

**DICKENS'S THEATRE OF IMMORALITY:  
VILLAINY, MELODRAMA AND THE NOVEL**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship between Dickens's malefactors and the villains of nineteenth-century melodrama. It does not confine itself to the Victorian period, however. Chapter 1 analyses the figure of the villain in literature from the Medieval period to the nineteenth century. Chapter 2 investigates the villains of nineteenth-century melodrama and concludes that the idea of 'the melodramatic villain' is a critical myth. Three main types of villain are isolated here - the Gothic villain, the problematic romantic villain and the genteel villain of domestic melodrama - while Chapter 8 discusses female villainy. Though Chapter 3 (on Dickens's journalism) completes the groundwork of the thesis, it is essentially the typology formed in Chapter 2 which acts as a template for the larger analysis of Dickens's deviants.

The typology of villainy outlined is a heuristic device rather than a fixed system of categorisation. This thesis illustrates how Dickens employs yet transforms his melodramatic inheritance in subtle and sophisticated ways. Emphasis is placed as much on generic differences between drama and the novel as on any parallels discerned between them. Other areas of investigation are Dickens's recurrent fascination with the concept of sincerity, the theatricality of social identity and the relationship between 'passionate' and 'passionless' villainy. Also central to the study is the relationship between 'high' and 'low' art, the aim being to encourage understanding of how popular entertainment and 'serious' literature are related to each other.

The key to Dickens's art of high entertainment is his unique prose style and his expert manipulation of the resources specific to the novel form. A detailed analysis of Dickens's use of language and narrative is offered in order to illuminate Dickens's creative processes and to illustrate the symbiotic relationship which exists between the 'dark' and the 'theatrical' aspects of his imagination.

*TO MY FAMILY: JACKIE, DAVID AND REBECCA*

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	page 5
References and Abbreviations	6
Introduction	9
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
Archeological: Villainy in Pre-Victorian Literature	18
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
Cloak and Dagger: The Real Villains of Nineteenth-Century Melodrama	49
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	
Periodical Villainy: Dickens, Crime and the Theatre	91
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	
Passionate Villains: From Stage to Novel	118
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	
<i>Oliver Twist</i> , Fictional Morality and Moral Fiction	158
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	
Dickens and Dandyism: Dehumanising the Human in Society and the Novel	191
<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	
Byronic Baddies in the Novels of Dickens: Sincerity, Society and the Self	224
<b>CHAPTER 8</b>	
Sincerely Duplicitous Women in the Novels of Dickens	264
Conclusion	297
Bibliography	301

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## REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

### Dickens

References to Dickens's novels are to the Clarendon Edition (Oxford, 1966-) for *David Copperfield*, *Dombey and Son*, *Great Expectations*, *Little Dorrit*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *Oliver Twist* and *The Pickwick Papers*, and to the (New) Oxford Illustrated Dickens (London and Oxford, 1947-) for all other volumes. References are cited in the text, as are other references throughout this thesis where this is helpful and possible.

<i>AYR</i>	<i>All the Year Round</i>
<i>BH</i>	<i>Bleak House</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Barnaby Rudge</i>
<i>CB</i>	<i>Christmas Books</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>A Christmas Carol</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>Christmas Stories</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>
<i>D&amp;S</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i>
<i>ED</i>	<i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i>
<i>GE</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hard Times</i>
<i>HW</i>	<i>Household Words</i>
<i>Letters (Nonesuch)</i>	<i>The Letters of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. by Walter Dexter, 3 vols (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1938)
<i>Letters (Pilgrim)</i>	<i>The Letters of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey, 7 vols, The Pilgrim Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-)
<i>Life</i>	John Forster, <i>The Life of Charles Dickens</i> , ed. by J. W. T. Ley (London: Palmer, 1928)
<i>LD</i>	<i>Little Dorrit</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>
<i>OCS</i>	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>

<i>OMF</i>	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i>
<i>OT</i>	<i>Oliver Twist</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Pickwick Papers</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>Sketches by Boz</i>
<i>TTC</i>	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>

### **Drama**

The abbreviations employed for both editions of plays and the names of theatres are taken from Allardyce Nicoll's *A History of Early Nineteenth-Century Drama, 1800-1850*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930).

<i>Acting Nat. Drama</i>	<i>The Acting National Drama</i> (1837-50), ed. by B. N. Webster
<i>Cumberland</i>	<i>Cumberland's British Theatre</i> (1829-60)
<i>Cumberland Minor</i>	<i>Cumberland's Minor Theatre</i> (1828-40)
<i>Dicks</i>	<i>Dicks' Standard Plays</i> (1880s)
<i>Duncombe</i>	<i>Duncombe's Edition (of Plays)</i> (pre-1850)
<i>French</i>	<i>French's Acting Edition</i> (a continuation of <i>Lacy's</i> . <i>French's NY</i> and <i>French's Minor NY</i> refer to the New York Edition of French's series of plays).
<i>Lacy</i>	<i>Lacy's Acting Edition</i> (c. 1850-60)
<i>Richardson Minor</i>	<i>Richardson's New Minor Drama</i> (1828-31)

### **Theatres**

Adel.	The Adelphi
C.G.	Covent Garden, Theatre Royal
C.L.	The Royal City of London Theatre
Cob.	The Royal Coburg Theatre
D.L.	Drury Lane, Theatre Royal
E.O.H.	English Opera House
H.2	Theatre Royal, Haymarket
Lyc.	The Lyceum

Olym.	The Olympic Theatre
P'cess	The Princess's Theatre
Queen's	The Queen's Theatre
St.J.	The St. James's Theatre
Surrey	The Surrey Theatre
S.W.	Sadler's Wells Theatre
Vic.	The Royal Victoria Theatre

### **Prefatory Note**

Unless otherwise stated, dates given in the text are dates of first publication in the case of fiction and poetry, and dates of first performance in the case of drama.

### Introduction

In Edmund Wilson's influential essay, 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', Dickens's Bradley Headstone is described as:

a type which begins to appear in these later novels of Dickens and which originally derives from those early theatrical villains, of the type of the elder Rudge or Monks in *Oliver Twist*, skulking figures with black looks and ravaged faces, a literary convention of which one would suppose it would be impossible to make anything plausible. Yet Dickens does finally succeed in giving these dark figures reality.<sup>1</sup>

Since Wilson stimulated interest in the macabre side of Dickens's work, many notable critics have dismissed Dickens's villains as 'melodramatic' and 'stagey', whilst at the same time praising Dickens's complex understanding of the 'dark' side of human nature.<sup>2</sup> My thesis was born in response to the false logic of such arguments; if Dickens's villains are nothing more than theatrical stereotypes, I asked myself, how do his novels convey what Humphry House calls an 'intimate understanding of morbid and near morbid psychology'?<sup>3</sup> The obvious answer to this question, and the main thrust of my thesis, is that Dickens's deviants are far more sophisticated than their popular neighbours on the nineteenth-century stage. Through close examination of a selection of both Dickens's 'villains' and what I have chosen to call his 'moral mongrels', this thesis will analyse the means by which Dickens uses and refines the materials of Victorian stage melodrama to render and explore the macabre, the deviant and the immoral. It offers a reassessment of conventions of villainy on the pre-Victorian and Victorian stage; it considers closely the linguistic and novelistic means by which Dickens transforms popular theatrical 'stereotypes' into figures rich and strange; in addition, it demonstrates how many of Dickens's malefactors are not lifeless, or even lively, 'types', but centres of consciousness in their own right - characters who manipulate their self-presentation and possess an intricate awareness of the links between the theatricality of identity, inner (im)moral fibre and outer (im)moral appearance.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1929), pp. 1-104 (p. 82).

<sup>2</sup> Wilson's pioneering essay is a classic example of this critical response to Dickens, as is Humphry House's essay, 'The Macabre Dickens's - *All in Due Time: The Collected Essays and Broadcast Talks of Humphry House* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1955), pp. 183-89.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Macabre Dickens', p. 187.

The first chapter of the thesis is a survey of what Wilson calls the 'literary convention' of theatrical villainy. I consider the representation of the villain in a range of texts dating from the Medieval period to the beginning of the nineteenth century, in an attempt to illuminate many of the unsolvable problems that attend a definition of villainy. I do not confine myself to drama, discussing also the self-conscious 'theatricality' of the villain in the novel and in poetry. This survey reveals the richness of conventions of theatrical villainy disparaged by Edmund Wilson. Furthermore, it helps account for the representations of villainy which subsequently appear both in nineteenth-century stage melodrama and the novels of Charles Dickens.

Hippolyte Taine argued in 1856 that 'all Dickens's characters belong to two classes - the people who have feelings and emotions, and people who have none'.<sup>4</sup> My thesis will argue that the idea of the villain as either passionate or passionless has a powerful hold over Dickens's imagination. In this, he is influenced by Victorian melodrama; yet such a polarised conception of villainy is one that has its origins, as I shall try to show shortly, on the Medieval stage. My first chapter argues that the personified Vice of the morality plays and the ranting Herod of the miracle plays exert a marked influence on their villainous descendants through the ages. This quasi-archaeological chapter is not meant to suggest any simple chain of influence. It rather uses the primitive models of 'hot' and 'cold' villainy as organising points of reference.

Curiously, these models are most straightforwardly in evidence on the Medieval and the Victorian stage - or to be more specific, in Victorian melodrama. Focusing itself on melodramatic villainy, Chapter 2 paradoxically proves that the idea of 'the melodramatic villain' is a critical myth. Though the villain is instantly recognisable in each individual melodrama, there are significant variations in type; these are determined by the particular melodramatic sub-genre which provides the villain's environment. The body of my thesis examines the influence of the following melodramatic sub-species on Dickens's villains: the Gothic villain, the problematic romantic

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<sup>4</sup> 'Charles Dickens, son talent et ses oeuvres', *Revue des deux mondes*, 1 (1 February 1856), 618-47 (repr. in *Charles Dickens Critical Anthology*, ed. by Stephen Wall (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 99-103 (p. 102)).

'villain', the genteel villain of domestic melodrama, and the female villain (considered in Chapter 8). The villain of Gothic melodrama, for instance, is often passionate, and comparatively 'honest' about his evil nature. The Gothic villain provides an excellent acting role for a professional melodramatic actor, but the villain himself is not an actor; he is 'sincere' about his emotions. It is this breed that colours popular conceptions of melodramatic villainy. Nineteenth-century melodrama was a highly expressive genre whose raw material was human emotion. Nothing was left unsaid; an emotion experienced was an emotion externalised. The Gothic villain typifies the general tendency of stage melodrama in this respect. The notable exception to this rule, however, is the aristocratic villain of domestic melodrama, who, to use the pithy terms of many melodramatists, replaced 'heart' with 'art'. The villain of domestic melodrama is often a passionless manipulator, a master of deceit who is conscious of both his villainy and his abilities as an actor. Domestic melodrama, the most popular form of the genre in the Victorian period, generated much of its dramatic force from the tension between the emotional repression of the upper-class villain and the passionate expression of the other - usually working-class - characters. Again, the romantic 'villain' is hardly a villain at all; this Robin Hood figure may be a criminal in the eyes of the law but he is a principled and admirable rebel. Finally, the female villain is often passionate, repressed and - like the Victorian actress - obliged to play certain roles.

Chapter 2 analyses villainous prototypes from nineteenth-century melodrama, rather than from other forms of the Victorian popular theatre, like pantomime or burlesque, for several reasons. Firstly, some element of selection is obviously required in a thesis which unites two topics as potentially inexhaustible as villainy and the novels of Charles Dickens. Secondly and more specifically, melodrama was not only by far the most popular and influential form of theatre in the nineteenth century; it was also the immediate parent of the villain proper. To clarify: this thesis is mainly interested in the influence on the novels of Charles Dickens of 'the villain' as an immediately identifiable fictional and theatrical figure. Victorian stage melodrama, structured typically as it was

around a strictly polarised conception of good and evil, was the true progenitor of thoroughbred villains.

In twentieth-century western culture, an increased interest in the effect of 'nurture' on deviant behaviour, and an increasing degree of religious scepticism, has made the idea of 'the villain' seem old-fashioned and incredible as a real-life concept, and simplistic or primitive in fiction. Victorian melodrama, by contrast, unashamedly presented its audience with 'a world of certainties', 'a world of absolutes where virtue and vice coexist in pure whiteness and pure blackness'.<sup>5</sup> In its rival form, pantomime, there was no such certainty, no such serious moral absolutism. Though it too had its gallery of knowable, stock types, in the words of Edwin M. Eigner, 'Transformation was the essence of pantomime'.<sup>6</sup> In pantomime, as in the cluster of related theatrical forms it spawned - burletta, burlesque, extravaganza, etc. - 'things are not what they seem to be [...]. Nothing can be relied on'.<sup>7</sup> Pantomime was characterised by 'the spirit of carnival and the Saturnalia';<sup>8</sup> the emphasis was on comedy, fantasy, anarchy. Melodrama, on the other hand, was not predominantly a laughing matter; villains could be relied upon to be villains proper - figures recognisable as perpetrators of no good from their first entrance to their predictable and reassuring demise. Melodrama's fantastical scheme of moral justice often coexisted curiously with social realism, and a seriousness of tone which insisted that the audience took both its villain and its overall moral message to heart.

At the risk of stating the obvious: the typology of melodramatic villainy developed in Chapter 2 is a heuristic device rather than a rigid system of categorisation. It acts as a template for the organisation of the rest of the thesis. For example, Chapter 4 discusses those villains in the novels of Dickens who are related to the villains of Gothic stage melodrama; in a similar way,

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<sup>5</sup> Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Jenkins, 1965), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *The Dickens Pantomime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Michael R. Booth, *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969-76), V, 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> A. E. Wilson, *Pantomime Pageant: A Procession of Harlequins, Clowns, Comedians, Principal Boys, Pantomime-writers, Producers, and Playgoers* (London: Stanley Paul, [n. d.]), p. 14; quoted by Eigner, *The Dickens Pantomime*, p. 10.

Chapter 5 examines the influence of the protagonists of romantic melodrama on the novels of Dickens; Chapter 6 looks at the relationship between Dickens's dandies and the genteel villains of domestic melodrama; Chapter 7 analyses Dickens's Byronic individuals and their relationship with both the passionate villain of Gothic melodrama and the heartless gentleman-villain of domestic melodrama; and Chapter 8 discusses Dickens's deviant women, the villainess of melodrama and the nineteenth-century professional actress.

In the earlier chapters (1 and 2 as described above, and Chapter 3, which analyses the response of Dickens's journals to villainy in real life and on the stage), I have resisted the temptation to 'jump ahead' and make explicit parallels between the characters and dramatic situations I discuss and individual Dickens villains. I have not made such links overt because I do not want to create the impression that this thesis is an exercise in 'ancestor-hunting' or 'villain-spotting'; on the contrary, I am concerned that readers should share my sense of the complexity and creative potentiality of the traditions from which Dickens's malefactors eventually emerged. My analysis of Dickens's novels does not assume a conscious manipulation of literary and theatrical traditions on Dickens's part; nor does it assume that Dickens was acquainted with the literary history of the stage villain. The contextual backdrop of this thesis functions as an illuminating canvas for an understanding of Dickens's malefactors, rather than a rigorous system for the decoding of meanings.

It is for these reasons that the selection of Dickens characters considered does not concentrate solely on those whose links with stage melodrama are readily apparent. Though Monks, Rudge, Bill Sikes and John Chester are included, so too are Charley Bates, the Artful Dodger, Eugene Wrayburn and Sydney Carton - characters whose appearances here are not so immediately self-evident. Thus let me clarify at the outset: the main slant of my thesis is to show how Dickens *transforms* the conventions and types of popular melodrama in subtle and unexpected ways. I aim to explore how Dickens uses literary and theatrical conventions of villainy to explore human deviance and immorality in his novels. To do this it did not seem necessary to include all Dickens's

major villains; in fact, this thesis will demonstrate that it is not always Dickens's obvious 'villains' who best convey his profound and subtle grasp of the theatricality of social identity or of the 'macabre' side of human existence.

