents keep up the appearance of being good Christians, praying in a church which does not care for the suffering of their child or indeed any of the children forced into labour in a bid to survive. Jo in *Bleak House*, however, knows nothing except the sanctity of the Lord's words. His humble position in life, far from being a direct result of his immorality, actually places him closer to God. The spelling of "nothing" as "nothink" is intended by Dickens to highlight Jo's cockney accent, but it also serves a second purpose. "Nothink" suggests that Jo does not need to think about the teachings of Christ, as he is already intuitively aware of them. As a result, Jo's liminality is apparent from the moment the reader meets him. He may only be "that boy" (ch.11, p.176) who has never been to school, but whilst his knowledge in worldly matters might be lacking, he has a wealth of knowledge when it comes to recognising truth. Jo is immediately dismissed by the Coroner following his inability to provide a suitable witness statement, with the Coroner exclaiming "This won't do, gentlemen!" (ch.11, p.177) and "Put the boy aside" (ch.11, p.177). Jo is discarded quickly as unimportant, and is referred to ironically by the narrator as a "graceless creature" (ch.11, p.177), but what becomes immediately apparent is that Jo is not unacquainted with grace and kindness. His account of how he knows the deceased

man can be interpreted as a Christian parable preaching mercy and charity. The narrator explains:

That one cold winter night, when he, the boy, was shivering in a doorway near his crossing, the man turned to look at him, and came back, and having questioned him and found that he had not a friend in the world, said, "Neither have I, Not one!" and gave him the price of a supper and a night's lodging. That the man had often spoken to him since; and asked him whether he slept sound at night, and how he bore cold and hunger [...] That when the man had no money, he would say in passing, "I am as poor as you to-day, Jo;" but that when he had any he had always (as the boy most heartily believes) been glad to give him some (ch.11, p.178).

Jo is on the receiving end of the practical Christian kindness which Dickens championed throughout his life. Captain Hawdon's kind treatment of Jo is a reminder that grace is not found in finery or wealth, but in simple kindness given to those most in need. Jo himself is aware of this when he states, "He was wery good to me" (ch.11, p.178). Jo's soft "v" at the beginning of "very" is again a technique applied by Dickens to indicate Jo's accent, but it is also reminiscent of a young child who has not yet learnt to pronounce his words; and this coupled with the repeated use of "boy" reminds the reader that Jo is indeed still just a child.

Jo may have been treated by Captain Hawdon simply as a child in need, but what becomes evident throughout the novel is that Jo possesses a knowledge and an understanding of certain events that is obscured to the adults around him. Far from knowing "nothink", Jo has a significant part to play in Lady Dedlock's mystery. When Lady Dedlock approaches Jo about visiting Captain Hawdon's grave, she is described as looking like "an upper servant by her attire" (ch.16, p.260) and "her face is veiled" (ch.16, p.260). Despite her attempts at disguise, Jo knows instinctively that she is not what she seems, for when he addresses her the narrator explains, "No offence, my lady," says Jo, with much humility; for even he has got at the suspicion of her being a lady" (ch.16, p.261). The extent to which Lady Dedlock needs Jo is evident in the multiple questions she asks him in quick succession; "Can you shew me all those places that were spoken of in the account I read? The place he wrote for, the place he died at, the place where you were taken to, and the place where he was buried? Do you know the

place where he was buried?” (ch.16, p.260). The narrator tells us that “Jo answers with a nod; having also nodded as each other was mentioned” (ch.16, p.261). Jo possesses the information Lady Dedlock desires most, and yet her manner towards him is far from grateful: “I am fly’ says Jo. ‘But fen larks, you know! Stow hooking it!’” (ch.16, p.261). His cockney turn of phrase may be applied by Dickens for comic effect, but it provokes the following response from Lady Dedlock: “What does the horrible creature mean?” exclaims the servant, recoiling from him” (ch.16, p.261). Just as the Coroner did in Chapter Eleven, Lady Dedlock brings into question Jo’s humanity by referring to him as a “creature”, only this time he is “horrible” rather than “graceless”. Her language is less than kind, but Jo does not seem concerned by her rhetoric for he “screws his up his mouth into a whistle, gives his ragged head a rub, takes his broom under his arm, and leads the way; passing deftly, with his bare feet, over the harsh stones, and through the mud and mire” (ch.16, p.261). Once again, we have the Blakean image of a child leading an adult through the streets of London in an effort to show the adult in question the truth they seek. The broom under Jo’s arm is a reminder to the reader that following the death of Captain Hawdon, the broom is his only companion now; and as a result, the reader is encouraged to feel sympathy for Jo, and contempt for the cruel way in which Lady Dedlock speaks to one whose help she so desperately needs.

The original illustration by Hablot K. Browne, depicting Jo pointing out the final resting place of Captain Hawdon to Lady Dedlock provides further evidence that far from being a “graceless” or “horrible” creature, Jo should be recognised as one who possesses truth.