Thus, while the omission of a character like Jonas Chuzzlewit arises simply from the necessity of selecting between characters similar in important respects - Jonas could have been comfortably incorporated in Chapter 4 with Bill Sikes - my omission of such well-known villains as Quilp and Pecksniff is deliberate and principled. As Edwin M. Eigner, Carol Lansbury and others have noted,<sup>9</sup> both characters are more pantomimic and comic than melodramatic. This is not a statement of a pedantic principle of categorisation of the type that I wish to avoid; it has, rather, a real resonance in relation to their respective novelistic presentations. The distinction I make is grounded on the fact (as it seems to me) that whereas those characters descended - even distantly - from the villains of melodrama have a moral, emotional and psychological urgency for the reader, the same reader perceives Quilp and Pecksniff as characters in a novel; he/she is cosseted by his/her heightened consciousness of their fictionality. They are not frivolous or irrelevant characters; but our response to them remains of a different kind to our response to Bradley Headstone, for example. John Carey would argue that they have 'no insides',<sup>10</sup> in G. K. Chesterton's terms, they are 'innocents';<sup>11</sup> in the coinage of Bakhtinian theory, they are carnivalesque.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In *The Dickens Pantomime*, Eigner calls Pecksniff 'one of the greatest of Dickens' Pantaloon' (p. 72) and Quilp 'one of the most hateful of his Dandy Lovers' (p. 101). See also Carol Lansbury, 'Pecksniffs and Pratsfalls', in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. by Carol Hanbery MacKay (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 45-51. James R. Kincaid has noted - with particular relevance to this discussion - the way that Pecksniff is villain on one page and pantomime buffoon on the next - *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 150-56. Paul Schlicke - in *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 125 - lists various recent theories about sources for Quilp in popular culture: an actual dwarf named Prior who lived in Bath, the evil dwarf and devil of folklore, the comic devil of the English stage, a fairy tale called 'The Yellow Dwarf', the father of Joseph Grimaldi, and Punch.

<sup>10</sup> *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp. 64-65. Carey in fact maintains that it is not only Dickens's hypocrites who have 'no insides', arguing: 'Life customarily consists of physical proximity and mental distance, and this is the essence of Dickens' character creations'. While Carey's account may be appropriate to some Dickens characters, this thesis will take issue with the view that 'physical proximity and mental distance' comprise 'the essence' of *all* Dickens's character creations.

<sup>11</sup> *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (London: Dent, 1911), p. 101. Discussing Mr Pecksniff, Chesterton argues that Dickens does not either love or hate his creation

To these remarks the discussion in Chapters 1 and 2 of the influence of genre on audience and reader reaction obviously has a direct relevance. I argue there, for example, that the character of Iago would have an entirely different effect in the context of a comedy. Again, though immorality is prevalent in the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century comedy of manners, the audience is anaesthetised from emotional involvement with either the villains or their victims by the highly self-conscious, 'fictional' nature of the genre. Indeed, Dickens himself analyses this very capacity of pantomime to immunise its audience from painful involvement with representations of violence and suffering; on 6 November 1849, he wrote that like the sadism in the Punch and Judy show, pantomime was 'quite harmless in its influence' and that 'one secret source of the pleasure was generally derived from [...] the satisfaction the spectator feels in the circumstance that likenesses of men and women can be knocked about without pain or suffering'.<sup>13</sup> Though Quilp and Pecksniff inhabit the same Dickens world as the characters who are included in this thesis, it is as if they import their pantomimic and comic generic inheritance with them; the reader sees them literally, to reanimate a cliché, as wolves permanently dressed in sheep's clothing. They are not thus 'inferior' characters of lesser moral seriousness; but we respond to them as entertaining 'likenesses' or *symbols* of immorality - or, to quote Dickens on Pecksniff, as 'Great Abstractions' (*MC*, Chapter 31, p. 498).

Moreover, while the links between Quilp and Pecksniff and the popular Victorian theatre are obvious and well documented,<sup>14</sup> the relationship between the villains of stage melodrama and moral mongrels like Sydney Carton and Eugene Wrayburn are not. Yet a concrete relationship between primitive theatrical prototypes and Dickens's more complex malefactors exists and is little understood; it is the aim of this thesis to clarify this relationship. Crucial to this thesis is an

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seriously, but enjoys his rhetoric. He states: 'Hatred allows no such outbursts of original innocence'. Edmund Wilson, in 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', contrasts the 'innocence' of Dickens's earlier villains with the later, darker villains like Headstone (pp. 82-83).

<sup>12</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (London: MIT Press, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> Letter to M. E. Taylor in *Letters* (Pilgrim), V, 640.

<sup>14</sup> See note 9 above.

exploration of the artistic means by which Dickens renders animate and complex what might be mere stereotypes in other hands; Chapter 4, for example, examines the fundamental importance of Dickens's narrative prose in this process; Chapter 5 looks at the way Dickens positions characters carefully in relation to the narrative discourse of the novel; the entire study examines Dickens's self-conscious manipulation of stereotypes, and indeed, his characters' own manipulation of stereotypes.

My examination of Dickens's artistic methods engages crucially with the impact of the methods and values of melodrama generally on his novels. For example, the fundamental passional patterning of melodrama - the tension between emotional expression and repression - is a staple and often highly sophisticated element of Dickens's fiction. More obviously still, melodrama's fairy-tale moral divisions and its scheme of moral justice have their impact on his novels. The social concerns of melodrama - the plight of the poor, industrialisation, urban corruption, etc. - are echoed in his pages. This thesis pays particular attention, however, to the influence of the artistic methods of melodrama on Dickens's novels; for example, its externalisation of emotion, faith in the revelatory power of physiognomy, its tendency towards the pictorial, and its 'iconography of character and emotion', in the phrase of Martin Meisel.<sup>15</sup> All this necessarily engages, also, with the generic differences between the theatre and the novel, and with the question of the relationship between 'high' and 'low' art - a question which has always plagued responses to Dickens long before Leavis labelled him as no more than a 'great entertainer',<sup>16</sup> and a question of particular relevance in academic circles today, where the validity of a 'canon' of great literature is increasingly debated.

A further recurrent concern in these pages is the relationship between emotion, 'acting' or role-playing, and (im)morality. At the centre of this shifting triangle is the concept of sincerity, all-important in the development of the 'the villain' from the Renaissance onwards, and central too to the evolution over that period of the concepts of 'the individual' and 'society', as Lionel Trilling's

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<sup>15</sup> *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, Peregrine (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 29.

*Sincerity and Authenticity*<sup>17</sup> convincingly shows. In the Victorian period, the concept of 'sincerity', for a variety of reasons, became little short of an obsession. Chapter 7 examines the struggles of Dickens's Byronic male malefactors, Steerforth, Sydney Carton and Eugene Wrayburn to believe in and attain the elusive state of sincerity. Chapter 8 explores the pressure faced by the Victorian woman - as the unofficial symbol of the moral and spiritual health of the nation - to appear sincere, and attitudes towards that arch-villain, the Victorian actress.

My aim throughout this thesis is to highlight the crucial interconnection between the 'dark' and the 'theatrical' strands in Dickens's writing, an interconnection which critics have either ignored or misunderstood. There has been a great deal of fruitful criticism of both elements of Dickens's work - Wilson, House and John Carey on the 'dark' Dickens, to name just a few, and Robert Garis, William Axton, George Worth, Edwin Eigner and Paul Schlicke on the 'theatrical' Dickens.<sup>18</sup> My study of Dickens's malefactors, however, fuses the two, rather than regarding them as separate. This fusion emphasises the complex relationship which exists - as I trust my background research into the figure of the villain demonstrates - between immorality and theatricality. It also seeks to get to the heart of what is distinctive in Dickens's writing, or to pinpoint the way in which Dickens combines theatrical and novelistic resources in his rendering of a character's psychology, moral fibre and inner emotional life.

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<sup>17</sup> *Sincerity and Authenticity: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1969-70* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972; rev. 1974).

<sup>18</sup> See (in addition to those texts mentioned previously) William F. Axton, *Circle of Fire: Dickens' Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theatre* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), George J. Worth, *Dickensian Melodrama: A Reading of the Novels*, University of Kansas Humanistic Studies, L (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1978).

## Chapter 1 - Archeological: Villainy in Pre-Victorian Literature

### 1. 1 - Medieval Beginnings

Like all labels, the term 'villain' is both meaningful and meaningless. The futility of attempting any all-encompassing definition of what constitutes a villain - whether on the stage, in the work of Dickens, in life, or in literature generally - is evident if one considers the range of meaning given to the word in the *OED*. A villain is primarily defined as:

Originally, a low-born base-minded rustic; a man of ignoble ideas or instincts; in later use, an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel; a man naturally disposed to base or criminal actions, or deeply involved in the commission of disgraceful crimes.

But the term has also been used from the Middle Ages, the *OED* tells us, as 'a term of opprobrious address'. It can be employed 'in descriptive use', and 'used playfully, or without serious imputation of bad qualities'.<sup>1</sup> The word villain can be applied to a woman, was once applied to certain birds of common or inferior species and, going back to its origins, 'villein' signified 'one of the class of serfs in the feudal system'. A more useful definition, for the purposes of this thesis, is:

(Usually with *the*.) That character in a play, novel etc., whose evil motives or actions form an important element in the plot.<sup>2</sup>

It is this breed of villainy - *the* villain in literature - which is the subject of this chapter. I am interested in those characters in literature through the ages whose primary function is to perpetrate evil in the texts they inhabit. Such villains are unquestionably bad - though the sheer energy they exude can, of course, prove so attractive to the reader or theatre-goer, that their original (im)moral function is subverted. Thus, even though most malefactors included in this chapter are here because they are straightforwardly, unambiguously villainous, the artistic, moral and religious questions which attend such figures are anything but straightforward. Two such

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<sup>1</sup> An example of the latter, frivolous use of the word villain is taken by the *OED* from *PP*. Mr Wardle exclaims:

'Where's that villain Joe?'

'Here I am; but I ha'nt a willin,' replied a voice. It was the fat boy's. (Chapter 9, p. 127)

<sup>2</sup> The *OED* gives an interesting example of the use of '*the* villain' is quoted from Lamb: 'The fact is, you do not believe in such characters as Surface - the villain of artificial comedy - even while you read or see them' - 'On Some of the Old Actors', in *Elia* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1823), pp. 302-22 (p. 320).

questions have in effect already been touched on: if 'the villain' is recognisable in literature as the evil-doer, then how, if we are to avoid circularity, do we define the evil he does? Can any self-respecting critic in the largely secular twentieth century have any belief in a transcendental and/or Christianised concept of evil? Again, even if one accepts the Christian belief-system which frames the texts under discussion, there is always the question of 'what entered the Almighty's mind when he put the serpent into the Garden of Eden' - in the words of John Mortimer.<sup>3</sup> If one is a believer, one can always take refuge in the somewhat troubled security that God alone knows why villainy exists in a world under His divine control. If one is not a believer, such questions are likely to be less interesting or relevant than the problem of the relationship between the villain and his environment, the relationship between the villain and the law, and the vexed question of why villains are more interesting than heroes. Indeed, in our present post-Romantic age, we have no small difficulty distinguishing between a villain and a hero.

The idea that the battle between good and evil is central to human existence characterises pre-Christian belief systems like Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism and pervades the western, Christian psyche. It was the fourth-century Christian poet Prudentius, who in his homiletic allegory of the *Psychomachia* (405), was the first to personify vice and virtue; and thus to supply the generic name for the most common form of Medieval allegory. It is the premise of the *Psychomachia*, and of the English morality plays that, in the words of Prudentius:

The way of victory is before our eyes if we may mark at close quarters the very features of the Virtues and the monsters that close with them in deadly struggle.<sup>4</sup>

The early morality plays, heavily influenced by the *Psychomachia*, personify both vices and virtues, and their struggle to gain dominance over the human soul is a dramatisation of the Christian allegory of human experience. The Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Cardinal Virtues

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<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Book of Villains* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. vii.

<sup>4</sup> Prudentius, *Writings*, ed. by H. J. Thomson, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949-53), I, 281; quoted by Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of Metaphor in Relation to his Major Villains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 81.

exchange hard words in the earliest surviving complete morality play, the archetypal *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1400-25). This early pattern survives in some later morality plays like *Mundus et Infans* (c. 1500-20), where two personifications are presented in each camp, Mundus and Folly representing damnation and conscience, and Perseverance representing salvation.<sup>5</sup> A play like *Everyman* (c. 1520?) is made unusual by the fact that God appears on the list of dramatic personae.<sup>6</sup> Both God and the Devil make rare appearances in their own persons on the morality stage, as they are not personifications, but concrete historical figures in the Christian mythos.

Thus the villain, and the villain's ancestor, the Vice, grow originally from personifications of abstract human vices like Lust, Pride, Gluttony, and so forth. Most relevant to this study, however, is the process by which the Vice, as a specific dramatic role, emerges from the plurality of vices to dominate the morality drama. An understanding of this process also crucially illuminates the way in which the Vice eventually becomes a symbol of passionlessness, though the very word 'vice' suggests the most negative and extreme human passions - for example, lust or gluttony.

The morality plays themselves are a curious - and to the cynical modern eye, questionable - mixture of moral instruction and lewd humour. Their aim is stated clearly in the Prologue of *Like Will to Like* (c. 1562-68):

Herein, as it were in a glass, see you may  
The advancement of virtue, of vice the decay.<sup>7</sup>

'The advancement of virtue' means that the virtues must be entirely free from bawdy humour, and often from any type of levity whatever. The vices thus take on the roles of low entertainers and buffoons; they often trick and deceive the virtues and encourage the audience's complicity with their dissimulation. In *Mankind* (c. 1464-71), the vices - who refer to themselves as 'minstrels'<sup>8</sup> - dance, revel and entertain the audience with vulgar rhymes such as:

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<sup>5</sup> *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays: Mankind, Everyman, Mundus et Infans*, ed. by G. A. Lester, The New Mermaids (London: Benn, 1981), p. 107-57.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-102 (p. 61).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*, ed. by Lester, pp. 1-57 (p. 7; l. 72).

'I have eaten a dishful of curds,  
And I have shitten your mouth full of turds'. (p. 10; ll. 131-32)<sup>9</sup>

Mercy refuses to participate in their sinful performances, exclaiming 'do way this revel, sirs, do way!' (p. 8; l. 82), 'Nay, brother, I will not dance' (p. 8; l. 90), and 'how wretches delight in their sinful ways!' (p. 9; l. 106).

Members of the audience, not surprisingly, themselves proved wretches who delighted in the sinful ways of the vices. Bernard Spivack, in his authoritative work, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, explains that:

it is the paradox of the allegorical plays, anticipating the paradox of *Paradise Lost*, that their theatrical achievement was at the opposite pole to their ethical intention. Proclaiming the moral superiority of virtue, they uniformly demonstrated the dramatic superiority of vice. The personified virtues were verbose and wooden preachers, the personified vices trenchant and versatile actors.<sup>10</sup>

The vices became the darlings of the audience - so much so that Spivack describes the 'dramaturgic feature that supplied the morality with its liveliest humour and its greatest theatrical appeal' as 'the continuous rapport throughout the play between its most important evil personage and the audience'.<sup>11</sup> This 'most important evil personage' entertains and amuses the audience to such an extent that 'there is no such thing as innocent merriment' and the comedy of the morality plays is entirely what Spivack calls the '*comedy of evil*'.<sup>12</sup> Vice figures such as Titivillus in *Mankind* were so popular that a special collection was taken for him from amongst the audience, as soon as he came on stage. In the version of the play in G. A. Lester's collection, Newguise warns the audience:

We intend to gather money, if it please your negligence,  
For a man with a head that is of great omnipotence. (p. 28; ll. 460-61)

Shortly afterwards, the stage direction instructs, '*Enter TITIVILLUS with net*' (p. 29).

It is not now difficult to see how the role of the Vice emerges from the personified vices to exert a marked influence on representations of villainy on the Renaissance stage. The vices

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<sup>9</sup> Nowadays asks Mercy to translate these words into Latin.

<sup>10</sup> p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

monopolise the theatrical life of the play to such an extent that one of the vices - often the most immoral, acted by the best player in the company - builds up a special intimacy with the audience, and is described on the casting lists as 'the Vice'. With this development from 'vices' to 'Vice', moreover, another change occurred. Spivack explains that the popularity of 'the Vice' had little to do with morality:

the word *vice*, which originally had simply a moral meaning acquired in his case a special dramaturgic significance. It became the familiar theatrical label for the stock role of the homiletic artist who, as protagonist of the forces of evil, created and sustained the intrigue of almost every morality play.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, though the Vice represented an amalgam of vices - and related passions - it eventually became popular as an empty theatrical vessel. The signifier became divorced from its original signified meaning. The Vice was a self-consciously performative role; this arch-trickster forged a complicity with the audience, whilst deceiving those on stage with accomplished moral dissimulation. The Medieval player, then, who represented the Vice, was essentially *an actor playing the role of an actor*. Descended from personifications of abstract vice, the Vice itself has no emotions and is not a representation of a human being, but a stage creation who acts out vices inherent in human nature.