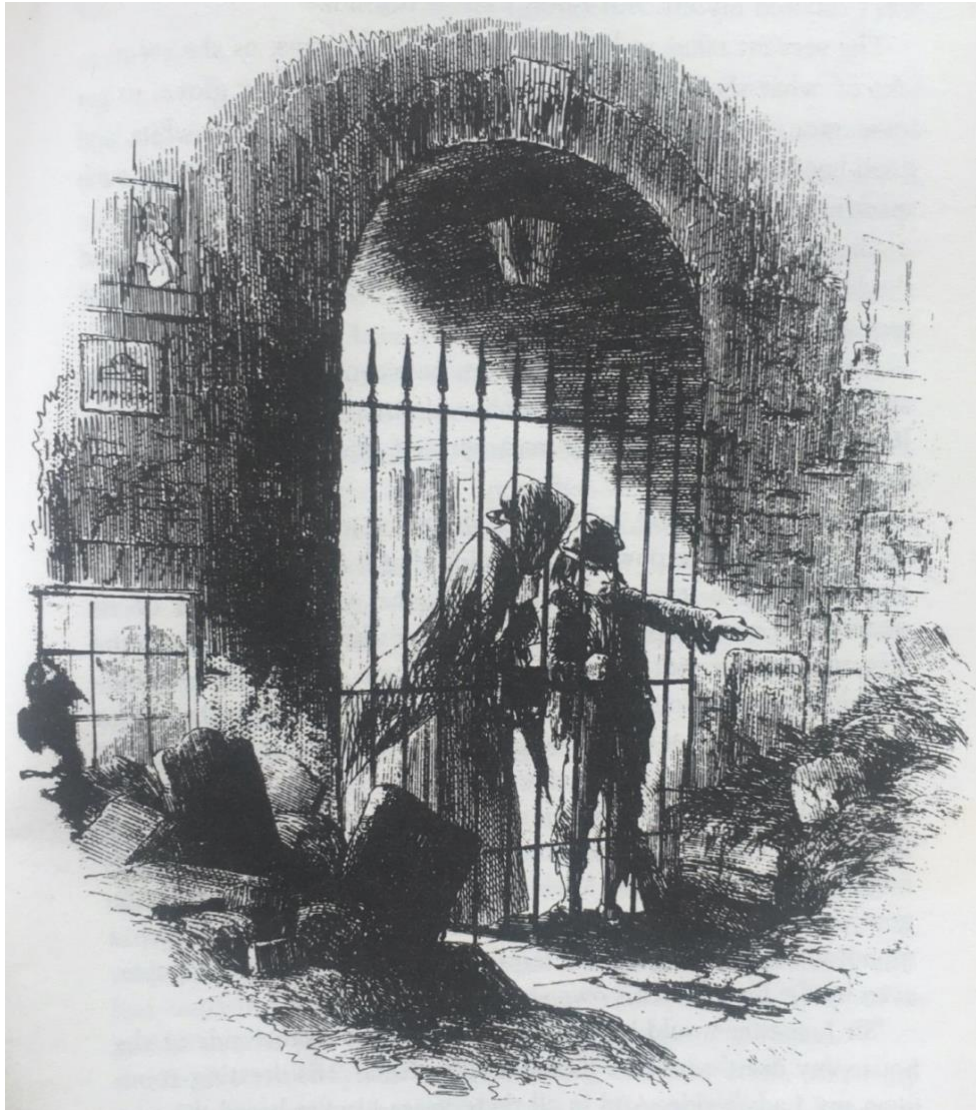


FIGURE 22. "CONSECRATED GROUND". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *BLEAK HOUSE* (1852-53), ILLUSTRATION BY H. K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *BLEAK HOUSE*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) P.263.

What is most striking about this illustration is the light that pours in from above, illuminating Jo as he points out the grave of Captain Hawdon. Just as in Blake's illustration for "London", light shines down upon the child as he leads the old man through the streets; light shines down upon Jo as he leads Lady Dedlock to the grave. The light follows Jo's pointed finger, which encourages the viewer to consider it as divine light, shining on Jo as he enlightens Lady Dedlock as to the location of Captain Hawdon's final resting place. The two "come to the little tunnel of a court, and to the gas-lamp (lighted now), and to the iron gate" (ch.16, p.262); but what is key about this illustration is that the gas lamp depicted is shrouded in darkness, and therefore cannot

be the light source behind Jo. What is interesting about Jo in this illustration is that his face is illuminated by the light source, whilst Lady Dedlock is obscured from the reader. Although it may have been important for Browne to hide Lady Dedlock's face in order to preserve the mystery of who this refined servant is, obscuring her face and illuminating Jo's has the effect of presenting Jo as pure in the face of truth whereas Lady Dedlock needs to hide herself from it. Although she has requested to know where Captain Hawdon is buried, she does not look directly where Jo is pointing in the illustration; her face is not turned towards the light as his is, indicating that this truth which Jo has revealed to her is painful as much as it is a blessing to know. Richard L. Stein argues that the "images juxtapose London poverty with the polite world [...] the effect is both to map the novel's social extremes and to evoke its process of social analysis" (2001, p.175). "Consecrated Ground" certainly depicts social extremes; even dressed as a servant, Lady Dedlock appears to be too finely dressed to be in such a "place of abomination" (ch.16, p.262), whereas Jo in his rags and bare feet looks far more likely to frequent such a place. But it is not just social extremes that are being highlighted in this illustration. What is made clear is that Jo, with the light of the divine shining upon him, finally reveals to Lady Dedlock the truth she has so desperately sought. If Jo is to be considered as a "creature" he is more akin to something holy than anything else. The truth he reveals to her may seem like an "abomination" to her, but it is nonetheless what she desires most – to know the final resting place of the only man she has ever loved.

It is important to remember that the graveyard Jo leads Lady Dedlock to is not only the final resting place of Captain Hawdon, but is also the place where the reader sees Lady Dedlock for the final time. Hablot K. Browne's illustration "The Morning" (1853) presents the reader with a dead Lady Dedlock on the steps of the graveyard.



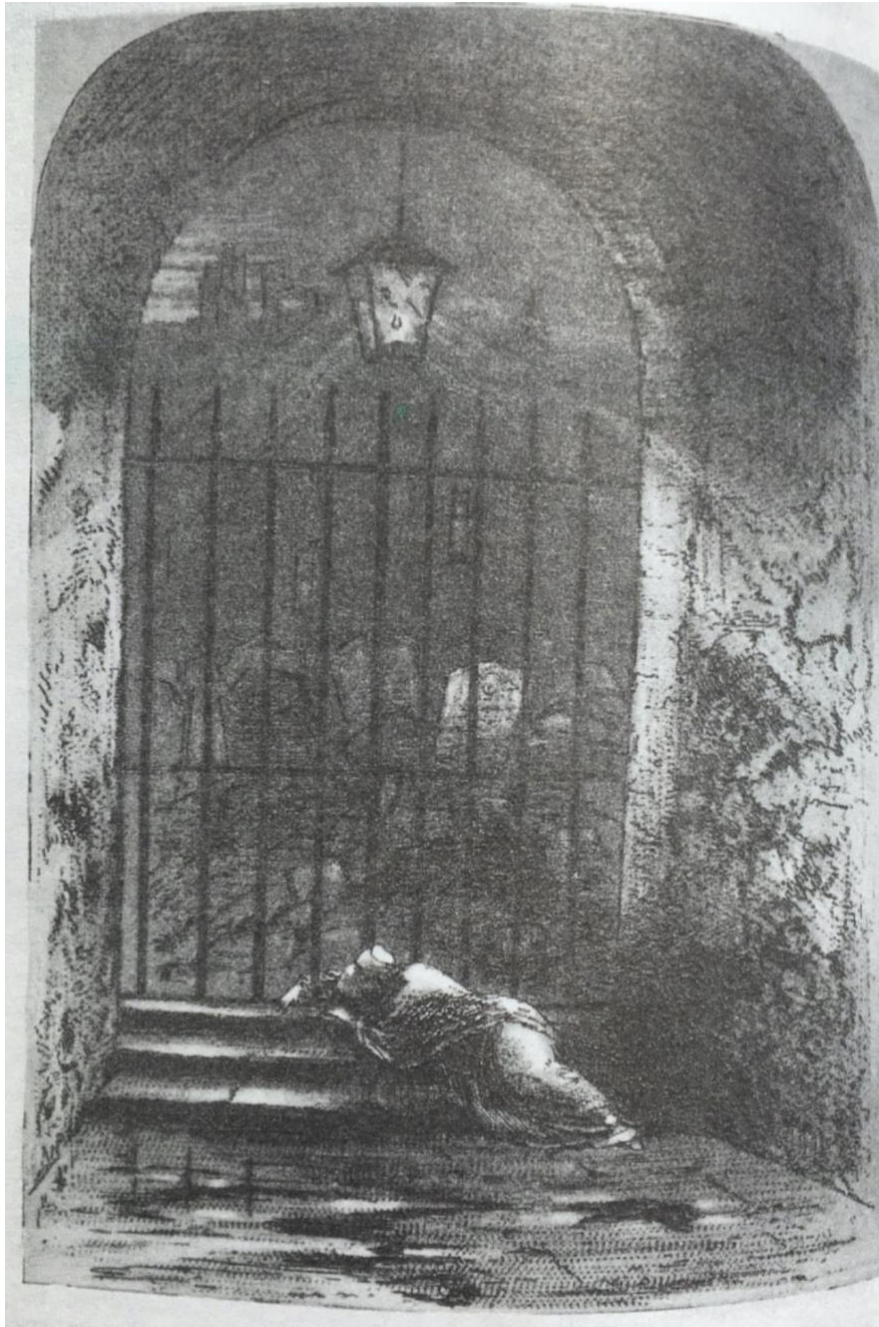


FIGURE 23. "THE MORNING". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *BLEAK HOUSE* (1852-53), ILLUSTRATION BY H.K. BROWNE. RPT. IN *BLEAK HOUSE*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) P.914.

Unlike the earlier illustration; there is no light shining down from above this time; again the gas lamp is visible, and again it produces no light. Lady Dedlock is completely alone and shrouded in darkness, the light of her life having finally gone out. With her arm reaching towards Captain Hawdon's grave beyond the locked gate, Browne makes it clear that the last act of Lady Dedlock's life was to reach out towards the grave of the man who had been beyond her reach for many years. It would appear then that Jo, the



humble crossin- sweeper who claims to know so little, actually led Lady Dedlock to the end of her journey. It is because of Jo that this is where Lady Dedlock spends the last moments of her life. When discussing Jo's purpose in the novel, Janice M. Allen comments that in Victorian London, "at every street corner, a waif like Jo might be standing, waiting to sweep a relatively clean path through the mud" (p.76, 2004). She goes on to explain that in the novel, "Jo swept the mud, but beyond his sweeping he could be ignored [...] Jo, the crossing sweeper whose existence society refuses to acknowledge, spreads the infectious disease engendered by the foul material in which he must work and live" (p.76, 2004). Far from being divine, Allen describes Jo as being almost indistinguishable from the mud in which he lives and works. Jo then, can be understood as literally "from the gutter"; he is an earthly being that society does not need to acknowledge. And yet, being directly linked to earth can still have holy connotations. The Christian committal prayer, read during a burial service contains the sentence "we now commit his/her body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" (p.314, 2011). This wording is taken directly from Genesis, in which God chastises Adam and Eve for disobeying him; he claims "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (p.6, 1979). The realisation that Jo is almost indistinguishable from the mud and dirt and dust and earth in which he exists, takes on new a significance then, when we consider that "for dust you are" were God's words explicitly. Furthermore, the last time we see Lady Dedlock, she is lying in the earth and mud, in the exact place to which Jo had led her. Acting like a divine guide, Jo led Lady Dedlock to the truth she so desperately desired, and having done so, he has enabled her to finally be at peace.

By the time Lady Dedlock lies down to die, Jo has already left the novel, having himself died in the care of Allen Woodcourt. In his last moments, Jo perfectly understands what must come next, for he explains "it's time for me to go to that berryin ground, sir" (ch.47, p.733). Confused by Jo's words, Woodcourt replies "lie down, and tell me. What burying ground, Jo?" (ch.47, p.733). Again, we see an adult requesting that Jo impart the information that he holds, and when Jo does explain what he means, it becomes clear that, like Lady Dedlock, to be with Captain Hawdon is all that Jo desires now. He explains:

“Where they laid him as wos wery good to me, wery good to me indeed, he wos. It’s time fur me to go down to that there berryin ground, sir, and ask to be put along with him. I wants to go there and be berried. [...] I wants to tell him that I am as poor as him now, and have come there to be laid along with him” (ch.47, p.733).

Jo’s exhibits no fear at the prospect of a premature death; his admission that he “wants to go there and be berried” shows he has accepted his fate and goes willing to it. But whilst he exhibits wisdom beyond his years, when talking about his impending death, there is also something distinctly childlike about his wish to be buried alongside Captain Hawdon. Just as earlier in the text, Jo’s soft “v” at the beginning of “very”, whilst it is an indication of his cockney accent, is also reminiscent of how a small child may pronounce the word. More importantly though, it is his apparent need for comfort that is most striking. Jo’s wish “to be laid along with him” is similar to that of a child wishing to remain close to their parent, and therefore acts as a reminder to the reader that Captain Hawdon is the closest thing to a father figure that Jo has ever had. The thought of death is not frightening for Jo, because it is through death that he will be able to be reunited with the person who has shown him the most kindness during his short life.

Donald Hawes describes Jo as “the wretched little crossing-sweeper” (2002, p.122) and explains that “he dies in the midst of saying the Lord’s Prayer” (p.122). To describe Jo as “wretched” is to describe him in relation to his mortal existence on earth; but by the time his death comes it is arguable whether Jo is wretched anymore. Not only will death return him to the side of his only friend, it will also return him to his Heavenly Father. To die whilst saying a prayer is to die in direct conversation with God. Indeed it is for this reason that Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius in Act 3, scene 3 of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603) declaring “Now might I do it pat, now he is a-praying; / And now I’ll do’t and so he goes to heaven (ll.73 – 74). Unlike Claudius though, Jo is not guilty of any heinous crimes, and the image of him repeating the Lord’s Prayer in his dying moments, adds poignancy to the closing lines of the chapter in which he dies (entitled “Jo’s Will). The narrator states, “the light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead! Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentleman. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day” (ch.48, p.734). The reference to “Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order” is reminiscent of the line

“Every blackning Church appals” (ll.10) in Blake’s “London”, and hints at the hypocrisy of the Church; an institution which is supposed to embody Christian values, but which in reality does little to help those like Jo, namely, members of society most in need. The narrator’s appeal to “men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts” is evidence of Dickens’s belief that God’s will is that “individuals, and society as a whole have a Christian responsibility to care for the underprivileged” (Hooper, 2017, p.14). Jeremy Hawthorn argues, “Jo is undoubtedly a realised character, not a puppet; his life and death affect us both in terms of this realised individuality and also as representative of the lives and deaths of real children” (1986, p.66). Hawthorn is correct of course: the ill-treatment and suffering that Jo experiences acts as a representation of what many children experienced on the streets of Victorian London. Just as the child leads the old man through the streets in Blake’s “London” revealing to the viewer the way things truly are, so Jo’s suffering reveals to the reader the dire reality faced by many children every day. However, it is not just his suffering that is meant to enlighten the reader about the truth of things: his innate understanding of Christian teachings and his ability to lead Lady Dedlock to the truth she so desperately desires, indicates how much we as adults can learn from children. Jo may just be a “wretched little crossing-sweeper” (Hawes, 2002, p.122), but he can also be understood as a messenger of God because he delivers Lady Dedlock to the end of her journey. When Lady Dedlock lies down and dies near the grave of Captain Hawdon, she also lies down and dies near the grave of Jo. Ultimately then, Jo is her guiding light, guiding her to the truth, and there to meet her at the end.

It is not however, just Lady Dedlock who requires information from Jo. Hawes declares that “the authorities are always ‘moving him on’” (2002, p.122) and that he is “harassed by them and by people (including Mr Snagsby and Inspector Bucket)” (p.122). Hawes is correct to use the term “harassed”, for Mr Bucket is very forthcoming in explaining how he used Jo to obtain information. On seeing Hortense dressed as Lady Dedlock was when she approached him about Captain Hawdon’s grave, Jo explains:

That there’s the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd. It is her and it an’t her. It an’t her hand, nor yet her rings, nor yet her voice. But that there’s the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd, and they’re wore the same way wot she wore ‘em and it’s her height wot she wos, and she giv me a sov’ring and hooked it (ch.22, p.364).

Having gained the information he needed from Jo, inspector Bucket states:

It's all squared, you see, as I squared it myself, sir. There an't a doubt that it was the other one with this one's dress on. The boy was exact respecting colours and everything. Mr Snagsby, I promised you as a man that he should be sent away all right. Don't say it wasn't done! (ch.22, p.365).