Given the abstract, inhuman nature of the Vice, it would perhaps seem unlikely that such a figure would feature on the Renaissance stage. One of the consequences of the vast historical changes which we know as the Renaissance and the Reformation involved the replacement, on the popular stage, of abstract personifications and direct allegories of Christian experience by the dramatisation of the lives of specific individuals. The morality play became in effect obsolete when the personifications which defined its formal existence succumbed to the secular pressure towards the concrete, the specific and the literal. But the Vice survived the morality tradition which spawned it. The title 'the Vice' is generally thought to have been first used outside the allegorical tradition in two plays, John Heywood's *Play of the Wether* (1533) and *Play of Love* (1533).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 136

The reason for the survival of the Vice is as fascinating as the survival itself. As I have already suggested, by the end of the morality tradition, audiences were more interested in the capacity of the Vice to entertain than to instruct; his energy as a theatrical persona outweighed his function as a vehicle for moral instruction. The names of characters employed in Ben Jonson's drama - Volpone, Mosca, Subtle, Face, etc. - frequently hark back to the past tradition of personification. But the general transition from an emphasis on the moral, on the Medieval stage, to an emphasis on the human, on the Renaissance stage, is actually described by Mirth in Ben Jonson's *The Staple of Newes* (1626):

*That was the old way, Gossip, When Iniquity came in like Hokos Pokos, in a Iuglers ierkin, with false skirts, like the Knaue of Clubs! but now they are attir'd like men and women o' the time, the Vices, male and female!*<sup>15</sup>

Evil characters on the Elizabethan and Shakespearean stage, when they are not referred to by their names - Tamburlaine, Dr Faustus, Richard III, Iago, and a host of others with which we are familiar - are invariably referred to as 'villains'. The title of the Vice may have disappeared from the casting lists, but, according to Spivack, many of its characteristics are inherent in the stage villain. Spivack's argument is convincing on its own terms, but the problem is that he only analyses one kind of Shakespearean villain. After he has distinguished between two breeds of villainy, the 'intelligible'<sup>16</sup> and the 'artistic' villain, he pays next to no attention to the 'intelligible' villain. The 'unintelligible' villain is an 'artist-criminal',<sup>17</sup> as Iago demonstrates, he is apparently motiveless, self-conscious and virtually lacking in human passion. It is not difficult to trace a direct link between this kind of villain and the Vice of the Medieval stage.

But not all villains are artists, or intellectual malefactors fully in control of their misdeeds and their presentation of self. On the Medieval stage, Herod of the mystery plays is the antithesis of an artist-criminal. Herod is all that the figure of the Vice is not.<sup>18</sup> The obvious differences are, of

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<sup>15</sup> *Ben Jonson*, ed. by Herford and Simpson, 11 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-52) VI (1938), 277-382 (p. 323); 2nd Intermeane after Act 2; ll. 14-17.

<sup>16</sup> *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, pp. 37-43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> The differences between Herod and the figure of the Vice owe much, of course, to the generic

course, that Herod is a named representation of a human being, and, of course, no ordinary human being - according to the Christian myth which casts him as a more monstrous enemy of Jesus than Pilate, and perhaps even Judas. But these differences are less relevant here than the precise form that Herod's monstrosity takes. Though there are subtle differences in each representation of Herod, as Rosemary Woolf's book *The English Mystery Plays*<sup>19</sup> argues, the overall impression which remains on reading the plays is of the ranting Herod familiar to Shakespeare.<sup>20</sup>

Woolf argues that Herod's rage springs not from ordinary political fears, but 'from the intense hatred of one who believes himself a god and now finds that the true God has come'.<sup>21</sup> This may well be the case, but however sophisticated the conception behind Herod's hatred of God, his hatred in action has none of the sophistication of Milton's Satan's comparable hatred of God, for example. The Herod of the mystery plays often lacks intelligence, apart from occasional low cunning; he is governed by his primitive passions, and acts on these unthinkingly and barbarically; his language is violent, vulgar, blasphemous, and ranting. To give just a couple of examples from the *Shearmen and Tailors'* play (c. 1400-25): when Herod finds out that the three kings have taken another route from the one he intended, he rages at the messenger,

A-nuther wey? owt! owt! owtt!  
 Hath those fawl trayturs done me this ded?  
 I stampe! I stare! I loke all abowtt!  
 Myght I them take, I schuld them bren at a glede!  
 I rent! I rawe! and now run I wode!  
 [...]

*Here Erode ragis in the pagond and in the strete also.*<sup>22</sup>

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differences between the morality and the mystery plays. The mystery plays were biblical dramas popular in England from the thirteenth to the later sixteenth century. They take their name from the *mestier* (métier or trade) of their performers; they were previously called 'miracle plays' which, strictly, are enactments of the miracles performed by the saints.

<sup>19</sup> (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 202-211.

<sup>20</sup> In *Hamlet* (1602), Hamlet criticises acting which 'out-herods Herod' (III. 2. 14). Note that, due to the notorious obscurity of the prose line-numbering in the Alexander edition of Shakespeare's works, Shakespearean prose line numbers in this thesis are approximate.

<sup>21</sup> *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 203.

<sup>22</sup> *English Mystery Plays: A Selection*, ed. by Peter Happé (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975; repr. 1985), pp. 373-74; ll. 777-83.

Again, when he is advised against the massacre of the innocents, on the grounds that it could cause an uprising, he cries:

A rysyng! Owt! owt! Owt!  
 [...]
 Owt! velen wrychis, har apon you I cry!  
 My wyll utturly loke that yt be wrought,  
 Or apon a gallowse bothe ye schall dy,  
 Be Mahownde most myghtyste, that me dere hath boght! (p. 374; ll. 801-5)

Herod's tantrums may strike the modern reader - and obviously struck Shakespeare - as absurd in their extremes. But in the mystery plays, Herod's barbarous cruelty is given weight for the audience through the dramatisation of the violence and thuggery of the soldiers, who regard themselves as chivalrous in the very act of killing babies. Herod's passionate villainy is shown then, to be anything but laughable or harmless. Herod is transparent and paradoxically 'honest' about his villainy; that is, most of the time, he makes no attempt to disguise his feelings or his intentions. But his 'honesty' does not necessarily make him less frightening than a devious, Machiavellian malefactor.

Herod is psychopathic in the sense that he believes in his omnipotence. Much of his language, as the above examples confirm, conveys the complete confidence in his own will characteristic of Marlowe's Tamburlaine. Herod believes that he has total control over the world, which is obviously disturbing, but what is even more disturbing is that he has absolutely no control over his own primitive impulses. So when Herod's impulses are put into practice by those who obey him, the result is barbarism. And Herod *is* obeyed; he is obeyed because he speaks the primal language of violence, a language which strikes fear into most, excitement into some. Herod's villainy is that of the primitive personality. It is passionate, uncontrolled and employs brute force. What is most intriguing is that such villainy does not die with the Medieval stage, but persists through supposedly more civilised ages in literature and in life; Bill Sikes, for example, is his Dickensian descendant. If the figure of the Vice fathers 'artistic' malefactors, Herod breeds a line of hot-headed hooligans.

## 1. 2 - The Interim: From the Renaissance to the Nineteenth Century

In *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, Spivack groups Iago with Richard III, Don John and Aaron together under the heading 'artist-criminals'. These artist-criminals, according to Spivack, contrast with Shakespeare's other - intelligible - villains, because they have no intelligible motives for their evil deeds. For Spivack, Iago, Richard, Aaron, and Don John are Vice figures disguised as human beings; they represent 'variant expressions of the same dramatic formula'.<sup>23</sup> Their hatred of their victims is, by this reading, not personal, but an expression of their function in the play; their opposition to virtue is fundamentally a remnant of the allegorical past of the morality tradition.

Spivack maintains that artist-criminals feel towards their victims:

a nearly complete emotional indifference; for their whole action remains essentially an artistic demonstration that is not concerned with practical ends.

For such villains, evil does not exist:

the evil in the plays in which they appear is never really committed; it is only suffered. For the agents of evil are not moral; only their victims are. *Evil* is a word that describes the human and moral view of what they do. But since at bottom they are neither human nor moral, evil is for them solely an organic function of an artistic pleasure.<sup>24</sup>

In Shakespeare, there are indeed numerous examples of villains overtly comparing themselves to their stage ancestors, and conceptualising their villainy as almost separate from themselves - as an impersonal, acted role. In *King Lear* (1604-5), for instance, Edmund tells the audience on Edgar's entrance: 'Pat! He comes, like the catastrophe of the old comedy. My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o'Bedlam' (I. 2. 128-30). Richard III announces in his opening speech that his purpose in life is to play the role of the villain -

I am determined to prove a villain  
And hate the idle pleasures of these days. (*Richard III* (1593); I. 1. 30-31)

- and the play is riddled with his reminders of the role he is playing. In Act 1, scene 3, he soliloquises on the moral duplicity which lies at the centre of his role, and which we have already seen in the role of the Vice:

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<sup>23</sup> p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> p. 45.

And thus I clothe my naked villainy  
 With odd old ends stol'n forth of holy writ,  
 And seem a saint, when most I play the devil. (I. 3. 336-38)

And in Act 3, scene 1, he overtly compares himself to the morality Vice:

[*Aside*] Thus, like the formal vice, Iniquity,  
 I moralize two meanings in one word. (III. 1. 82-83)

In *Othello* (1602-4), when Brabantio accuses Iago, 'Thou art a villain', Iago answers 'You are - a senator' (I. 1. 119), as if it is his occupation to play the villain just as it is Brabantio's to play the senator. In Act 2, scene 3, Iago analyses at length the duplicity which is the key to many performances of villainy:

What's he then that says I play the villain,  
 When this advice is free I give and honest,  
 Probal to thinking, and indeed the course  
 To win the Moor again?  
 [...] How am I then a villain  
 To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,  
 Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!  
 When devils will the blackest sins put on,  
 They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,  
 As I do now. (pp. 1129-30; II. 3. 325-42)

Emilia's rhapsody in the final scene -

Villainy, villainy, villainy!  
 I think upon't - I think I smell't! - villainy!  
 I thought so then. - I'll kill myself for grief.  
 O villainy, villainy! (V. 2. 193-96)

- explains both Iago's real nature and the role he has been playing during the course of events. Such a summation of Iago's character appears to group him with less complex Shakespearean villains like Don John, from *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598-99), who also announces that he is to play the villain's role: 'I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain' (I. 3. 24-26). Likewise, Aaron, in *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1592) appears to be of Iago's ilk:

O, how this villainy  
 Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it!

Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace:  
 Aaron will have his soul black like his face. (III. 1. 203-6)

There are many truly valuable insights in Spivack's theory of the 'artist-criminal'. But there is also much with which I wish to disagree. The notion, for instance, that these villains play what Spivack calls 'a single role four times repeated', that they 'are essentially one and the same artist',<sup>25</sup> is obviously stretching his argument somewhat. There are significant differences between the four villains which have essential repercussions for my argument. Most obviously, Don John and Aaron are far less adept at manipulating their self-presentation than Richard and Iago. If Richard and Iago are clearly related to the Medieval Vice, Don John and Aaron have as much in common with Herod.

Compared with Iago, Don John could be called, paradoxically, an honest or innocent villain. Though Don John is not as violently temperamental as Herod, he is controlled by his moods and trapped within his clearly defined selfhood. Aaron, of course, is even more clearly related to Herod than Don John. *Titus Andronicus* in general is far more Senecan than a late play like *Othello*, and is thus dominated by intense passion, sex and violence. Aaron is the focus and the embodiment of this raging turbulence. His affair with Tamora ensures that he is associated with prohibited sexual passion from the outset, while the racist stereotypes which surround him throughout the play constantly suggest the primitive and the passionate. Even his reflection on his own villainy (above) - 'how this villainy/Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it!' - is expressed in sensual terms. Though Aaron is far from stupid, thought itself to him is a physical rather than an intellectual function. Even his fittingly barbaric death sentence does not subdue him. Despite the fact that he must be buried in the ground breast-deep and starved to death, he goes to his death as exultingly as any villain in nineteenth-century stage melodrama.

Iago and Richard, in comparison, are not noticeably driven by powerful passion. They are also unusually intelligent and both have a chameleonic ability to play any role the situation requires of them. Their repertoire includes an ability to feign emotions which they do not have, but which

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<sup>25</sup> *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, p. 46.

their psychological penetration tells them the situation demands. In *Richard III*, for instance, after Lady Anne has accused Richard of having no emotions -

Villain, thou know'st nor law of God nor man:  
No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity. (I. 2. 70-71)

- he produces words expressive of the tenderest emotions:

Those eyes of thine from mine have drawn salt tears,  
Shamed their aspects with store of childish drops. (I. 2. 153-54)

Richard's language expresses a sensitivity to the most touching of human emotions, making him the most perfect of hypocrites.

Iago's duplicity is of necessity far more subtle and accomplished than that of Richard. Having nowhere near the power of a protector/king like Richard, Iago cannot risk loud lies and histrionic hypocrisy. Since his relationship with his main victim is of an intimate nature, he must employ acute psychological penetration as his main weapon. His manipulation of Othello reveals an astonishing understanding of Othello's emotional and psychological make-up - his method with Othello is precisely one of implication; at every stage he leaves Othello to form his own conclusions, while unremittingly controlling his train of thought. Othello's conjectures, moreover, are always based on a firm belief in Iago's role as 'honest Iago'. In Act 3, scene 3, for example, Othello's first thoughts on Iago's exit are of Iago's honesty rather than of the dishonesty which has been imputed to his wife:

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,  
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit  
Of human dealing. (III. 3. 262-64)

It is the fact that Iago and Richard possess such 'a learned spirit of human dealings' that makes their villainy so fascinating. Their shrewd insight into the emotions and psychology of others comes not from looking within, but from viewing others as objects of intellectual interest. To know 'all qualities, with a learned spirit/Of human dealings' demands an elastic and 'sympathetic' imagination. The fact that Iago and (to a lesser extent) Richard possess the intellectual mechanism

of a sympathetic imagination without the emotional content which the word 'sympathy' implies makes them mysteriously monstrous in their inhumanity.

This is especially true of Iago, as the pain and suffering which he manufactures and which is graphically presented before him in the final scenes, leaves him remorseless and apparently unperturbed; whereas Aaron openly exults at his death, Iago enigmatically says nothing. Nor is there any hint of the dawning conscience which is rather unconvincingly imposed on Richard in *Richard III*:

I rather hate myself  
For hateful deeds committed by myself!  
[...]  
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
And every tale condemns me for a villain. (V. 3. 189-95)

This picture of a tragically divided Richard is unconvincing as there has been no development of this human and fallible side of Richard; the speech represents one of those unconvincing jolts of characterisation which sometimes mar Shakespeare's more immature drama. The question of maturity is indeed all-important here. Aaron and Richard, for instance, are creations of an earlier Shakespeare, a Shakespeare still experimenting with stereotypes - and in Richard's case, introducing the idea of evil with a conscience, even if it is unconvincing in context. Iago, however, is a creature of the later Shakespeare, who in the same period of composition (1599-1608) created malefactors of such moral and emotional complexity as Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Goneril, and Regan.

What sets Iago apart from these fellows in villainy is that he remains *completely untouched by emotion or passion*; he is an observer rather than a participator in the tragedy he creates. Iago is in no sense tragic, because he is barely human. He is the agent of tragic suffering in the play, and even his grim sense of humour is as much a dehumanising, as a humanising characteristic. Macbeth's ambition, Lady Macbeth's breakdown, and Shylock's hatred of Christianity reveal human passions with which we can empathise. Iago's motiveless and

emotionless evil, however, make him what Dickens would call 'a horrible wonder apart'.<sup>26</sup> Like Stevenson's Mr Hyde - the embodiment of 'pure evil'<sup>27</sup> - he has no recognisable emotions other than a hatred of virtue and an irrational pleasure in evil. Iago is Shakespeare's representation of what St. Paul - in his letter to the Thessalonians - calls 'the mystery of iniquity'.<sup>28</sup> We need think only of Idi Amin, for instance, bizarrely echoing *Titus Andronicus* by serving up the head of Brigadier Suleiman to his dinner guests, or Emperor Bokassa feeding school-children to his crocodiles, or political dictators like Stalin and Hitler ordering the massacre of thousands, indeed millions, of innocent people, to realise that a complete lack of regard for the lives of others is not solely the property of the stage villain.