Bucket is proud not only of how he has managed to obtain the information he needed from Jo, but also how he intends to treat Jo, now that he is of no use to him. Jo's innocent nature as a child is in direct contrast with Bucket's manipulative and corrupted adult nature. Bucket asserts his authority and dominance over Jo when he refers to him as "the boy", and then states "Mr Snagsby. I promised you as a man that he should be sent away". Despite having needed Jo to solve the mystery of the veiled woman, Bucket shows no gratitude towards him, refusing even to refer to him by his name. In Bucket's eyes, Jo is a worthless street urchin, but the reader is encouraged to recognise him as considerably more. The information Lady Dedlock required from Jo gave us an insight into her heart's desires, whereas Inspector Bucket needed Jo for practical purposes, but what is most important to understand is that both Lady Dedlock and Inspector Bucket depended on Jo to provide them with the answers they sought. Therefore, Jo serves as a reminder to the reader that adults can not only learn from children, but that children, even those from the humblest of backgrounds, can often provide us with the knowledge that we most desire to have.

Jo is not the only example in Dickens's fiction of a child who is called upon to provide answers to the adults around them. Jenny Wren in *Our Mutual Friend* plays a vital role in revealing what Eugene Wrayburn is trying to express to Lizzie Hexam following his attack by Bradley Headstone. The narrator explains that Jenny Wren had an "eye, bright and watchful as the bird's whose name she had taken" (bk.2, ch.11, p.347), and she lives up to her name when she is called upon to observe Eugene on his sick-bed. Unlike Jo, who already possessed the information Lady Dedlock and Inspector Bucket required, Jenny is called upon because the adults are confident only she can reveal what Eugene is trying to communicate. Towards the end of the novel, Mortimer Lightwood seeks Jenny out, explaining to her that Eugene "asked for you to be brought to sit beside him. Hardly relying on my own interpretation of the indistinct sounds he made, I caused Lizzie to hear them. We were both sure that he asked for you" (bk.4, ch.9, p.735).

Eugene is confident that only Jenny will be able to decipher what he is trying to say, and it is not long before he is proven right. For while Mortimer and Lizzie may struggle to understand Eugene, Jenny has no such difficulty. The narrator explains “the little creature attained an understanding of him that Lightwood did not possess. Mortimer would often turn to her, as if she were an interpreter between this sentient world and the insensible man” (bk.4, ch.10, p.739). Just like Jo in *Bleak House*, Jenny is referred to here as a “creature”, and this coupled with Mortimer’s tendency to view her as “an interpreter between this sentient world and the insensible man”, encourages the reader to consider Jenny as a higher being, for she can understand what those belonging to the “sentient world” cannot. Furthermore, just as Jo is able to lead Lady Dedlock to what her heart most desires, Jenny is able to do the same for Eugene. In the chapter entitled “The Dolls’ Dressmaker Discovers a Word”, the narrator explains:

The watchful little dressmaker had been vigilant as ever in her watch, and she now came up and touched Lightwood’s arm as he looked down at his friend, despairingly [...] She whispered in his ear one short word of a single syllable [...] “Try it,” said the little creature, with an excited and exultant face. She then bent over the unconscious man, and, for the first time, kissed him on the cheek, and kissed the poor maimed hand that was nearest her. Then she withdrew to the foot of the bed (bk.4, ch.10, p.741).

Following Jenny’s discovery, Mortimer leans close to Eugene and asks “Is the word we should soon have come to – is it – Wife?” (bk.4, ch.10.,p741), which results in Eugene exclaiming “Oh, God bless you, Mortimer! [...] Yes. God bless you! Yes.” (bk.4, ch.10, p.741). What is interesting about this scene is that despite it being Jenny who has fathomed the unfathomable, it is Mortimer whom Eugene showers thanks upon. Jenny is almost instantly forgotten, and she seems to be very aware that her job is now complete; evidenced by the fact that she “withdrew to the foot of the bed” immediately after her discovery. Furthermore, the chapter concludes:

As the evening light lengthened the heavy reflections of the trees in the river, another figure came with a soft step into the sick room.

“Is he conscious?” asked the little dressmaker, as the figure took its station by the window. For Jenny had given place to it immediately, and could not see the

sufferer's face, in the dark, room, from her new and removed position (bk.4, ch.10, p.742).

Having provided the adults with what they require, Jenny is no longer needed or important to them. The original illustration by Marcus Stone of Jenny at Eugene's bedside does much to reinstate her position among the adults.



FIGURE 24. "EUGENE'S BEDSIDE". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND* (1864-65), ILLUSTRATION BY MARCUS STONE. RPT. IN *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*, (LONDON" VINTAGE BOOKS, 2011) P.736.

Sitting at the foot of the bed, Jenny is the closest character to the viewer in this illustration, but shrouded in darkness, she is easily missed. The viewer's eye is drawn straight to Eugene illuminated in the middle of the picture, with the adults gathered around him, whilst it is easy to overlook Jenny and not notice her at all. Cohen and Rabb explain that when looking for an illustrator for *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens wanted the illustrations "to be done by an artist who would bring new, fresh styles of observation and representation" (1980, p.203). Stone's fresh style of observation is clear to see in "Eugene's Bedside". His depiction of Jenny Wren, fading into the darkness is a perfect representation of the point Dickens is trying to make through her character. She is only a child, and therefore it is easy to overlook her, and to consider her as not important. And yet, it is due to Jenny's powers of observation that Eugene and Lizzie are married: she is central to their happiness. Just as Jo in *Bleak House* leads Lady Dedlock to what her heart most desires, so too does Jenny illuminate the way for Eugene and Lizzie to be united in marriage. Through characters like Jo and Jenny Wren, who are poor, working-class children, Dickens is reminding his readers that no one in society deserves to be forgotten, for the most unlikely individuals may just turn out to be the most significant. As the speaker explains in "The Divine Image" in *Innocence*:

And all must love the human form,  
In heathen, Turk or Jew.  
Where Mercy, Love and Pity dwell,  
There God is dwelling too (ll.17-20).

Both Dickens and Blake argue that God's love knows no boundaries. It cares not for status, it is only concerned with "Mercy, Love and Pity". With the light of God's love in them, Jo and Jenny are able to lead the adults around them to the truth. Dickens and Blake want us to remember that often it is being able to see the world through the eyes of a child, that allows us to see things as they truly are, or how they ought to be.

### **Teaching a Lesson**

Both Jo and Jenny Wren are called upon to provide answers to the adults around them; the adults recognise that these children possess knowledge and information that they themselves do not. By requesting the assistance of these children, the adults acknowledge that they have something to learn. *Hard Times* (1854) however, presents

readers with quite a different scenario, where we find Mr Thomas Gradgrind refusing to learn from those around him, particularly the children in his life. The importance of education is a theme which is present from the outset in *Hard Times*, apparent from the famous opening:

“Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach this boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!” (ch.1, p.9).

Gradgrind’s opening speech reveals much about his character and his views regarding the education of children. As Hugh Cunningham argues, Gradgrind is “the embodiment of Utilitarianism” (2008, p.160), and therefore it is not surprising that he has such a rigid approach to teaching. Michael Schiro describes nineteenth-century Utilitarian education in Britain as emphasising “the importance of making schools useful and relevant to the life of the individuals and the nation” (2012, p.79). This sentiment is echoed in Gradgrind’s speech, but what is alarming is his view that children are not born as “reasoning animals” but instead have to be taught reason. By dehumanising the children, he is able to convince himself that he is doing them a service. Having learned the importance of reason himself, he is superior to the children; and in his mind they can offer him nothing except their willingness to learn the importance of “Facts”. The narrator, however, wastes no time in signalling to the reader that we should be sceptical of such a mind-set: “the scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room” (ch.1, p.9). The narrator’s choice of adjectives when describing the school-room indicates that we as readers are not supposed to feel inspired by Gradgrind’s approach to teaching, but rather should feel uneasy at the prospect of an education which does not in any way encourage the development of the human imagination. Such a description is similar to Blake’s “The School Boy” in *Experience* who declares in the second stanza:

But to go to school in a summer morn,  
Oh! It drives all joy away;  
Under a cruel eye outworn,



The little ones spend the day  
In sighing and dismay (ll.6-10)

Like the children in “The School Boy”, the pupils in Gradgrind’s school find themselves “under a cruel eye”, and the narrator’s description of “a bare, monotonous vault of a school-room” (ch.1, p.9) leaves the reader “In sighing and dismay” at Gradgrind’s approach to education. George Orwell makes clear in his 1939 essay “Charles Dickens”, the importance of a good education was not lost on Dickens: “If you hate violence and don’t believe in politics, the only major remedy remaining is education. Perhaps society is past praying for, but there is always hope for the individual human being, if you can catch him young enough” (p.44). As Orwell highlights, Dickens argued not for the Utilitarian approach to education which dehumanises children the way Gradgrind does, but for one that recognises human beings as individuals and stimulates their imagination. If the dreary setting of the school-room is not enough to convince the reader that Gradgrind is misguided in his approach to education, the introduction of Sissy Jupe and the dialogue between her and Gradgrind which follows, does much to highlight the flaws in his character. Furthermore, it sets out Sissy’s purpose in the novel clearly. Dehumanising Sissy by referring to her as “girl number twenty” (ch.2, p.13), Gradgrind asks: “So you would carpet your room – or your husband’s room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband – with representations of flowers, would you” (ch.2,p.13). To which Sissy replies:

“If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers” (ch.2, p.13)

“And is that why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots?” (ch.2, p.14)

“It wouldn’t hurt them, sir. They wouldn’t crush and wither if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy –” (ch.1, p.14).

“Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn’t fancy,” cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to this point. “That’s it! You are never to fancy.” (ch.2, p.14).

What becomes obvious to the reader during this conversation between Gradgrind and Sissy, is that Gradgrind has a lot to learn from girl number twenty. She may not be a grown woman with a husband, but Sissy is strikingly liminal, because despite being a child, she already has a better understanding than Gradgrind of what is important, indicating that she has wisdom which expands beyond her years. The manner in which she speaks to Gradgrind is respectful and submissive, made clear by the repetition of “sir” when she addresses him. And yet, her bold defence of the importance of Art indicates that whilst she is respectful of him as her superior, she does not agree with his opinions. Consumed by the notion of Facts, and described as “a galvanizing apparatus [...] charged with a grim mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away” (bk.1, ch.2, p.10), Gradgrind is similar to the human form in “A Divine Image” in *Experience* which is explained as: “The human form, a fiery forge; /The human face, a furnace sealed; /The human heart, its hungry gorge” (ll.6-8). Appearing more like a machine than a human being, it is clear that Gradgrind has lost sight of what is important in life, and therefore it will be up to Sissy, to illuminate the right path for him and to fill the “hungry gorge” of his heart with lessons on the importance of imagination. Indeed, Sissy as an illuminating source is suggested early on when the narrator explains “the girl was so dark-eyed and dark-haired, that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun when it shone upon her” (ch.2, p.11). Such a description encourages the reader to consider Sissy as enlightened by truth, whilst those around her exist in the darkness of ignorance.

Steadfast in the face of men, Sissy proves her strength of character throughout the novel, and nowhere is this more apparent than when she takes it upon herself to remove James Harthouse from Louisa’s life. When she meets him “her face was innocent and youthful, and its expression remarkably pleasant. She was not afraid of him, or in any way disconcerted; she seemed to have her mind entirely preoccupied with the occasion of her visit” (bk.3, ch.2, p.223). Despite her innocence and youth, Sissy is not afraid of Harthouse or the situation she places herself in by going to see him alone. She explains to him in no uncertain terms “I am young, as you see; I am alone, as you see. In coming to you, sir, I have no advice or encouragement beyond my own hope” (bk.3, ch.2, p.224). Again, Sissy is respectful in the way she addresses the man before her, but she also makes it clear that her “own hope” is not to be ignored. This is evident even to Harthouse:

The child-like ingenuousness with which his visitor spoke, her modest fearlessness, her truthfulness which put all artifice aside, her entire forgetfulness of herself in her earnest quiet holding to the object with which she had come [...] presented something in which he was so inexperienced, and against which he knew any of his usual weapons would fall so powerless; that not a word could he rally to his relief (bk.3, ch.2, p.224-5).

Sissy's liminality is present not only in her "modest fearlessness", but also in her "entire forgetfulness of herself". Resolute in her belief that she is doing the right thing, she demonstrates a sense of maturity and reveals her mothering qualities as she strives to protect Louisa from Harthouse. Having first cared for Mrs Gradgrind when she was dying, Sissy now takes Louisa into her protection. Louisa's illness following the breakdown of her loveless marriage causes Gradgrind for the first time to consider whether bringing up his children on "Facts alone" was actually a mistake, as he finally acknowledges his daughter's suffering, and confesses:

"Some persons hold [...] that there is a wisdom of the Head, and that there is a wisdom of the Heart. I have not supposed; but, as I have said I mistrust myself now. I have supposed the Head to be all-sufficient. It may not be all-sufficient; how can I venture this morning to say it is! If that other kind of wisdom should be what I have neglected, and should be the instinct that is wanted" (bk.3, ch.1, p217-218).

Gradgrind's admission that the way he raised his children was wrong, marks a turning point for his character, and now his education in the importance of the "wisdom of the heart" (bk.3, ch.1, p.217) can at last begin. And who better to guide Gradgrind to the light than Sissy herself. Taking it upon herself to care for Louisa in her time of need, Sissy proves her worth to Gradgrind as "in the innocence of her brave affection, and the brimming up of her old devoted spirit, the once deserted girl shone like a beautiful light upon the darkness of the other" (bk.3, ch.1, p.220). Again, light is being used as an indicator of Sissy's role in the novel. Far from being just a number, "girl number twenty" illuminates a future for both father and daughter that is free from the "mind-forged manacles" of fact and reason.

Sissy is successful in re-educating Gradgrind in what is important, as the narrator reveals at the end of the novel:

Here was Gradgrind [...] How much of futurity did *he* see? Did he see himself, a white-haired decrepit man, bending his hitherto inflexible theories to appointed circumstances; making his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope, and Charity [...] Probably he had that much fore-knowledge (bk.3, ch.9 p.286).