Our interpretation of Iago's character, therefore, is entirely determined by generic context. Iago's villainy is highly dependent for its effect on the dramatic contrast between his lack of suffering, and the pain and confusion of the mature human beings around him. Had Iago been a character in a comic context, his impact would have been entirely different. When Spivack lumps Don John in the same group of villains as Aaron, Richard and Iago, he takes no account of the genre from which the four originate. A Vice-villain character will metamorphose, depending on dramatic environment; grouping villains from comedy, immature tragedy and mature tragedy simply does not work critically. I have already, for instance, pointed out the similarities between Iago and Richard; in *Richard III*, however, the emotional and spiritual lives of the villain's victims are not as vividly realised as in *Othello*. The victims themselves retain something of the playhouse, more role-players of tragic suffering than human beings immersed in the tragic experience.

Jacobean tragedy, for example, which abounds with extreme villainy of all kinds, does not always manage to convey the suffering of the victim forcefully enough to achieve the effect of tragedy. Jacobean drama sometimes contains too much passion and too much villainy for the villainy or its human consequences to have any real emotional effect on the audience. In this

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<sup>26</sup> *ED*, Chapter 20, p. 175.

<sup>27</sup> *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories*, ed. by Jenni Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 27-97 (p. 85).

<sup>28</sup> Cited by Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, p. 3.

respect, a play like *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) could arguably be considered closer to melodrama than to tragedy. In Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), by contrast, the suffering of the Duchess is forcefully dramatised throughout and is nowhere more powerfully conveyed than at her death scene (IV. 2). Here as elsewhere, the pain of her situation is relayed both through the intensity and intelligence of her language, and through the sporadic emotional involvement in her plight of the maverick malcontent, Bosola, who is also curiously the instrument of her suffering.

The figure of the malcontent in fact exemplifies one of the strange features of Jacobean tragedy. Genetically dominated by melancholy, a creature of an emotional bent, the malcontent also retains the capacity to detach himself from any emotion and become a disengaged spectator of the human life around him. In this, malcontents like Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* are probably influenced by Marston's original malcontent, Malevole, in his play *The Malcontent* (1603). Malevole was not of course a genuine malcontent, but the disguised Duke of Genoa. Thus, though Bosola, for example, is actually a melancholy man, he retains the ability to detach himself from his emotion; at times, he therefore confusingly appears to play the part of the malcontent, or to act the role of himself, without any of the Duke's reasons for so doing. This curious combination of emotionalism and theatrical self-consciousness surfaces in many of the characters in Jacobean tragedy and pervades the mood of the whole; the genre is a curious blend of primitive passion and theatrical sophistication.

The two breeds of villain that dominate Jacobean tragedy are thus not always as straightforward as they may first appear. The labels Machiavel and malcontent could seem to imply that the former is a descendant of the Vice - and of course of Machiavelli's courtier in *The Prince* (1513) - while the latter is a descendant of the passionate Herod. But they both literally blow hot and cold, vacillating between uncontrolled passion and controlled, heartless pieces of deviousness. Webster's Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi* is perhaps the most successful depiction of one man's transition from the life of the intellect to the life of the passions. By contrast, though his cardinal is not, like Shakespeare's Iago, shown to be devoid of passion, his bursts of anger or hatred only

strengthen his icy resolve. The contrast between the cardinal and Ferdinand serves to intensify the audience's sense of the cardinal's villainy, while the contrast between the Duchess's suffering and the warped callousness of both the brothers and Bosola increases our sympathy with her plight. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster uses dramatic contrast of several varieties to intensify the effect of tragedy.

Paradoxically, in Shakespearean comedy, we find that the moral and dramaturgic dynamics outlined above are inverted. When we think of examples of suffering in Shakespearean comedy, we can think of very few clearly virtuous victims - suffering is often the fate of the character alienated from the comic community, the potential villain or destroyer of comic harmony, whereas role-playing is the haven of the virtuous. The best and worst examples of this pattern are Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-97), and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (1602). In these examples, it is the very inability of the villains to see life as a stage that alienates them from the comic whole. In the comedies, to be fully human, one must possess a complex theatrical consciousness, an ability to play different roles; this defence against suffering makes one 'good' because it confirms the very nature of what is being presented - a comic universe. Here it is an addiction to the role of self that threatens the comic vision of the world which is dramatised. However, if the audience empathises with the suffering of the outsider, then the effect of comedy is diffused - and indeed, it is not unusual for directors to interpret both plays as dark comedies, tragi-comedies or even tragedies.

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Ben Jonson's comedies illustrate the danger of using Shakespeare as a template for generalisations about genre. Jonson's rogues use their theatrical versatility to victimise their theatrically innocent gulls. These gulls are in no way virtuous, however, for virtue is foreign to Jonson's satire. Jonson's gulls are, like Shakespeare's comic victims, immersed in the role of self. In Jonson's criminal world, such performative ineptitude is sometimes depicted as more blameworthy than the conscious malice of the chameleonic rogues.

A comedy like *The Alchemist* (1610), for example, represents an entirely immoral society where the most daring villainy, in the tradition of Roman comedy, brings not alienation and condemnation but praise. As in the morality plays, there is an overt link between villainy and entertainment, and the audience is asked to applaud the performative vitality of the chief villain, regardless of his immorality. We have no choice but to:

triumph and sing  
Of Face, the precious king  
Of present wits. (V. 4. 12-14)<sup>29</sup>

Face, like the most skilful of villains, has the performer's ability to 'suit the word to the action, the action to the word'. His self-conscious theatrical virtuosity enables him to both 'save Face' with Lovewit, and to triumph over his fellow villains. Lovewit, the only outsider who threatens to destroy the immoral underworld of the play, himself treats Face like a character in a play, directing the audience with his praise of Face's performance:

What device should he bring  
forth now?  
I love a teeming wit as I love my own nourishment. (V. 1. 15-16)

He stands back and lets Face perform, offering no moral admonishment and eventually surrendering the reins of power to his servant - 'I will be ruled by thee in anything, Jeremy' (V. 5. 143). When Face asks the audience directly for approval -

yet I put myself  
On you, that are my country: and this pelf  
Which I have got, if you quit me, rests,  
To feast you often, and invite new guests. (V. 5. 162-65)

- the form of histrionic capitalism which governs the play makes disapproval impossible.

*The Alchemist* enacts the view expressed in Jonson's *Timber* (1640) that 'our whole life is like a Play: wherein every man forgetful of himself, is in travaile with expression of another. Nay, we so insist in imitating others, as we cannot when it is necessary return to ourselves';<sup>30</sup> Face is

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<sup>29</sup> *The Alchemist*, in *Three Comedies: Ben Jonson*, ed. by Michael Jamieson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; repr. 1985), pp. 185-317. The words are spoken by Subtle. Jonson's original Act and scene divisions are maintained.

all-powerful because he, unlike the mediocre members of mankind, *can* 'return to himself'. His flexibility ensures that he is immunised against suffering and presents no threat to the comic vision of the universe upheld in the play.

In *Volpone; or The Fox* (1606), however, the theatrical agility of the chief rogue cannot gain the unadulterated respect and applause of the audience as it does in *The Alchemist* and is duly punished. The disparity in skill between the theatrical villains and the theatrically inept gulls in *Volpone* is so great that the audience feels a certain sympathy for the Jonsonian victims - a sympathy which threatens the comic fabric of the play. Performative dexterity is employed in the service of mental and physical sadism in *Volpone*. Our revulsion against the rogues in *Volpone* is, however, unusual in comedy. It results, as in the case of Iago, from the effect of contrast; the inhumanity of the villains juxtaposed with the helpless suffering of the victims is distasteful.

More generally in comedy, where so many characters see life as a stage, the felt force of evil behind representations of villainy is diffused; the more self-conscious a form of comedy is, the less room there is in it for suffering. This can be clearly seen in the comedy of manners of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,<sup>31</sup> its overtly theatrical nature means that virtually all its characters see themselves as stage performers. Characters in the comedy of manners of this period are predominantly what Erving Goffman would call 'merchants of morality',<sup>32</sup> creating the desired impression of one's moral fibre is often more important than projecting one's true moral self. In a world where vice and role-playing are equally fashionable, such an outlook on life produces the most bizarre moral twists. At the end of Sheridan's *School for Scandal* (1777), for instance, Snake is sincerely worried about losing his reputation as a villain:

I live by the badness of my character; [...] and, if it were once known that I had been betrayed into an honest action, I should lose every friend I have in the world.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Timber; or, Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter*, ed. by Felix E. Schelling (Boston: Ginn, 1892), p. 36; ll. 22-36.

<sup>31</sup> See Lamb's comments on the villain of artificial comedy (p. 18, note 2 above).

<sup>32</sup> *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Pelican (USA: Anchor, 1959; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971; repr. 1987), p. 243.

<sup>33</sup> Ed. by F. W. Bateson, *The New Mermaids* (London: Benn, 1979); V. 3. 221-24.

Earlier in the play, when Sir Peter Teazle discovers that Joseph Surface, the man he trusted implicitly, is in fact a 'hypocritical villain!' (V. 2. 204), it does not take him long to disengage his emotions and see the whole affair at an aesthetic distance: 'Ha! ha! 'Twas devilish entertaining, to be sure!' (V. 2. 207). 'Devilish entertaining' is a highly ironic phrase in a play where constant reference is made to the link between villainy and play-acting. Joseph Surface the hypocrite muses,

The silver ore of pure charity is an expensive article in the catalogue of a man's good qualities; whereas the sentimental French plate I use instead of it makes just as good a show and pays no tax. (V. 1. 109-12)

- betraying a consciousness of himself not only as play-actor, but as play-actor in a literary tradition. Lady Teazle is obsessed with acting the part of a lady of fashion, even if it involves her in immoral love-affairs, whilst Lady Sneerwell's acting abilities allow her, in the words of Snake, to 'do more with a word or look than many can with the most laboured detail' (I. 1. 28-29). The Epilogue, spoken by Lady Teazle, laments the end of a play which was both entertaining and immoral, in words which mock the tragic ending of *Othello*:

yet I must deplore  
That the gay dream of dissipation's o'er.  
[...]  
The transient hour of fashion too soon spent,  
Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content!  
[...]  
And Lady Teazle's occupation's o'er! (ll.13-42)

Her subsequent attempt to give the play a moralistic turn is highly unconvincing.

Not all Restoration comedies celebrate immorality as openly as *The School for Scandal*. Lord Touchwood, for instance, in Congreve's earlier play *The Double Dealer* (1694) advocates 'rewarding virtue and wronged innocence'. Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) likewise pleads a moral purpose in exposing affectation, and Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676) presents Dorimant as a reformed rake. Yet everywhere in Restoration comedy, we are reminded of the proximity of the real and the feigned in matters of morality, perhaps the best example of this being

the villain Maskwell's soliloquy in *The Double Dealer*. In the vein of Shakespeare's Iago and Edmund, Maskwell announces his own villainous creed to the audience:

But is there not such a thing as honesty? Yes, and whosoever has it about him bears an enemy in his breast: [...] ha! ha! ha! Well, for wisdom and honesty, give me cunning and hypocrisy; oh 'tis such a pleasure to angle for fair-faced fools! [...] Why, let me see, I have the same face, the same words and accents, when I speak what I do think, and when I speak what I do not think - the very same - and dear dissimulation is the only art not to be known from nature.<sup>34</sup>

Maskwell's villainy has an entirely different effect, however, from the villainy of Iago or Edmund. The highly self-conscious nature of Restoration comedy means that villainy within the genre can be appreciated by the audience only in an objective and intellectual fashion. We are not horrified or emotionally disturbed by the villain of Restoration comedy, because we see him, as he sees himself, as a play-actor in a drama. He causes no real suffering to his victims because, like him, they see themselves as performers in a world of roles and surfaces. The comedy of manners of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, more than any other mode of the genre, enacts Bergson's theory that 'the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart'.<sup>35</sup>

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However, whilst the villain of the comedy of manners undergoes no real development between the early plays of Etherege and the later sentimental plays of Sheridan, there is a significant development of the figure of the villain in the budding eighteenth-century novel. This development can perhaps most tellingly be evoked in a phrase: Richardson's *Lovelace*. On one level, *Lovelace* can be seen as a villain in the same tradition as Iago: a villain who seems almost emotionless, sees life as a stage, and has no sympathy for the suffering of his victims. His villainy shocks and repels the reader in the way that villainy in eighteenth-century comedy does not, for it is set against the tragic experience of *Clarissa*.

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<sup>34</sup> Ed. by J. C. Ross, *The New Mermaids* (London: Benn, 1981), p. 48; II. ll. 393-406.

<sup>35</sup> Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher, trans. by Fred Rothwell (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 59-190 (pp. 63-64).

For instance, when Clarissa escapes to Hampstead, and Lovelace disguises himself in order to recapture her, he describes the incident to Belford thus:

I threw open my great-coat and, like the devil in Milton (an odd comparison though!),

'I started up in my own form divine,  
Touched by the beam of her celestial eye,  
More potent than Ithuriel's spear! - '.<sup>36</sup>

Lovelace's comparison is ironic, as Clarissa's previous letter to Miss Howe has also compared him to the devil - 'Oh why was the great fiend of all unchained, and permitted to assume so specious a form [...]. And what had I done that he should be let loose particularly upon me!' (Letter 230, p. 755). However, the telling difference between the two comparisons is that whereas Clarissa speaks with extreme fear and emotion of Lovelace as devil, Lovelace sees the devil as a heroic theatrical role. Indeed, Lovelace's description of the entire episode is couched in self-consciously theatrical language, whilst Clarissa's reaction to his 'act' is emotionally and physically violent and spontaneous. When Lovelace traces Clarissa to her lodging in Hampstead, for example, he writes to Belford: 'And here, supposing my narrative of the dramatic kind, ends Act the First' (Letter 231, p. 764). When musing on the possibility that he may have to marry Clarissa, he writes, like an actor contemplating the role of husband: 'I can suit myself to any condition, that's my comfort' (Letter 232, p. 767). And like Hamlet training the players at Elsinore, Lovelace must teach his accomplices in Clarissa's recapture, who are posing as his relations, to act their (genteel) roles:

A little *graver*, Lady Betty. [...]  
That's the air! Charmingly hit - Again - You have it.  
[...]  
Now for *your* part, cousin Charlotte! (Letter 255, p. 876)

Throughout the novel, Lovelace is likened to devil, villain or soulless actor. Miss Howe imagines that as a boy Lovelace was, 'a curl-pated villain, full of fire, fancy, and mischief; an

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<sup>36</sup> Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady* (1747-48), ed. by Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 772 (Letter 233). The quotation is from *Paradise Lost* (IV. 812).

orchard-robber, a wall-climber, a horse-rider without saddle or bridle, neck or nothing' (Letter 46, p. 210). Belford offers a more accurate picture of a colder Lovelace:

for, from thy cradle, as I have heard thee own, thou ever delightedst to sport with and torment the animal whether bird or beast, that thou lovedst, and hadst a power over. (Letter 222, p. 710)

Lovelace's reputation as devil, villain, libertine, and actor is one to which he is accustomed from infancy and one which he works hard to sustain. His reputation suggests the invincibility which we usually associate with - albeit hellish - divinity. Yet I would argue that there is a fascinating ambiguity - or perhaps humanity - at the root of his personality which makes him one of the most compulsive and baffling villains in our literary history. The centre of the Lovelace mystery is located in the following quotation from Lovelace himself:

the dear sly rogue looking upon me, too, with a view to discover some emotion in me: *that* I can tell her lay deeper than her eye could reach, though it had been a sunbeam. (Letter 131, p. 472)

The imagery used by Lovelace here suggests that not even the most elementary and powerfully illuminating force in nature can locate his concealed emotions.