Resembling the aged man in Blake's plate for "London" the "white-haired decrepit" Gradgrind has learned the importance of Christian values, made explicit by the reference to Corinthians 13:1-13 and the focus on always being guided by "Faith, Hope, and Charity". The biblical reference is another indication of Sissy's liminality, as she can be understood as a messenger of God, sent to guide Gradgrind from ignorance to knowledge. Whilst Gradgrind is described as aging, Louisa's transformation at the end of the novel reflects what she was lacking at the beginning of the narrative. She is described as having "grown learned in childish lore" (bk.3, ch.9, p.287). Together Sissy and Louisa embody the essence of liminality and the way it can be seen as either a permanent or a transitional state. Sissy has moved from being an enlightened child to a mother "lovingly watchful of her children, ever careful that they should have a childhood of the mind no less than a childhood of body" (bk.3, ch.9, p.287); while Louisa remains in an intermediate stage, possessing as an adult the "childish lore" which was unknown to her in her infancy. She does not make the transition as Sissy does, from child to wife and mother, because Gradgrind did not allow her to have a "childhood of the mind". Permanently damaged she remains an example of what happens when children are only allowed a "childhood of the body".

All the child-characters I have discussed so far can be understood as messengers of God, but they are still human characters. In *A Christmas Carol* however, Dickens presents readers with two Blakean child characters, one, Tiny Tim, undeniably human, and the other distinctly nonhuman - the Ghost of Christmas Past. The ghost is described as being an "unearthly visitor" (ch.2, p.25) and:

A strange figure - like a child; yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view and being diminished to a child's proportions. It's hair, which hung about its neck and down its back was white, as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin (ch.2, p.25).

The ghost's physical appearance is an amalgamation of both the child and the adult depicted in the plate for "London", and like the child in "London", it quickly becomes apparent that this ghost is to be understood as a guiding light for Scrooge: "from the crown of its head there sprang a bright clear jet of light" (ch.2, p.26). When Scrooge asks the ghost to put on his cap and cover up the bright light, the ghost replies "would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give? Is it not enough that you are one of those whose passions made this cap, and force me through whole trains of years to wear it low upon my brow?" (ch.2, p.26). The ghost's cap then, is a metaphor for the ignorance of adulthood that Scrooge and the adult in "London" represent. Wearing it low upon his brow, the ghost is suggesting that Scrooge's mind-set of "are there no prisons [...] and the Union workhouses [...] are they still in operation?" (ch.1, p.11) is the reason that the ghost's light is so often extinguished, leaving no trace of the right path which leads to mercy and compassion. Having grown blind to the suffering around him, Scrooge has in effect, become part of the problem. He is evidently surprised by the ghost's suggestion that he is to blame: "Scrooge reverently disclaimed all intention to offend or any knowledge of having wilfully 'bonneted' the Spirit at any period of his life" (ch.2, p.26). Scrooge's admission that he had not purposely offended the ghost highlights how much he has to learn, as at present he does not comprehend or even care that his selfishness and cold-heartedness have a negative effect on those around him. The ghost's intention may be to illuminate the right path for Scrooge, but this is not his only concern. When asked by Scrooge "what business brought him there" (ch.2, p.26), the ghost simply replies "your welfare!" (ch.2, p.26). Just as Sissy is concerned with Louisa's welfare in *Hard Times*, choosing to care for her in her time of need, the Ghost of Christmas Past displays concern for Scrooge's wellbeing, choosing to give this as the only reason for his appearance. Whilst it can be understood that the ghost is referring to the eternal damnation Scrooge will face if he doesn't change his ways, answering simply with "your welfare" also highlights the caring nature of the ghost. Crucially though, it demonstrates to the reader the type of nature Scrooge needs to develop if his soul is to be saved. It is not surprising to find paternal qualities in messengers of God, as it reiterates the notion that we are all God's children, and that we are made in his image.

The ghost may have had good intentions, but Scrooge, like Gradgrind, cannot at first accept the error of his ways. Having been shown the happy home of his former love, Scrooge becomes desperate for the ghost to leave him, demanding “Take me back. Haunt me no longer” (ch.2, p.39), and exerts his strength over the ghost’s “dwarfish stature” (ch.2, p.26):

In the struggle, if that can be called a struggle in which the ghost with no visible resistance on its own part was undisturbed by any effort of its adversary, Scrooge observed that its light was burning high and bright; and dimly connecting that with its influence over him, he seized the extinguisher-cap, and by a sudden action pressed it down upon its head.

The Spirit dropped beneath it, so that the extinguisher covered its whole form, but though Scrooge pressed it down with all his force, he could not hide the light, which streamed from under it, in an unbroken flood upon the ground (ch.2, p.39).

Scrooge’s anger towards the ghost reveals his shame at being shown images from his past which disturb him, and his lashing out at the ghost indicates he has not yet learnt the error of his ways. By pushing the extinguisher- cap down upon the ghost’s head he is choosing to ignore the ghost’s message; and attempting to block out the light indicates that he is still driven by selfish motives. Hurt by what he has seen, Scrooge’s desire is simply to look no longer, rather than acknowledge why the scenes from his past have wounded him. The key point, however, is that the light “burning high and bright” from the ghost’s head cannot be fully extinguished, despite Scrooge’s best efforts. The light then represents hope, and whilst Scrooge does his best to seal his fate by refusing to be guided by the ghost, the Spirit does not give up on him. A messenger of God, the Spirit is there to remind Scrooge that even in his darkest moments, there is hope for him, if only he chooses to believe it and act upon it. John Leech’s original illustration of Scrooge pushing the cap down over the ghost’s head does much to emphasise the struggle between light and dark.



FIGURE 25. "SCROOGE EXTINGUISHES THE FIRST OF THE THREE SPIRITS". ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* (1843), ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN LEECH. RPT. IN *A CHRISTMAS CAROL AND OTHER CHRISTMAS WRITINGS*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) P.69.

The expression on Scrooge's face is one of both sadness and determination, as he battles to block out the ghost's light. Illuminating Scrooge, the light surrounds him as if it is willing him to yield to the lesson the ghost is trying to deliver. Behind Scrooge the dark shadow of an indistinguishable shape is present in the background. Cohen and Rabb argue that "the four uncolored woodcuts displayed suitable mood and expression as well as delicacy of line, whether they portrayed grotesque phantoms, impoverished children or mature friends" (1980, p.143). "Scrooge Extinguishes the First of the Three Spirits" is one of the uncoloured illustrations, and Leech's "delicacy of line" is clear to see. This is because although the dark shape in the background could just be Scrooge's own shadow, it can also be interpreted as a warning of the darkness which is to come, if Scrooge does not learn to be kind. Considering the shadow in this way makes the illustration even more poignant, as it depicts Scrooge actively causing his own downfall, by choosing to shut out the guiding light of the ghost. Just as in the plate for "London" where the darkness is behind the adult, so too it is here with Scrooge. But whereas the adult in "London" is being guided to the light by the child, Scrooge is

resisting the urge to change, meaning the dark is still to be feared in his case. His reluctance to heed the ghost's message, and the physical strength he exerts over the ghost is a reminder that, as adults, it is easy to ignore what children are trying to teach us. However, if we remain blind and ignorant, we will be sure to face the consequences in the end. This is made clear in *A Christmas Carol* when Scrooge is made to stand face-to-face with the darkness that had previously lurked behind him. Chapter Four begins with the sinister approach of the Third Spirit:

The phantom slowly, gravely, silently approached.  
When it came near him, Scrooge bent down upon his  
knee; for in the very air through which this Spirit  
moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.

It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which  
concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of  
it visible, save one outstretched hand. But for this, it  
would have been difficult to detach its figure from the  
night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was  
surrounded (ch.4, p.61).

A direct opposite to the Ghost of Christmas Past, which was surrounded by light, and possessed a childlike quality, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is death-like and gives off no light at all. He is the embodiment of what it means to ignore the guiding light Scrooge had previously met with disdain, and represents what happens when the light of Scrooge's life is extinguished for good, and with it, any hope of redemption. Heeding the message of divine spirits is also the theme in "The Angel" in *Experience*:

Soon my angel came again.  
I was armed; he came in vain,  
For the time of youth was fled,  
And grey hairs were on my head. (ll.13-16).

For the speaker in "The Angel" the passing of youth means that the Angel's message is in vain, but this need not be the case for Scrooge. He is still being given an opportunity to learn from the Spirits, if only he shows willing.





FIGURE 26. "THE LAST OF THE SPIRITS. ILLUSTRATION FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* (1843), ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN LEECH. RPT. IN *A CHRISTMAS CAROL AND OTHER CHRISTMAS WRITINGS*, (LONDON: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003) p.109.

Leech's illustration depicts Scrooge cowering in fear of the last Spirit, hiding his face in his hands. Significantly smaller than the ghost, and too terrified to look at it head on, he appears more like a child trapped in a nightmare, than a grown man. The darkness which was lurking in the background of "Scrooge Extinguishes the First of the Three Spirits" is now front and centre, and Scrooge is no longer able to exert any adult dominance, the way he did over the first ghost. It is not until he is faced with the prospect of permanently losing the light that he finally realises the message the first Spirit was trying to convey, leading him to desperately promise "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, Present, and

the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach” (ch.4, p.72-73). With his solemn promise that he will heed the lessons of the Spirits, Scrooge is described as “holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate reversed” (ch.4, p.73). Scrooge is acknowledging his transition from ignorance to knowledge, and in doing so he himself develops liminal qualities as he crosses a crucial threshold from defiant adult to obedient child. He now bears similarities to the Ghost of Christmas Past, who was “like a child; yet not so like a child as an old man” (ch.2, p.25). This is a fitting transformation for Scrooge, as he comes to finally understand that the Spirits are messengers of God, and that we are all made in God’s image.

Up to this point each of the characters I have discussed can be interpreted as possessing a message for particular individuals, but this is not the case for Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*, the crippled child who “bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame!” (ch.2, p.47). Arguably the most obvious example of a messenger of God, he is described revealingly by his father:

“Somehow, he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day who made lame beggars walk and blind men see” (ch.2, p.47).

Tiny Tim is of course referring to Matthew 4:23 in which it is explained that: “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people”. Tim understands that he can be useful to other people, by reminding them of the good work Jesus did and encouraging them to be faithful to their Saviour. He is not bitter about his ailments, instead he embraces them and tries to find what good they can do. What is interesting is that Bob considers Tiny Tim’s viewpoint as strange, indicating that he is surprised a child could possess such a selfless mind-set. However, it is not surprising that Tim is keen to spread Christian kindness, for whereas the previous characters I have discussed can be interpreted as messengers of God, Dickens is far more explicit about Tiny Tim, explaining “Spirit of Tiny Tim, thy childish essence was

from God!” (ch.4, p.71). With his enlightened and accepting attitude towards his own suffering and his famous message of “God bless us, every one!” (ch.5, p.79) Tim is almost more believable as a heavenly being than a mortal one; but it is his mortality which makes him such an important character in the story. It is not until Scrooge sees the light and swears to change his ways that we are told of “Tiny Tim who did *not* die” (ch.5,p.78). Scrooge’s kindness is what saves Tim: he may have been enlightened by the word of God, but he, like everybody else, is also reliant on human kindness and compassion. Just as Tim hopes to save the people in the Church from eternal damnation by reminding them of the teachings of Christ, he himself is saved from death by Scrooge’s “last prayer” (ch.4, p.73). John Ruskin criticised Dickens’s view of Christmas, complaining that it “meant mistletoe and pudding - neither resurrection from dead, nor rising of new stars, nor teaching of wise men, nor shepherds” (Cohen and Rabb, 1980, p.142-143). Ruskin’s view is short-sighted because it fails to take into consideration the true message in *A Christmas Carol*; namely that as human beings we are all connected to one another, and that we must use the teachings of Christ to act more kindly towards our fellow men.

The purpose of this chapter has been to discuss how throughout his novels Dickens often presents his readers with child characters whose purpose within the text is to provide the message and the moral of the story. Such characters can be recognised as liminal because although they are children, they have a better understanding of the world around them than the adults in the text do. Despite only being children, it is in fact their job to guide the adults in the narrative towards the truth, thereby illuminating the path from ignorance to knowledge. Using a selection of poems from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, I have highlighted the similarities between Blake’s poems and Dickens’s fiction, regarding the importance of children in society and the lessons they can teach the adults around them. The child characters I have discussed in this chapter can be understood to have a “Blakean” element about them, because they have an understanding of the world around them which is obscured from the adults in the narrative. Both Blake and Dickens force the reader to reconsider the true worth of children, highlighting not only their struggles and hardships, but also their ability to interpret true Christian ideals better than adults can. Often poor, disabled or outcast, the child characters I have discussed in this chapter are members of Victorian society who would usually be forgotten or silenced, something which Dickens clearly feels is unjust

and wrong. By presenting these children as the deliverer of the message and the moral, Dickens is reminding his readers that we must not be dismissive of those who on the surface do not appear to be useful to us. In my previous chapters I have in many cases focussed on negative liminal spaces, highlighting how children are often forced from childhood too soon. This chapter, however, has revealed how liminality can be interpreted more positively. The “Blakean” children I have focussed on in my final chapter, whilst they are not immune to suffering, are represented by Dickens as important specifically because they are liminal, and it is their liminality which allows them to educate and guide the adults in the novel to truth and enlightenment. Jenny Wren has featured in three out of my five chapters, and whilst her liminal space can be interpreted negatively in “The Carer” and “The Sexualised Child”, this chapter has shown how resilient a character Jenny truly is. For despite being forced from childhood too early, Jenny is able to utilise the liminal space she exists in, making her essential to the adults around her. She and all the “Blakean” characters I have discussed act as a reminder that as adults, we must realise that there is much we can learn from children, if only we are prepared to see the world through their eyes.

## Conclusion

This thesis has argued that liminal characters are a key aspect of Charles Dickens's fiction. By creating characters who inhabit the space particularly between childhood and adulthood, Dickens was able to engage with a range of themes, often embedding them below the surface of the text. As a writer, Dickens is often accused of being a caricaturist. As I explained in my introduction, from *The Saturday Review* in 1865 who claimed: "Mr. Dickens has always been, and always will be, essentially a caricaturist" (p.612), to recent contemporary criticism which argues, "Mixing the influences of the Gothic novel, of ancient demonology and of modern caricature, Dickens thus peopled his London world with poverty-stricken figures, sinister elderly men and women with grimacing faces" (Peyrache-Leborgne, 2015, p.21); caricatures are often considered to be at the centre of Dickens's fiction. Throughout this thesis I have re-evaluated some of Dickens's key caricatures from the Artful Dodger to Dora Spenlow, suggesting that these characters often exist in liminal spaces, and far from being one dimensional, they are examples of how Dickens subtly uses the liminal space between childhood and adulthood in his fiction.