Lovelace is in fact a different type of villain to Iago, for whereas Iago uses the actor's art to feign emotions which he does not have, Lovelace uses the actor's hard discipline to smother emotions which he does possess. Their different brands of villainy are in part a reflection of the societies which produce them. Lovelace is a product of a society where vice is fashionable, and the male members of society often take pride in their bad reputations; Sheridan's *Snake* caricatures a real social phenomenon in this respect. Iago, on the other hand, is presented within the context of a society which has no language for the countenancing of immorality. However, Richardson's master-stroke lies in the fact that Lovelace's suppressed emotions do not succeed in endearing him to the reader for any length of time. The reader is rather horrified at the success which Lovelace has in recreating himself as an emotionless work of art, and repelled by a society which, as an audience, applauds and thus encourages the actor of heroic villainy.

Shortly after telling Belford 'a *jest* I call all that has passed between her and me' (Letter 453, p. 1308), Lovelace confesses more candidly:

Indeed, it is to my *deep concern* that my very *levity* is owing; for I struggle and struggle, and try to buffet down these reflections as they rise; and when I cannot, I am forced as I have often said to try to make myself laugh that I may not cry; for one or other I must do. (Letter 453, pp. 1309-10)

He claims in the same letter, 'my grief, as my joy, is sharper-pointed than most other men's' (p. 1310). Later still, Lovelace says of his libertine comrades, 'I want them not. My soul's sick of them, and of all the world; but most of myself' (Letter 478, p. 1358). Finally, just before his death, on the way to Gad's Hill, an apparently rejuvenated and frivolous Lovelace confides to Belford (in Belford's words):

'Whatever airs I give myself, this charming creature has hold of me *here* (clapping his hand upon his heart); and I must either appear what you see me, or be what I so lately was'. (Letter 527, p. 1463)

This quotation sums up the Lovelace dilemma. Although we are convinced by the end of the novel that Lovelace, unlike Iago, has strongly-felt emotions, to the end, his reputation is more important to him than any remorse he (or we) may think he feels. Likewise, the fact that he refuses to ask for God's mercy at his death suggests that he is playing the role of arch-villain to the end. Even at the point of death, Lovelace refuses to confess his fallibility and humanity. Richardson's *Clarissa* shows the evil which is the product of eighteenth-century high society's obsession with role-playing and fashionable vice.

Henry Fielding's *Jonathan Wild* (1743) had, of course, years earlier provided a thorough critique of the way in which society romanticises criminality and mistakenly labels its villains heroes. This novel is also riddled with references to Wild's talent for role-playing, a talent which gains him access to high society and aids his villainy. When he is virtually caught red-handed stealing from his 'friend' Heartfree, for example, the text makes clear that his acting is central to his criminality:

However, as he had that perfect mastery of his temper, or rather of his muscles which is as necessary to the forming of a great [i.e. bad] character, as to the personating it on the stage, he soon conveyed a smile to his countenance.<sup>37</sup>

Jonathan Wild mocks the corrupt complicity of a society which knowingly allows access to its circles for criminals with 'those transcendent qualities [...] a bold heart, a thundering voice, and a steady countenance' (Book 2, Chapter 2, p. 61), or for those who can perfect the appearance of gentility. Moreover, society makes such charismatic, chameleonic villains heroes, as the popularity of the so-called 'Newgate' novels in the period proves.<sup>38</sup>

One of Lovelace's successors was the Vicomte de Valmont of Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). He too puts his reputation before his own emotions and the feelings of others. He leaves Madame de Tourvel knowing full well that he loves her and that she will die without him. Yet his decision to put his social image as villain above any other consideration owes more to his psychological manipulation by the Marquise de Merteuil than to his own determination. Merteuil accurately calculates that the one weak spot in Valmont's almost impenetrable emotional armour is his fear of being laughed at by society. 'Yes, Vicomte,' she tells him,

you loved Madame de Tourvel very much and you still love her; you love her like a madman; but because I amused myself by making you ashamed of it, you have bravely sacrificed her. You would have sacrificed a thousand rather than endure one jest. Where vanity will take us! The wise man is indeed right when he says that it is the enemy of happiness.<sup>39</sup>

Laclos appreciates, perhaps even more acutely than Richardson, that eighteenth-century society's concern for reputation is 'the enemy of happiness'. The interaction between immorality and social role-playing in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is given strength and depth by the fact that Valmont has a formidable rival in villainy in the person of the Marquise. Indeed, Merteuil makes both Valmont and Lovelace look like amateurs at repressing their emotions in the service of

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<sup>37</sup> *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild, the Great*, in *Works*, ed. by George Saintsbury, 12 vols (London: The Navarre Society, 1926), XII, 68 (Book 2, Chapter 3).

<sup>38</sup> Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) also analyses the relationship between the terms 'hero' and 'villain', pointing out that real life heroes are never perfectly virtuous, and that the heroes of society or literature are never of 'low' birth - or at least, cannot seem so.

See Chapter 5 for a discussion of the Newgate novel.

<sup>39</sup> *Dangerous Acquaintances*, trans. by Richard Aldington (London: Routledge, 1924), p. 379 (Letter 145).

villainy. With remarkable psychological penetration, she reveals (Letter 81, pp. 220-29) how she trained herself from adolescence as a social actress so accomplished that her emotions and her villainy can never be discovered.

Merteuil speaks of herself as a work of art - 'I can say that I am my own work' (p. 223) - and explains the process by which she created herself. Essential to the process is the destruction of any trace of emotion:

I tried to govern the different expressions of my face [...] Did I experience some grief, I studied to show an air of serenity, even one of joy; I carried my zeal so far as to cause myself some voluntary pain and to seek for an expression of pleasure at the same time. [...] In this way I acquired that power over my features by which I have sometimes seen you astonished. (p. 223)

The extreme language in which Merteuil's self-analysis is couched - terms like 'zeal', 'power', 'pleasure', 'pain' - elevates her theatrical practice almost to the level of a religious creed. Her first sexual encounter is:

simply an opportunity for experience; I noticed very carefully both pain and pleasure and in these different sensations I saw nothing but facts to collect and to meditate upon. (p. 225)

Merteuil appreciates that the key to her villainy, and hence to power, is the capacity to destroy emotion within oneself in order to fake convincingly. However, she meets her greatest challenge in that most difficult of human emotions, love:

In vain I had been told and had read that this sentiment could not be feigned; I saw that to do so successfully one had only to join the talent of a comedian to the mind of an author. I practised myself in both arts and perhaps with some success; but instead of seeking the vain applause of the theatre, I resolved to employ for my happiness what others sacrifice to vanity. (p. 226)

Merteuil, in one of the key statements on villainy in the eighteenth-century novel, openly equates her society with the theatre, and her training in immorality with the training of the actress. As a villain, however, there is one immense difference between her and Valmont or Lovelace. She is a woman in a society which openly admires immorality only in men. Therefore, she must train herself to act the part of a virtuous woman, whilst Valmont and Lovelace can be proud of acting

the villain. But the insight which her analysis gives into the complex interaction between acting, emotion and villainy in all three characters is of the highest importance; moreover, it enlightens our understanding of the behaviour of Dickens's comparatively angelic social performers, Edith Dombey and Lady Dedlock.

But one of the warped ironies about the Marquise de Merteuil is that, like Lovelace and Valmont, she does experience love - she talks to Valmont of 'the time when we loved each other, for I think it was love' (Letter 131, p. 353) - but she too sacrifices felt human emotion for her chosen social role. Having conditioned herself to the self-image of heartless actress, she cannot avow even inwardly that human passion is consuming her. Yet her passion for Valmont ultimately causes death and torment. The Marquise de Merteuil demonstrates the distortion and suffering inherent in a social code which is primarily theatrical and denies the human.

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In this context, it seems surprising that the fiery, primitive villain should make a reappearance, but reappear it does in the shape of the Gothic villain. The villains of the Gothic novel are often little more sophisticated than the medieval Herod, to whom they are obviously related. Gone is the idea of villainy as socially nurtured; back is the idea of the villain as an embodiment of a primal, almost superhuman 'evil'. It is perhaps unsurprising that such villains should be governed by their emotions, as the desired effect of many such novels must have been similar to that described by Horace Walpole in his Preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764): 'the mind is kept up in a constant vicissitude of interesting passions'.<sup>40</sup> Walpole's Manfred is the archetypal passionate villain and there are frequent references in the text to 'the tyrant's rage' (Chapter 2, p. 50). Walpole tries to give some depth to his character by suggesting that

Manfred was not one of those savage tyrants who wanton in cruelty unprovoked. The circumstances of his fortune had given an asperity to his temper, which was naturally humane; and his virtues were always ready to operate, when his passion did not obscure his reason. (Chapter 1, p. 29)

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<sup>40</sup> *The Castle of Otranto and Hieroglyphic Tales*, ed. by Robert L. Mack, Everyman (London: Dent, 1993), pp. 1-102 (p. 4).

But this complicating humanity in Manfred's character is rarely in evidence because his feelings always get the better of him. The result is a specimen of 'exquisite villainy' (Chapter 1, p. 34), as Walpole calls him elsewhere.

M. G. Lewis's Ambrosio in *The Monk* (1796) (the forefather of his Dickensian namesake, 'Monks') is paradoxically both more exquisitely diabolical and more recognisably human. Although elements of the supernatural and diabolical exist in abundance in the tale, the crimes of the villain, the text clearly points out, grow from passions which are only too human. The epigraph of the novel, taken from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (c. 1604) -

- Lord Angelo is precise;  
 Stands at a guard with envy scarce confesses  
 That his blood flows, or that his appetite  
 Is more than bread to stone (I. 2. 50-53)

- anticipates events, Angelo's story having marked affinities with that of the monk.

Ambrosio the monk at first prides himself on his lack of passion, associating it with mortal weakness. He soliloquises: 'Are not the passions dead in my bosom? have I not freed myself from the frailty of mankind?' (Volume I, Chapter 2, p. 66).<sup>41</sup> Indeed, early in the novel it seems as if Ambrosio's villainy, like Iago's, will spring from lack of emotion; he upbraids himself for treating Agnes the young nun's sins 'without emotion [...] with too great severity' (Volume I, Chapter 2, p. 73). Before long, however, he errs to the other extreme; after meeting his temptress Matilda, 'Ambrosio's bosom became the theatre of a thousand contending passions' (Volume I, Chapter 2, p. 103). Although his lust is awakened, the narrator tells us initially, 'his other passions [...] lay dormant; but they only needed to be once awakened, to display themselves with violence as great and irresistible' (Volume II, Chapter 6, p. 240). Once awakened, they are expressed in the language and gestures of melodrama:

Starting from the bed, he paced the chamber with disordered steps, howled with impotent fury, dashed himself violently against the walls, and indulged all the transports of rage and madness. (Volume II, Chapter 7, p. 263)

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<sup>41</sup> Evergreen, CLXIII (New York: Grove Press, 1959).

Admittedly, Ambrosio only gives vent to his passions in such a manner in private, or when he is with Matilda, who could be called his familiar. Part of the fascination of Ambrosio's character is that he upholds the role of monk in public for most of the novel. He is not therefore, theatrically naive, and indeed, his early performances in the pulpit 'enchanted' and 'irresistibly attracted' (Volume I, Chapter 1, p. 45) the crowd. But although Ambrosio is a powerful performer, the reader is privy to all his private moments. The same can be said of Ann Radcliffe's Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). His pride, courage, good looks and 'presence' impart something satanic and Byronic to his character. Likewise, he is often reserved and self-controlled, a fact which makes him anything but a hot-headed bully. Nonetheless, it is his fiercely passionate nature which the reader remembers. Though Montoni represses his passionate self, it clearly simmers beneath the surface:

She [Emily] could scarcely have imagined, that passions so fierce and so various, as those which Montoni exhibited, could have been concentrated in one individual; yet what more surprised her, was, that, on great occasions, he could bend these passions, wild as they were, to the cause of his interest, and generally could disguise in his countenance their operation on his mind; but she had seen him too often, when he had thought it unnecessary to conceal his nature, to be deceived on such occasions.<sup>42</sup>

### **1. 3 - Postscript: Misfits and Mongrels**

This brief survey of villainy from Medieval times to the end of the eighteenth century has, of course, omitted one figure of great importance: Milton's Satan. The reason for this omission is that although Satan has exerted much influence on the representation of villainy through the ages - Lovelace, Ambrosio and Montoni are just a few of his relatives - Satan himself is not straightforwardly villainous. Such a claim is obviously contentious when one is discussing Milton's representation of the arch-enemy of God and mankind, but it is nonetheless valid. In making it, I have of course Blake, Shelley and William Empson on my side, but my argument is slightly different from theirs. In denying that Satan is a villain according to the terms of this chapter, I am

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<sup>42</sup> Ed. by Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966; repr. 1991), p. 296 (Volume II, Chapter 9).

not necessarily claiming that he is a hero. What is important in the presentation of Satan, in terms of this study, is that the suffering he causes himself is more vividly realised than the suffering he causes Adam, Eve or God. We need think only of the memorable line, 'Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell'.<sup>43</sup> While Satan's suffering does not make him a hero, and while it does not blind readers to his moral corruption, it engages their understanding, imaginative and emotional sympathy - and perhaps even their complicity. Such is the complexity of Milton's portrayal of Satan that readers see him as a victim of evil as much as its perpetrator. This view of Satan's character does not, however, prevent my seeing him also as the prototype of Gothic villains like Ambrosio and Montoni. What makes the latter more straightforwardly villainous, however, is the fact that their wrongdoing is most convincing when it is directed at others; their own suffering is not convincingly rendered when compared with the suffering of their victims.

By contrast, what makes Byron's 'heroes' - the label is Byron's and not mine - unmistakably satanic is that they victimise themselves as much as others; their suffering engages the reader. Like some of the villains I have discussed, they are role-players; unlike my previous subjects, however, they consciously adopt a pose which alienates them from their society. Wearing their scorn like a mask, and often jealously guarding a weighty secret, they have no desire to participate in society's petty play-acting.

Dan Jacobson's essay, 'What's Eating Lara? (or Lord Byron's Guiltiest Secret)' tells us much about both the secrets and the suffering of Byron's heroes. The crux of his argument is that whilst the poems:

are *about* hollowness, [...] bad faith and insincerity. [...] One can go further and say that the central, tormenting secret which the heroes of the poems (and their creator) try to guard so jealously from prying eyes is their own suspicion that they are fakers.<sup>44</sup>

Byronic heroes constantly doubt the veracity of their own emotions; like Dickens's James Steerforth and Eugene Wrayburn (whom they undoubtedly influenced), they waver between what Jacobson

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<sup>43</sup> *Paradise Lost* (1667), ed. by Christopher Ricks, (New York: New American Library, 1968; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989); IV. 75.

<sup>44</sup> *Adult Pleasures: Essays on Writers and Readers* (London: Deutsch, 1988), pp. 31-39 (p. 35).

calls the state of being sincere and the state of wishing to be sincere.<sup>45</sup> Their 'suspicion that they are fakers', that they do not and cannot feel emotion as others do, leads to a self-imposed exile from society on their part. They regard themselves as criminal outcasts from their fellow men, and act as such. Hence we read of Childe Harold:

Strange pangs would flash along Childe Harold's brow,  
 As if the memory of some deadly feud  
 Or disappointed passion lurk'd below:  
 But none this knew, nor haply car'd to know;  
 For his was not that that open, artless soul  
 That feels relief by bidding sorrow flow.<sup>46</sup>

In 'Lara. A Tale' (1814)<sup>47</sup>, likewise, there is much evidence for the hero's suspicion that his emotions are not genuine; again this leads to a self-imposed alienation:

That brow in furrow'd lines had fix'd at last,  
 And spake of passions, but of passion past;  
 The pride, but not the fire, of early days,  
 Coldness of mien, and carelessness of praise;  
 [...]  
 But still he only saw, and did not share  
 The common pleasure or the general care;  
 [...]  
 Around him some mysterious circle thrown  
 Repell'd approach, and showed him still alone. (I. 5. 67-70; I. 7. 101-2; I. 7. 107-8).

Jacobson points out that the consciousness of insincerity can become, paradoxically, a genuine torment:

That it can be a torment is certain: more of a torment than [...] evil, criminality and isolation, which are the ostensible subjects of this particular group of [narrative] poems.<sup>48</sup>

There is a profound understanding expressed in Byron's poetry of the relations between emotional hollowness and criminality. If one has no belief in the genuineness of one's own feelings and those of others, one becomes a role-player with no felt sense of emotional and moral responsibility. But Byron's heroes, paradoxically, are sincere cynics. In reading Byron's poems, we are struck far more

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. A Romaunt* (1812), in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-91), II (1980); I. 8. 65-70.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., III (1981), 214-56.