My thesis extends and develops the arguments produced in previous key publications such as Jane W. Stedman's article "Child-Wives of Dickens" (1963) published in *The Dickensian* and Malcolm Andrews's *Dickens and the Grown-Up Child* (1964). I reveal that liminality is a thread which runs throughout the body of Dickens's novels; my conclusion being that the liminal space in which many of Dickens's characters exist is central in allowing Dickens to embed subtext within his narratives. Throughout the thesis I am able to connect and analyse characters alongside each other who may not have been considered together before. Clara Copperfield the timid child-wife in *David Copperfield* for example, may not on the surface, appear that similar to John Willet the Maypole in-keeper in *Barnaby Rudge*. However, I have revealed that they both exist in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. The causes of their liminality may be vastly different, but nonetheless it is what connects them to each other and to all the other characters in Dickens's fiction whose liminality is used to refer to an array of social, political and psychological themes.

Dickens knew writers have the power to effect change; placing liminality at the heart of his fiction allowed him to argue for changes and reforms, whilst still managing to write to entertain. Liminal characters allow the reader to see what they want to see. For example, on the surface Dora and Clara can be silly childish individuals - the caricatures for which Dickens is so famous. But closer analysis of them reveals a stark conversation about the way middle-class women are viewed by society. Likewise, Miss Havisham can be a stock gothic villain, or a complex example of what happens when society abandons those suffering from mental trauma. I have revealed how Dickens was ahead of his time, often depicting characters who appear to suffer from an array of conditions, before they were medically recognised. Furthermore, his progressive attitudes towards the most vulnerable in society meant that Dickens was an advocate of social change in a time when it was sorely needed. For example, in Chapter One I highlighted how Dickens understood the hardships faced by those who assume the role of carers, long before social care was a profession. In Chapter Two I discussed how Dickens depicted characters with an array of psychological disorders, encouraging his readers to reassess their views on those in society who may not be completely sound of mind. Chapter Three revealed Dickens's adversity to the notion of the middle-class child-wife, who was expected to remain childlike whilst also assuming the role of a wife and mother. Although still concerned with separate spheres, having presented the failed child-wives of Clara and Dora, Dickens depicts the more capable and realistic versions of adult wives in the characters of Bella Wilfer and Mrs Bagnet, highlighting the importance of marriage being a strictly adult affair. In Chapter Four I showed how Dickens was able to hint at the shocking theme of child prostitution, encouraging his readers not to view prostitutes with scorn, but to recognise that they are often vulnerable children who need protecting rather than abusing. In my last chapter I have shown how Dickens valued the insight children can offer on the adult world around them, regardless of how humble their backgrounds might be. In each of these examples I have revealed how all of the topics engaged with have liminal characters at their centre. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that there are undoubtedly characters I have left out, or only mentioned in passing. My aim was not to document every single liminal character in Dickens's fiction. Instead, it was to highlight key examples throughout the body of his work, thereby indicating that this was a narrative technique which he uses throughout his career.

I have concentrated on the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, but as Dickens himself suggests, there are other liminal spaces within which characters can exist. As I explained in the Introduction to my thesis, Dickens's letter in 1842 to the New York merchant Jacob Harvey says as much when he writes: "I always seek in drawing characters, for a mixture of Good and Evil – as the Almighty has created Human character after that fashion". As well as "Good and Evil" the use of other liminal spaces in Dickens's fiction could be analysed further, including the space in between madness and sanity, or realism and fantasy for example. I have touched on some of these points, particularly in relation to characters such as Hugh in *Barnaby Rudge*, who not only exists in the space between childhood and adulthood, but who is also caught somewhere between being a victim and a villain. Perhaps one of the most liminal spaces that characters can occupy is the space between life and death, portrayed most poignantly in a deathbed scene. In her book *Dickens and the Business of Death* (2015), Claire Wood argues that Dickens's fiction is filled with "recurrent scenes of death-based storytelling" (p.60) and suggests that Dickens tells stories about death "as a way of dealing with his own loss and helping others to do so too; and to use death's captivating power to ensure the popular and commercial success of his work" (p.60-61). Wood is right to suggest that death has a "captivating power" in literature, and arguably the most captivating and tragic is a child deathbed scene. I have considered the relevance of two child deathbed scenes, firstly in Chapter One when I discussed the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and secondly in Chapter Five when I discuss Jo's death in *Bleak House*. Both characters find themselves in an indeterminate liminal space, caught not only between childhood and adulthood, but also between life and death. Their deaths highlight the struggles such children face, and unlike Jenny Wren who is saved by a "fairy godmother", Nell and Jo represent the many children who have no hope of a happy ending.

Whilst the deathbed space is undeniably liminal, it is more focussed on being between life and death, rather than between childhood and adulthood. For this reason, I have kept my discussions of it brief, whilst still acknowledging its importance. I made a similar decision when considering the importance of the reflective narrator. As George Orwell argues: "No one, at any rate no English writer, has written better about childhood than Dickens" (1939, p.44). He goes on to explain:

I must have been about nine years old when I first read *David Copperfield*. The mental atmosphere of the opening chapters was so immediately intelligible to me that I vaguely imagined it had been written *by a child*. And yet when one re-reads the book as an adult sees the Murdstones, for instance, dwindle from gigantic figures of doom into semi-comic monsters, these passages lose nothing. Dickens has been able to stand inside and outside of the child's mind, in such a way that the same scene can be wild burlesque or sinister reality, according to the age at which one reads it (p.44).

Orwell's claim that Dickens "has been able to stand inside and outside of the child's mind" highlights the effectiveness of the reflective narrator in *David Copperfield*, who not only grows into adulthood as the novel progresses, but whose narrative also grows in maturity as the reader matures. The same thing can be said of Pip's narration in *Great Expectations*, or Esther's narrative in *Bleak House*. As reflective narrators, all three characters grow in maturity as the novel advances, and as a result, their narratives begin with the insight of a child, and end with a more adult perspective on the world. As Nicolas Tredell suggests, the "movement between immediacy and partial detachment, between the perspective of the vulnerable child and that of the more distanced – though by no means indifferent – adult, is characteristic of Dickens's technique" (2013, p.25). The result is that the narrative itself is liminal, for even when the child's perspective is being portrayed, we must remember that the narrator has advanced closer to adulthood by the time the narrative is penned. Wishing to avoid straying into a discussion of narratology, I chose not to discuss reflective narrators in my thesis.

I have chosen to stay strictly within the confines of the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, mentioning other forms of liminality only where relevant. However, further research could be dedicated to a deeper analysis of Dickens's use of other liminal spaces and their relevance in his fiction. Furthermore, my research encourages renewed study of other nineteenth-century authors who may also use liminality as a way to engage with an array of themes within their narratives. Future studies could also examine how the liminal space between childhood and adulthood evolves with the turning of the twentieth-century, with particular attention paid, for example, to war literature that deals with the way the concept of childhood was disrupted and re-defined as a result of the Great War.



Each of the characters I have discussed in this thesis exists in their own unique liminal space. Similarities can be drawn between them, but essentially what makes them liminal is personal to them. Sometimes they exist in a negative space, created by trauma or mistreatment. At other times they exist in a positive space, where innocence is being allowed to survive despite the odds. It is in these liminal spaces where Dickens reveals himself to be a writer truly ahead of his time and one intent on pushing for societal change through his fiction.

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