<sup>48</sup> *Adult Pleasures*, p. 36.

forcefully by the suffering that the heroes cause themselves than the pain that they undoubtedly inflict on others. They are thus victims as much as villains, or heroes. In a sense, Byron's 'heroes' unite the two breeds of villainy we have examined in this chapter: they are role-players, passionately tormented by the fact that their passions may not be genuine. Their self-inflicted anxiety about their own insincerity prevents us from regarding them as out-and-out villains; while their moral slipperiness, to some, disqualifies them from being regarded as heroic.

Byron's 'heroes' ironically underline the difficulty of labelling characters as either villain or hero, victim or victimiser, cynical or sincere, passionate or passionless. Janus-like, they waver between several of the categories provisionally employed in this thesis.

## Chapter 2 - Cloak and Dagger: The Real Villains of Nineteenth-Century Melodrama

The popular idea of the Victorian melodramatic stage villain is that of a mysterious stranger with a moustache, a dark cloak and a sinister aspect. As melodrama as a genre is emotive and tends to simplify character, the melodramatic villain is often assumed to be an uncomplicated caricature of passionate evil. He is seen as curiously primitive when compared with his brothers in the evolving novel form in the nineteenth century, a form which produced such individual yet archetypal villains as Dickens's Fagin, Emily Brontë's Heathcliff and George Eliot's Grandcourt. They seem more curious still when one remembers that Shakespeare and Jonson had already created such complex characters as Iago, Angelo, Volpone, and Faustus centuries earlier.

Yet the emergence of the melodramatic villain is no enigma; excess of sentiment is a prominent feature of Restoration heroic tragedy, eighteenth-century Sentimental comedy and the domestic tragedy of Lillo and Moore. All forms of Restoration and eighteenth-century drama, moreover, take the battle between vice and virtue as their structural core. The strict schematic and moral opposition between vice and virtue is the foundation of nineteenth-century melodrama, a foundation on which the villain depends for his being. Moreover, as the first chapter of this thesis has shown, the ancestry of nineteenth-century villains stretches far beyond the eighteenth century. What I propose to do in this chapter is firstly to summarise the emergence of melodrama as a form on the Victorian stage; and secondly to demonstrate that, although there is a great deal of truth in the popular image of the melodramatic stage villain, there is also far more to this stock figure than the familiar description implies. The idea of '*the* melodramatic villain', for example, is itself a critical myth; there are in fact several different breeds of melodramatic villain. Then again, each individual model is more complex than the received idea would imply. Moreover, the emergence and popularity of melodrama in Victorian Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century are the results of social and cultural conditions of great importance in themselves, and of considerable influence on the unrivalled reception which the novels of Charles Dickens were to enjoy.

## 2. 1 - Melodrama and the Victorian Theatre

The story of melodrama and the Victorian theatre in reality starts in the first half of the eighteenth century, with the Licensing Act of 1737. This legislation meant that theatres were divided into those which were allowed by royal patent to present drama of the spoken word and those which were not. Covent Garden and Drury Lane were the only theatres legally permitted to produce what became known as 'legitimate drama', while every other theatre in London had to confine itself to 'illegitimate drama', which did not involve the spoken word. This somewhat ridiculous situation existed officially for over a century until the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843. The aim of the Licensing Act was to raise and sustain standards in the theatre; legitimate drama was intended only for the élite, who could afford to go to the patent theatres, and for the literate, educated classes who could appreciate the work of the contemporary Shakespeares who were confidently expected to appear.

Predictably, not one playwright emerged talented enough to satisfy critical expectation. The Licensing Act encouraged the existence of two different kinds of theatre with two distinct types of audience. The artificial segregation of 'élite' from 'popular' drama proved extremely detrimental to the health of the British theatre in general. 'Legitimate' dramas were often dry, scholastic and lacking in vitality, while 'illegitimate' dramas usually lacked anything resembling intellectual content. The Romantic poets, of whom so much was hoped, never really fulfilled their supposed potential, and theatrical hacks did not even attempt to find out if they possessed genuine talent. The result of such conditions, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, was that the legitimate drama had deteriorated, and playwrights of the illegitimate drama catered for the tastes of the ill-educated masses. In the words of J. B. van Amerongen: Drury Lane and Covent Garden 'did not live by their privileges, but [...] they died of them'.<sup>1</sup>

Illegitimate drama originally adhered to the terms of the Licensing Act by neglecting the spoken word. A cluster of related forms was thriving by the time Victoria came to the throne:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Actor in Dickens: A Study of the Histrionic and Dramatic Elements in the Novelist's Life and Works* (London: Palmer, 1926), p. 95.

burlesque, extravaganza, burletta, melodrama, revue, pantomime, burlesque-pantomime, operetta, comic opera, and opera were all highly popular and all relied to differing extents on music, spectacle and gesture for their effect. It is generally agreed that the parent of these individual forms is the pantomime.<sup>2</sup> In France, for example, melodrama grew out of Guilbert de Pixérécourt's 'pantomime dialoguée'.<sup>3</sup> The basic pattern of pantomime was constructed around the stock characters Clown, Pantaloon, Harlequin, Columbine, the Dandy Lover, and the Benevolent Agent. The essential 'plot', if it can be so called, was the escape of the lovers, Harlequin and Columbine, from their enemies Pantaloon and the Dandy Lover. The main body of the pantomime, the comic business or harlequinade, in the words of James Robinson Planché:

consisted of a dozen or more cleverly constructed scenes, in which all the tricks and changes [...] were introduced as contrivances to favour the escape of *Harlequin* and *Columbine*, when too closely followed by their enemies.<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible, however, to talk about 'plot' in Victorian pantomime in the same way we would talk about the 'plot' of a tragedy or novel, because, as Eigner argues, 'Transformation was the essence of pantomime'.<sup>5</sup> A wave of the Benevolent Agent's wand could change everything.

Hence, of more influence on the related forms of illegitimate drama than the 'plot' or patterning of pantomime were its thematic concerns and its artistic methods of presentation. William Axton argues, for instance, that the impact of pantomime on its subspecies extended beyond the mere employment of mimed action to music. Pantomime, in Dickens's playgoing days, was:

a curious amalgam of fantasy, realism, topicality, anachronism, grotesquerie, burlesque, spectacle, music, verse, dance, and a serious story. Moreover, it bequeathed most of its mixed elements to the dramatic forms that grew out of it.<sup>6</sup>

All the dramatic forms which evolved from pantomime inherited its:

<sup>2</sup> See Axton, *Circle of Fire*, Eigner, *The Dickens Pantomime*.

<sup>3</sup> See Axton, *Circle of Fire*, p. 24, Eigner, *The Dickens Pantomime*, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Recollections and Reflections* (London: Samson, Low, Marston, 1901), pp. 136-38.

<sup>5</sup> *The Dickens Pantomime*, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Circle of Fire*, p. 20

striking alternations of scene and mood, a pronounced burlesque approach to comedy, parallel plotting, and the same preoccupation with masking and unmasking, especially, in the case of melodrama, with the hidden relationships between disguised characters and with the transparent mask.<sup>7</sup>

The significant oddball amongst all these related forms of nineteenth-century musical drama, however, was burletta. Burletta had all the characteristics of an illegitimate child of the theatre, yet was reared in the plush surroundings of Covent Garden and Drury Lane. Burletta was simply defined by the official examiner of plays (and former comic dramatist), George Colman the Younger, as: '*a drama in rhyme which is entirely musical; - a short comic piece consisting of recitation or singing, wholly accompanied, more or less, by the orchestra*'.<sup>8</sup> Joseph Donohue tells us that 'initially burletta had no taint of the illegitimate about it. The patent theatres had as unquestioned a right to it as they did to ballad opera'. Yet burletta was 'the one verbal form found at the major houses which contained no spoken dialogue',<sup>9</sup> and as such, it presented the playwrights of the minor theatres with what Donohue calls succinctly a 'legal umbrella'.<sup>10</sup> Drama described as 'legitimate' could be performed at the 'illegitimate' theatres without any infringement of the privileges of the patent houses.

Once burletta had provided the bridge between the two species of drama, the patents of the Licensing Act appeared unworkable and absurd. The spoken word rapidly insinuated its way into the supposedly illegitimate drama, and the patent theatres relied increasingly on spectacle and sensation as concern for the box office replaced concern for the welfare of the drama. The sheer stupidity of the legislation was farcically emphasised in 1789, when the actor John Palmer was called a 'rogue and vagrant' for speaking prose in a performance at the Royal Circus and sent to prison.<sup>11</sup> Palmer was the only unlucky victim of the act and by the nineteenth century, the law was either ignored or cleverly subverted. In 1830, George Colman the Younger, himself the examiner of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Random Records*, 2 vols (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), I, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

plays, described the process by which plays 'entirely musical' became indistinguishable from regular drama. Minor theatres:

made their Recitative appear like Prose, by the actor running one line into another, and slurring over the rhyme; - soon after, a harpsichord was touch'd *now and then*, as an accompaniment to the actor; - sometimes once in a minute; - then once in five minutes; - at last - not at all; - till, in the process of time, musical and rhyming dialogue has been abandoned.<sup>12</sup>

The situation was cheekily satirised by Planché in *The Drama's Levée* (16 April 1838, Olym.); its chief characters are Legitimate Drama, dressed in a Roman toga, and Illegitimate Drama, who is half the harlequin of pantomime and half a figure from melodrama. Their parent, Mother Drama, concludes the piece:

Unless between themselves they soon agree,  
These boys, I feel, will be the death of me!  
They so confound me that though I'm their mother,  
I vow I sometimes can't tell one from t'other.<sup>13</sup>

It was in this climate that melodrama was born on the British stage. The word itself, literally meaning 'music-drama' or 'song-drama', derives from Greek but reaches our theatre by way of French. The first recorded use of 'le mélodrame' was in 1772, and Rousseau applied it to his *Pygmalion* (1775)<sup>14</sup> - a piece described by Michael R. Booth as 'a *scène lyrique* in which a character expresses action through speech and dumb show to music'.<sup>15</sup> Maurice Willson Disher, in his study, *Blood and Thunder*, argues that we can trace 'melodrama's fundamental conventions' to the writings of Rousseau:

the division of characters into black-and-white, the faith in Nature's partiality to the good, the identification of virtue with poverty and simplicity, and vice with rank and culture, as well as 'the swamping of reason in emotion, the floods of tears, the complete insensibility to the absurd'.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Random Records*, I, 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> *The Drama's Levée; or, A Peep at the Past*, in *The Extravaganzas of J. R. Planché*, ed. by T. F. Dillon Croker and Stephen Tucker, 5 vols (London: French, 1879), II, 7-29 (p. 13).

<sup>14</sup> *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas*, ed. by Michael R. Booth (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Blood and Thunder: Mid-Victorian Melodrama and its Origins* (London: Muller, 1949), p. 29.

Yet however close Rousseau's ideology was to that of melodrama, he was not a practical man of the theatre like Guilbert de Pixérécourt, who was regarded by contemporaries and by Disher as the 'father of le mélodrame'.<sup>17</sup> Pixérécourt borrowed the word, the dumb show and the music from Rousseau's *Pygmalion* and applied these methods to the peculiarly French melodrama of the Revolution. This type of melodrama thrived in the late 1790s in the theatres of the Boulevard du Temple - which later became known as the Boulevard du Crime - and were essentially what Michael Booth calls 'lurid melodramas of blood',<sup>18</sup> employing violence of situation and pathos of sentiment to achieve sensational effects. Pixérécourt also employed his tried-and-tested melodramatic techniques to recreate hugely successful stage versions of Gothic classics like *Les Mystères d'Udolphe* (1798), his version of Mrs Radcliffe's work. His most famous works, *Victor; ou, l'enfant de la forêt* (1798) and *Coelina; ou, l'enfant du mystère* (1800) were both taken from French novels.

It was a pirated version of the latter play that first brought the term 'Melo-drame' to Britain; Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* (13 November 1802, C.G.) announced itself as 'a New Melo-Drame'.<sup>19</sup> Holcroft's stated aim in the Preface was 'to fix the attention, rouse the passions, and hold the faculties in anxious and impatient suspense'.<sup>20</sup> Holcroft also emphasised the use of 'Speaking, Dancing & Pantomime'.<sup>21</sup> Though Holcroft announced that his melodrama was 'new', and though *A Tale of Mystery* is often regarded as the first British melodrama, Allardyce Nicoll rightly points out that:

the formal 'melodrama' of the nineteenth century merely marks the culmination of a movement which had been rapidly gathering power between 1790 and 1800. [...] Holcroft recognised in Pixérécourt's work, not so much a new type of dramatic art, as a perfection of that which he himself, Morton and a dozen others had been blunderingly aiming at for over a decade. [...] Holcroft knew, from experience, that Pixérécourt would be popular in London.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Hiss the Villain*, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 106 from the playbill at the Henry E. Huntington library.

<sup>20</sup> *A Tale of Mystery* (London: Phillips, 1802), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 108 from the playbill.

<sup>22</sup> *A History of English Drama 1660-1900*, 2nd edn, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University

The fact that *A Tale of Mystery* was first performed and first achieved popularity at Covent Garden shows the total failure of the Licensing Act to immunise the patent theatres against 'low art'. In fact, Gothic melodrama ironically found a welcoming home in the 'legitimate' Covent Garden and Drury Lane;<sup>23</sup> these theatres needed to jump on the melodramatic band-wagon simply to survive. But Pixérécourt's mode of drama fast became the darling of the 'illegitimate' theatres, whose audiences were predominantly working-class. As Michael R. Booth has pointed out in an essay on the subject, 'From the audience point of view, melodrama - and pantomime at Christmas - was the Victorian working-class theatre'.<sup>24</sup> Though an educated man who bestowed the title 'Genius' upon himself,<sup>25</sup> Pixérécourt had masterminded a distinctly working-class genre. He declared openly that he wrote for those who could not read, developing 'a melodramatic artistry aimed entirely at an unlettered populace'.<sup>26</sup> George Ford points out that in 1850, 8 million people, over a quarter of the population, could neither read nor write;<sup>27</sup> by 1889, Charles Booth calculated that 95% of the population of the East End of London and 80% in Central London, were working-class.<sup>28</sup> It is thus no surprise that melodrama found a ready audience in Britain.

Indeed, a nexus of 'illegitimate' theatres already existed to provide entertainment for the working-class before melodrama officially entered the capital. On its entrance, the minor theatres swiftly developed their own particular brand of the drama.<sup>29</sup> The insatiable appetite of Victorian theatre audiences for melodrama is admirably demonstrated by the opinion of a London costermonger, who claimed that *Macbeth* would be better liked, if it was only the witches and the fighting'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Horace Foote in *A London Companion to the Theatres* recorded that *Richard*

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Press, 1952-59), IV (1955), 81.

<sup>23</sup> Michael R. Booth, *Hiss the Villain*, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> 'Melodrama and the Working-Class', in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. by Carol Hanbery McKay, pp. 96-109 (p. 100).

<sup>25</sup> Disher, *Blood and Thunder*, p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> Michael R. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Jenkins, 1965), pp. 44-45.

<sup>27</sup> *Dickens and his Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism Since 1836* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> Booth, 'Melodrama and the Working-Class', p. 98.

<sup>29</sup> See Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Early Nineteenth-Century Drama, 1800-1850*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), I, 217-34, for further details of individual theatres in London and the provinces and their specialities.

*III*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* were the most popular legitimate dramas, for the straightforward reason that they were 'the most melodramatic'.<sup>31</sup> The real power audiences held over managers and their staff is perhaps best illustrated by the infamous 'Old Price' riots, which occurred at Covent Garden in 1809 when John Philip Kemble took over its management. This long and tumultuous battle between the management and indignant spectators resulted in there being no plays for 67 nights. Although, as Allardyce Nicoll points out, riots were not unusual at the theatre,<sup>32</sup> the 'Old Price' riots mark what George Rowell calls 'the triumph of mob rule in the English theatre'.<sup>33</sup> The riots were still more remarkable when we consider that they occurred at a so-called 'patent' theatre.

Under such conditions, polite society lost interest in the theatre until the second half of the century. Authors were faced with a serious moral dilemma - whether they should stoop to popular taste or leave the populace to its own tastelessness. There were those, like Walter Scott, successful enough to feel that the theatre was worthy of nothing but contempt.<sup>34</sup> Some, like Edward Bulwer, attempted feebly to gain the best of two very different worlds; realising that 'Kings are no longer Destinies' on the stage, Bulwer turned 'to the People! Among the people, then, must the tragic author invoke the genius of Modern Tragedy, and learn its springs'.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately for Bulwer, 'Modern Tragedy' never really materialised until the advent of Ibsen, Strindberg and their companions. For those - usually aspiring - playwrights who realised that the people wanted melodrama and yet more melodrama, there was only one choice: to trade integrity for success.

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, and Those That Will Not Work*, 3 vols (London: Morning Chronicle, 1851), I, 15.

<sup>31</sup> *A London Companion to the Theatres; and, A Manual of the British Drama* (London: Marsh and Miller, 1829), p. 111; quoted by Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 128.

<sup>32</sup> *A History of English Drama*, IV, 10.

<sup>33</sup> *The Victorian Theatre, 1792-1914: A Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Scott claimed, 'the magnitude of these theatres has occasioned them to be theatres destined to company so scandalous that persons not very nice in their taste of society, must yet exclaim against the abuse as a national nuisance' and that 'prostitutes and their admirers usually' formed 'the principle part of the audience' - 'An Essay on the Drama', in *Essays on Chivalry, Romance and the Drama*, in *The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, 28 vols (Edinburgh: Cadell, 1834-36), VI (1834), 217-395 (pp. 392-93) (first publ. in the Supplement to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1819)).

<sup>35</sup> *England and the English*, 2 vols (London: Bentley, 1833), II, 150.

Charles Robert Maturin expressed a sentiment typical of many, when he wrote to Elliston: 'It is useless to hope for the success of what is called the regular drama. I must learn to adapt myself to the taste of the public'.<sup>36</sup>

The taste of the public, however, demanded variations on the melodramatic theme. Certain basic modes of the genre developed and, though they often merged into each other, I shall be provisionally employing the categories Gothic, romantic, domestic and crime melodrama.<sup>37</sup>

Michael Booth is in some senses correct when he talks of 'the paradoxical romanticism of Gothic melodrama',<sup>38</sup> but for purposes which shall become clearer later in my argument, I shall be segregating Gothic from romantic melodrama. Gothic melodrama germinated in the pens of British Gothic novelists like Mrs Radcliffe and Matthew 'Monk' Lewis, had an inspirational effect on budding continental playwrights like Pixérécourt, then by something of a boomerang effect, arrives on the British stage under the impetus of Holcroft. The arguments about whether melodrama is truly continental in origin, and whether novels influenced plays or vice versa are to be avoided here like the proverbial chicken-and-egg dilemma. Gothic melodrama is continental in flavour and atmosphere, adopting foreign and eastern settings, often introducing the supernatural, and generally appearing as remote from London life as possible. Gothic melodrama was written to one of two familiar formulae: the castle-dungeon-ghost pattern or the bandit-forest-cottage constellation. Representative of the latter formula is the most famous Gothic melodrama, Isaac Pocock's *The Miller and his Men* (21 October 1813, C.G.), of the former, M. G. Lewis's *The Castle Spectre* (14 December 1797, D.L.). However, Gothic melodrama at its extreme developed into 'monster melodrama',<sup>39</sup> in the phrase of Michael Booth, or 'demonic melodrama',<sup>40</sup> in the words of Disher.

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<sup>36</sup> Undated letter (c. 1821), in George Raymond, *Memoirs of Robert William Elliston*, 2 vols (New York: [n. pub.], 1969), II, 215; quoted by Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 128.

<sup>37</sup> Nautical and military melodrama were, of course, important and distinct types of melodrama, but have no real relevance to this thesis as a whole.

<sup>38</sup> *English Melodrama*, p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>40</sup> *Blood and Thunder*, p. 80.

Michael Booth argues that 'an essential part of the Gothic melodramatists intentions' was 'the attempt to arouse horror and fear'.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Fitzball planned *The Flying Dutchman; or, The Phantom Ship* (1 January 1827, Adel.) as a "piece of diablerie" which should not be by any means behind *Frankenstein* in horrors and blue fire'.<sup>42</sup> Again, Byron said of Monk Lewis:

Even Satan's self with thee might dread to dwell,  
And in thy skull discern a deeper hell.<sup>43</sup>

Gothic melodramatists made the most of the latest developments in stage-craft to achieve their spectacular effects, using trap doors, lighting tricks, and even explosives for novelty and sensation. Moreover, Disher argues that Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* actually changed the meaning of the word 'sensation': 'Henceforth the word "sensation" referred, not to the operation of the senses, but to the violent emotional excitement of the literary fashion known as "the romantic and the terrible"'.<sup>44</sup>

In my definition of romantic melodrama, I want to separate - artificially but usefully - 'the romantic' from 'the terrible'. My class of romantic melodrama shall include only those melodramas which descend in ethos and style, if not in actuality, from the novels of Walter Scott. In other words, I wish to associate 'romance' more closely with adventure than with horror. Scott's tendency to romanticise outlaws and criminals influenced romantic melodramatists and 'Newgate' novelists like Bulwer and Harrison Ainsworth, who in turn influenced the stage. These plays are not Gothic or eastern in setting, and are characterised by the moral ambiguity of the protagonist: he is often a highwayman or pirate by trade, of gentlemanly origin, supposedly virtuous by nature, and fatally attractive to women. The romantic criminal ties the usually straightforward morality of melodrama into all sorts of knots. These knots are anticipated and exploited to their full comic potential in

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<sup>41</sup> *English Melodrama*, p. 83.

<sup>42</sup> *Blood and Thunder*, p. 98.

<sup>43</sup> 'English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers', in *The Works of the Right Honourable Lord Byron* (Philadelphia: Thomas, 1820), pp. 1-86 (p. 16; ll. 275-76).

<sup>44</sup> *Blood and Thunder*, p. 36.

Fielding's earlier novel *Jonathan Wild*, where the 'villainy, alias greatness' (Book 4, Chapter 6, p. 181) of romantic villain/hero Jonathan is the backbone of the comedy.

Melodrama, however, is for the most part a form which takes itself very seriously.

Domestic melodrama especially raises issues of the utmost relevance to its working-class audience, and the passions it roused in its audience are not to be laughed at. Domestic melodrama is at the other end of the melodramatic spectrum to Gothic, dramatising various social and family problems only too familiar to its working-class audience like industrialisation, urbanisation, alcoholism, the disintegration of the family and the problem of the aristocratic seducer who corrupts innocent and lowly maidens. In his essay 'Melodrama and the Working-Class', Michael Booth says of domestic melodrama: 'for the first time in English drama, the working-class appeared in serious plays, not always as comic characters, in a recognisable domestic environment'.<sup>45</sup> Domestic melodrama is strongly anti-aristocratic in feeling, and the ruling-class villain is often seen as the symbol of various social evils. In John Walker's *The Factory Lad* (15 October 1832, Surrey), for example, the Squire is the oppressive tyrant who unfeelingly makes his workers redundant in the name of industrial progress. In Watts Phillips's *Lost in London* (16 March 1867, Adel.), Gilbert Featherstone, the owner of a Yorkshire mine, is guilty firstly of seducing one of the wives of his miners, and secondly, of taking her to the metropolis. As in most domestic melodramas dealing with the same subject, an antithesis is created between corruption in the city and innocence in the country. *Lost in London* has marked affinities with the Emily/Steerforth plot in Dickens's *David Copperfield*; Job Armroyd's search for his much younger, fallen wife, especially, strongly resembles Daniel Peggotty's search for Emily. Indeed, Dickens's novels provided perfect raw material for the adapters aiming to write domestic melodrama. As well as providing raw material for the type of class-conscious melodrama we have been examining, his novels often emphasise the sanctity of the family, another of the themes of domestic melodrama. Michael Booth in fact uses Dickens as surety for the integrity and social relevance of - particularly domestic - melodrama:

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<sup>45</sup> p. 103.

To those who have claimed [...] that [...] melodrama [...] has no relevance to the social realities of life - the charge makes just as much sense levelled at Dickens - one can reply by asking them to examine without prejudice and with some care the melodramas that treat of the life of the drunkard, the factory worker, the poor and the destitute.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most unsettling form of melodrama of all is crime melodrama. Authors of crime melodrama often based their plays on topical news stories and exploited lurid and sensational murders to attract greater audiences. In *Hiss the Villain*, Michael Booth explains how 'the growth of the mass circulation newspaper' in the nineteenth century gave melodramatists 'a treasure trove of plots in police court news and crime reporting'; he adds that 'the more sensational the crime the more versions of it'<sup>47</sup>. The most popular crime melodramas of the day were taken from the story of the killing of Maria Marten by the 'gentleman', William Corder. As Henry Mayhew points out, the public loved 'a good murder' enough to arrive at the theatre before 3 o'clock in the afternoon.<sup>48</sup>

Often associated with crime melodrama are Pierce Egan's *Life in London* (1820-21) and Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-43). Egan and Sue are significant because they brought 'the down-and-outs before the footlights',<sup>49</sup> in the words of Disher. In a century where, it was calculated, one fifteenth of the population lived by crime,<sup>50</sup> Sue and Egan succeeded in bringing to the attention of the public a class of people who were hitherto below the notice of even domestic melodramatists - a class which includes, in Egan's peculiar slang:

the TAG-RAG and BOB-TAIL *squad*, who do not care how the *blunt* comes, or how it goes [...], who must live at any price, and see a '*bit of life*,' [...]

THE BASE,

or *groundwork* of the design, [...] The *Vegetable-Bunches* of *Turn-UPS*; and *Strings of Ingens*.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> 'Melodrama and the Working-Class', p. 107.

<sup>47</sup> p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> *London Labour and the London Poor*, I, 18.

<sup>49</sup> *Blood and Thunder*, p. 121.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Life in London: or, The Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq. and his Elegant Friend Corinthian Tom accompanied by Bob Logic, The Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis* (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1821), p. xiv.

All forms of melodrama, however, have certain structural, stylistic and ethical features in common. Melodrama fulfils, more fully perhaps than any other genre, the infamous definition of fiction supplied by Oscar Wilde's *Miss Prism*: 'The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means'.<sup>52</sup> The structural backbone of melodrama is the battle between good and evil, a battle in which good invariably - though often unconvincingly - triumphs. The world of melodrama is, in the words of Michael R. Booth, 'a world of absolutes where virtue and vice coexist in pure whiteness and pure blackness'; it is 'a world of certainties',<sup>53</sup> in which evil is vanquished far more consistently than it is in reality. The structure of melodrama thus grows from the morality of fairy-land. Indeed, in *English Melodrama*, Booth argues that this underlying pattern of ethical fantasy is melodrama's most important and distinctive characteristic,

giving what appears on the surface to be a wildly chaotic and exceedingly trivial drama a logical moral and philosophical coherence. Essentially, melodrama is a dream world inhabited by dream people and dream justice, offering audiences the fulfilment and satisfaction found only in dreams. An idealization and simplification of reality, it is in fact what its audiences want but cannot get. Melodrama is [...] an allegory of human experience dramatically ordered, [a world] as it should be rather than as it is.<sup>54</sup>

'Idealization and simplification' is the key phrase in Booth's definition. For even when the subject matter of melodrama is topical and political - as it often is - the writer idealises and simplifies. This simplification does not solely apply to the ethical formula of the genre; it extends to all levels. The presentation of character, for instance, rests firmly on what can be neatly described as a 'pigeon-hole' system. The audience cannot fail to understand immediately a character's destined role in the play and his/her ethical substance. The appearance, language and gestures of a character on first entrance place him/her in a stereotypical pigeon-hole in which the character is usually confined for the duration of the play. Melodrama allows little room for character development, and indeed, a character's eventual fate is often evident from his/her opening speech. In the words of Joseph Donohue, 'In melodrama, character is destiny, but the laws of the form require this destiny

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<sup>52</sup> *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 357-419 (p. 376); II.

<sup>53</sup> *English Melodrama*, p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

to be manifest from the beginning';<sup>55</sup> to quote Michael Booth, 'melodrama demands superficial "instant" characters who behave in the same way, think in the same way, and act in the same way'<sup>56</sup> throughout the play.

Melodramatic dialogue, therefore, for the most part, shuns complexity and lyricism. Most commentators, like Joseph Donohue, emphasise that 'the dialogue of melodrama is, if nothing else, totally functional with respect to action';<sup>57</sup> as a consequence of its functional purpose, 'melodramatic dialogue ranges in quality from the wooden to the smoothly competent'.<sup>58</sup> Although Donohue and others are right to emphasise the direct link between dialogue and action in melodrama, dialogue fulfils a second, equally important purpose: the externalisation of emotion. In most melodrama, no passion remains unexpressed, and each passion is expressed unequivocally. The language of emotion is always extreme, and seemingly exaggerated. In Watts Phillips's *Lost in London*, for example, Job Armroyd the injured husband is so hurt that he cannot bear to hear the voice of his fallen wife, pleading: 'Dunna speak! I canna bear it! The soun' o' thy voice kills me'; despite the risk of her husband's death, the fallen wife must express her feelings too, crying 'Job! Job! I love you, I love you'.<sup>59</sup> In W. H. Murrey's *Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack* (2 July 1800, H.2), the villain leaves the audience in no doubt about his feelings. Jack tells his captive Rosa:

you have doubtless heard of Karfa's cruelties; but know, it is *not merely thirst of blood that fires me - a nobler passion nerves my arm - vengeance!* [...] Karfa's word is as his hate - unalterable!<sup>60</sup>

Externalisation is a technique which makes obvious that which may otherwise remain hidden; in melodrama, it aids simplification. Externalisation is, moreover, perhaps most evident in melodrama in the use of physiognomy and gesture. Both physiognomy and gesture dramatise character and moral fibre in visual terms. When talking of the use of physiognomy in melodrama, it

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<sup>55</sup> *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 112.

<sup>56</sup> *English Melodrama*, p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 114.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Hiss the Villain*, pp. 203-69 (p. 263; III. 1).

<sup>60</sup> *Dicks*, [No.] 478 (London: Dicks, [1883]), 7 (II. 3).

would be incorrect to claim that character is always evident from facial appearance, but it is true to say that physiognomy often corresponds with character - often enough, for instance, for exceptions to the physiognomy equals inner nature equation to be pointed out to the audience. In *Black-Eyed Susan; or, All in the Downs* (8 June 1829, Surrey), for example, Raker soliloquises: 'I must look a villain, and that's the truth. Well, there is no help for an ugly countenance; but if my face be ill-favoured, I'll take care to keep my heart of the right colour'.<sup>61</sup> Again, in the same play, Jacob is accused of having 'a most Tyburn-like physiognomy' and reminds Gnatbrain 'of the Newgate Calendar' (p. 165; I. 3), but nonetheless, he finally turns his back on wickedness.

Gesture is arguably a more reliable index of inner nature in melodrama. As Joseph Donohue points out:

The legacy inherited by early nineteenth-century actors, and audiences, from the previous age was, simply stated, that every human emotion has its commonly recognized manifestation in outward behaviour. [...] Since the days of Queen Anne, there was widespread agreement that the 'language' of an actor's performance - movement, gesture, intonation, and so on - imitated a universal language of the passions.<sup>62</sup>

There were even acting manuals available, which provided diagrammatic illustrations of the gestural 'translation' of numerous human emotions.<sup>63</sup> Although a century-long argument had been in progress about whether the actor should learn his trade by adopting the conventions of the stage or by confronting his own emotions, the tendency of acting, especially in melodrama, was 'towards consistent objectification'.<sup>64</sup> Exaggeration and externalisation of both language and gesture, however, was partly necessitated in melodramatic acting by the changes in the structure of the theatre itself. George Rowell observes in *The Victorian Theatre* that the population of London almost trebled in size between 1811 and 1851, and in consequence, theatres often trebled in size. Actors were thus required to 'broaden' their style in order to be seen and heard.<sup>65</sup> Melodramatic

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<sup>61</sup> *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Michael Booth, I, 151-200 (p. 160; I. 2).

<sup>62</sup> *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 68.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Gustave Garcia, *The Actor's Art: A Practical Treatise on Stage Declamation, Public Speaking and Deportment*, 2nd edn (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1888), Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* (London: Phillips, 1807).

<sup>64</sup> Donohue, *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 68.

<sup>65</sup> p. 1.

acting was thus characterised, in the words of Donohue, 'by vocal exaggeration and by "quick and stirring actions" growing out of an expertise in pantomime'.<sup>66</sup> Such conditions meant that, increasingly, actors became more important than playwrights. George Rowell maintains that the playwright became 'handyman to the company. He existed to make their performance possible, rather than they to interpret his work to an audience'.<sup>67</sup> Thus the 'star' system evolved on the early Victorian stage along with the tradition of the 'stock company'. Melodrama was ideal material for both star and stock company, often offering the star roles of extreme passion on which to exert his/her histrionic gusto - and offering the stock company a set of stereotypical roles recurring in every melodrama with slight variation, which enabled each actor of the troupe to adopt a specialised type role.

The basic constellation of melodramatic parts would have been familiar to both star and stock company; the main roles were hero, heroine, comic man and of course villain. Most commentators would agree with Michael Booth that 'the basic hero is really rather stupid'.<sup>68</sup> George Jean Nathan, for example, describes the hero as 'that character who displays spectacularly all the attributes of courage save forethought, intelligence and modesty'.<sup>69</sup> It is supposedly the hero's role to protect the heroine from the villain, and he often succeeds in his role with much luck and very little judgement. The comic man, who is often the villain's other main enemy, is much more adept at coping with villainy than the hero and, according to Michael Booth, 'is frequently entirely responsible for the triumph of virtue'.<sup>70</sup> But the core of melodrama is usually constructed around the relationship between the heroine and the villain. The heroine is at 'the heart of melodrama', in the words of Booth. 'The villain may be the *primum mobile*, but desire for the heroine generally causes him to act and set in motion the long train of melodramatic events'.<sup>71</sup> The heroine is usually however, as Booth suggests, the passive centre of melodrama; although she is an

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<sup>66</sup> *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 70.

<sup>67</sup> *The Victorian Theatre*, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> *English Melodrama*, p. 17.

<sup>69</sup> *Another Book on the Theatre* (New York: Huebsch, 1915), p. 311.

<sup>70</sup> *English Melodrama*, p. 34.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

expert at scolding the villain, her role is essentially to suffer courageously but stupidly. It is undoubtedly the villain who is the 'moving force' of melodrama. Michael Booth speaks for most commentators when he argues that 'in the villain the darkness and violence of melodrama are incarnate. From the point of view of ability the villain should certainly be hero'. The hero is nothing but 'the punching-bag of the villain's brain'.<sup>72</sup>

## 2. 2 - Villains in Nineteenth-Century Melodrama

Surprisingly little detailed research has been conducted into the villains of nineteenth-century melodrama. In fact, Michael R. Booth is one of the few critics who devotes any considered attention to the figure of the villain, and his comments are not comprehensive. In *English Melodrama* he maintains, 'There are two main kinds of villain: the grim, determined, immensely evil; and the shifty, cowardly, half-comic'.<sup>73</sup> He goes on to distinguish between the 'black', genteel villain who is likely to be 'cool and calculating' and the 'white' villain who is less threatening.<sup>74</sup> In *Hiss the Villain*, he provides an outline of the melodramatic villain to which I shall return. He claims that:

What intelligence, design, and thought there is in melodrama is resident in the villain and the comic man. The villain may be plural, and sometimes feminine [...], or there may be a villain and a villainess in the same play. When there are two male villains, one is usually vicious and menacing, the other cowardly, hesitant, and quite willing to desert the forces of good. *The genuine villain is heartless, unprincipled, hateful, and entirely evil.* Some attempt may be made to give him a sympathetic motive for his actions, but sympathy never attaches to his present behaviour. *The evil of melodramatic villains can make Iago look like a mere dabbler.* Continually in pursuit of the property and life of the hero on the one hand and the body of the heroine on the other, absolutely without humane feeling and deaf to the frenzied pleas of the heroine for mercy, justice, honour, etc., the villain meets with a fate such conduct rightly deserves. [...] Occasionally he is allowed reformation or dismissed with contempt, but this is subversive of moral principle and not common. [...] In melodrama as nowhere else the wages of sin is death.<sup>75</sup> (Italics mine)

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.

<sup>75</sup> pp. 10-11.

Extremely fertile though they are as stimuli to critical reflection, Booth's analyses are, I believe, underdeveloped. What I shall be offering here is a far more detailed exploration of the various villains in nineteenth-century melodrama and their significance.

### 2. 2. 1 - Villainy in Gothic Melodrama

In *The Life of the Drama*, Eric Bentley remarks of exaggeration in melodrama:

The exaggerations will be foolish only if they are empty of feeling. Intensity of feeling justifies formal exaggeration in art, just as intensity of feeling creates the 'exaggerated' forms of childhood fantasies and adult dreams. It is as children and dreamers [...], as neurotics and savages too - that we enjoy melodrama.<sup>76</sup>

'Talent in melodramatic writing', he goes on to say, 'is most readily seen in the writer's power to make his human villain seem superhuman, diabolical'.<sup>77</sup> These comments are in a sense more appropriate to Gothic melodrama and its villains than to any other form of the genre. In Gothic melodrama, intensity of feeling is the hallmark of the villain; he is passionately 'sincere' about his negative, inhumane emotions; and the intensity with which his feelings are expressed can create the impression that the villain is not human but 'superhuman, diabolical'. Of course, 'monster melodrama' and 'demonic melodrama', in which the villain is literally superhuman, demonic or monstrous, is an offshoot of Gothic melodrama, but the impetus towards demonic villainy in Gothic melodrama begins with the human; passionate intensity on the part of the human villain can manufacture the illusion of the superhuman.

Uncontrollable passion characterises all Gothic villains, but some make more of an attempt to master their passion than others. Perhaps the most morally monstrous villains are the most simplistic: those malefactors who relentlessly and unashamedly vent their destructive passions on others. Far from trying to disguise their true natures, these villains, Herod-like, revel in hatred and rage. Such an out-and-outer can be found in M. G. Lewis's *The Castle Spectre* in the misanthropic black servant, Hassan. Though we are told by both Hassan and M. G. Lewis - in the afterword to

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<sup>76</sup> (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 204.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

the play - that Hassan's heart 'was once feeling and kind',<sup>78</sup> we have to take their word for this. Throughout the play, soured by his experience as a slave, Hassan consciously indulges his feelings of hatred and resentment. His maltreatment at the hands of the Christian slave-traders is overshadowed in the play by its after-effects. Hassan explains to Saib: 'when the last point of Africa faded from my view, [...] in that bitter moment did I banish humanity from my breast. I [...] vowed aloud endless hatred to mankind' (p. 13; I. 2). He swears his allegiance to the tyrannical Osmond simply because Osmond is possibly more passionate and villainous than he is. Hassan explains:

I hate him! Yet viewing him as an avenging fiend sent hither to torment his fellows, it glads me that he fills his office so well! Oh! 'tis a thought which I would not barter for empires, to know that in this world he makes others suffer, and will suffer himself for their tortures in the next! (p. 65; IV. 1)

And indeed, Osmond does not disappoint the audience's expectations. He is totally at the mercy of his own passions, and others, in turn, are at his mercy. He has secretly imprisoned his older brother for years in order to gain his wealth, accidentally murdered the sister-in-law he loves, and spends the course of the play attempting to force himself upon their daughter, Angela. He recognises that he is trapped in 'passion's mazes' (p. 24; II. 1), but renounces responsibility for his destructive impulses. He soliloquises:

Oh! through what bloody paths do I wander in pursuit of happiness! Yes, I am guilty! [...] Yet lies the fault with me? did my own pleasure plant in my bosom these tempestuous passions? No! they were given me at my birth; they were sucked in with my existence! Nature formed me the slave of wild desires, and Fate, as she frowned upon my cradle, exclaimed, 'I doom this babe to be a villain and a wretch!'. (p. 33; II. 3)

Though M. G. Lewis comments in a footnote - (p. 33) - that this speech by Osmond reflects Osmond's own fatalism and not that of the author, it is common for both Gothic villains and the authors who conceived them to regard passion and villainy as innate and predetermined.

Such fatalism is often used by authors of Gothic melodrama to engage the audience's sympathy for the villain. Surprisingly, considering the fact that Gothic melodrama was the earliest

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<sup>78</sup> 4th edn. (London: Bell, 1798), p. 101.

and perhaps most primitive form of the drama, it was the exception rather than the rule for the villain to be presented in an entirely unsympathetic manner. Even the most larger-than-life villains were commonly endowed with characteristics which made them more complicated and more sympathetically human. Perhaps the most powerful influence on the conception of villainy in Gothic melodrama was the poetry of Lord Byron. Though Victorian melodramas obviously have none of the subtlety of Byron's poetry, many of the villains of Gothic melodrama are the poor relations of Byron's heroes. Though our villains certainly do not question the sincerity of their own passions, they are often presented as, to differing extents, victims of passion beyond their control. They frequently possess a conscience, an aura of grandeur and nobility; some have been wronged and are vengeful, while the gloomy egotism of others wins admiration, but shatters lives. Many are proud, have wasted their talents and are desperately in love.

Paradoxically, it is these human elements in the villains of Gothic melodrama which contribute to the illusion created that they are superhuman. Other characters in Gothic melodrama refer to the villain as if he were otherworldly, or godlike. R. C. Maturin's *Bertram; or, The Castle of St. Aldobrand* (9 May 1816, D.L.)<sup>79</sup> provides one of the best examples. A mysterious stranger, tormented by a secret passion, he is described even in his disguise by Imogine in the following, Byronic terms:

One stood alone, - I marked him where he stood,  
His face was veiled, - faintly a light fell on him;  
But through soiled weeds his muffled form did shew  
A wild and terrible grandeur. (p. 28; II. 3)

Clotilda likewise notices 'his dark eye's stilling energy' and the 'mystery of woe about him/That strongly stirs the fancy' (p. 28; II. 3). Bertram himself talks of his 'heart's steeled pride' (p. 33; II. 3). He interestingly labels himself 'a conscious villain' (p. 51; IV. 1), and indeed, much of his agony in the play results from his consciousness of his corrupted nature. The Prior sums up his satanic character accurately and succinctly:

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<sup>79</sup> (London: Murray, 1816).

High-hearted man, sublime even in thy guilt;  
 Whose passions are thy crimes, whose angel-sin  
 Is pride that rivals the star-bright apostate's. -  
 Wild admiration thrills me to behold  
 An evil strength, so above earthly pitch -  
 Descending angels only could reclaim thee. (p. 41; III. 2)

In true Byronic fashion, Bertram feels responsible for the death of Imogene, the woman he loves; he comments, 'I killed her - but - I loved her' (p. 91; V. 3). Despite his guilt, his pride prevents his repentance; he rather positively exults in his anti-Christian suicide. Laughing disdainfully at the monks, he exclaims, 'Bertram hath but a single foe on earth - /And he is here' (p. 91; V. 3), and then stabs himself. Ultimately, he dies asking for the admiration of his audience, '*With a burst of wild exultation*' (p. 91; V. 3).

In Gothic melodrama, the audience's sympathy and admiration for the villain coexists with censure of his immorality and egotism. In many cases, in fact, the villain's humanising traits - guilt, remorse, conscience, etc. - are only routinely sketched in. In Henry Siddons's *The Sicilian Romance; or, The Apparition of the Cliffs* (28 May 1794, C. G.)<sup>80</sup>, for example, Ferrand, the Marquis of Otranto, pays lip service to the idea of having a conscience -

Now every heart with glowing rapture beats,  
 Save mine alone, where like a vulture, guilt  
 Continual gnawing keeps one on the stretch (p. 13; I. 2)

- but the audience is struck far more forcefully by that 'blackest of monsters - *Ingratitude*' (p. 17; I. 2) and by 'the darling idol of [his] my soul - *Command*' (p. 23; II. 1). Again, in Gothic melodramas like S. J. Arnold's *The Woodman's Hut* (12 April 1814, D.L.), or Pocock's popular piece, *The Miller and his Men*, the emphasis is more on the daring exploits of the bandit-villains than on their emotional constitutions. At the other extreme, moreover, some malefactors in Gothic melodrama are such victims of their own warped passion, that they either break down, like Joanna Baillie's *De Monfort*,<sup>81</sup> or change their ways, like W. T. Moncrieff's Gebir, in *Zoroaster; or, The Spirit of the Star* (19 April 1824, D.L.). In either case, they lose their claim to the title of villain.

<sup>80</sup> (London: Barker, 1794). Siddons' play is an adaptation of Mrs Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791).

<sup>81</sup> The protagonist of *De Monfort* (29 April 1800, D.L.).

However, though there are notable variations in the representations of villainy in Gothic melodrama, all Gothic villains experience a passion so intense that it is beyond their control. This means that Gothic villains are not as skilful at controlling their self-presentation as their brothers in domestic melodrama. They are capable of lying, and of disguising their true natures, but the disguise is usually transparent or temporary. In Pocock's *The Miller and his Men*, for example, the chief villain leads a nominal double-life, as Grindoff the miller by day and Wolf the bandit leader by night. But his disguise is always flimsy and the comic man Karl is not the only character who never entirely believes in Wolf's amateurish performance. Karl muses, 'Lord, how a man may be deceived! I took you for a great rogue; but I now find you are a good Christian enough, though you are a very ill-looking man'.<sup>82</sup> There is a strong sense of what Donohue might call 'the climactic display of the immanent'<sup>83</sup> in Wolf's eventual unmasking, a sense of violent physical and emotional release. The stage directions read:

*[With a violent effort of strength, the old man suddenly turns upon WOLF and tears open his vest, beneath which he appears armed. WOLF, at the same instant, dashes KELMAR from him, who impelled forward is caught by the COUNT. The COUNT draws his sword - WOLF draws pistols in each hand from his side-pockets, and his hat falls off at the same instant - appropriate music]. (p. 69; II. 4)*

As we see here, the Gothic villain's forte is revelation, not deceit. Thus even the most extreme villains in Gothic melodrama are eager to show off their passionate, destructive natures. Gothic villainy is more exultant than any other variety of melodramatic villainy; this exultation can be viewed as either horrifying in its audacity, or strangely naive and innocent in its simplicity. The Gothic villain can thus appear to be what Robert Heilman calls 'the more familiar evil character', who, 'tends to eliminate the judicious intelligence by yielding his being to insatiable impulses that keep him always on a rigid one-way monorail'.<sup>84</sup> He is characterised by monopathic intensity of feeling, which can create an interesting double effect; he strikes the emotional faculty of the

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<sup>82</sup> *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, I, 29-72 (p. 59; II. 1.).

<sup>83</sup> *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 111.

<sup>84</sup> *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), p. 242.

spectator as superhuman in his intensity, a satanic character from the underworld; he can strike the spectator's intellectual faculty as a caricature, as a character from a fictional world.

### 2. 2. 2 - Villainy in Romantic Melodrama?

The typical protagonist of romantic melodrama is admirably described by W. Moncrieff in his prefatory remarks to William Barrymore's *Gilderoy; or, The Bonnie Boy* (25 June 1822, Cob.):

Gilderoy, Rob Roy and Johnnie Armstrong, - are all branches of the same family; romantic in sentiment, generous in feeling, daring in enterprize, and courageous in combat; wild in excess, lawless in conduct, ingenious in plan, and triumphant in execution; protecting poverty though persecuted by power, and abounding in marvellous stratagems and hair-breadth escapes, it is not to be wondered that their exploits have ever been favourites with the million.<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, the stereotypical romantic 'villain', as Moncrieff's description suggests, is almost the opposite of villainous. He is a criminal in the eyes of the law, but often justifies his crimes by what could be called a nineteenth-century Robin Hood ethic. He often sees himself as the scourge of the oppressors of society and feels justified in rejecting the laws of a society which rejects its poor. The romantic criminal is a stranger to his Gothic cousin's evil frenzy in the blood; although he is also passionate about his crimes and his women, his lawless lifestyle can start with an intellectually justified objection to his society.

William Barrymore's *Gilderoy* is an interesting example of a romantic wrongdoer. The highland outlaw establishes in the first scene of the play the reasons for his criminal crusade against Southerners, telling his morally indignant sweetheart of 'the wrongs I had endured, the sufferings I have borne' (p. 13; I. 1). He informs Jessie that when he was younger his cottage was burnt and his father killed by 'fierce foes of Southern climes', exclaiming:

here, here in characters of blood, my injuries are written. [...] Never, while Gilderoy breathes life will he break the vow that bound him to a fate of plunder and revenge. (pp. 13-14; I. 1)

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<sup>85</sup> *Richardson Minor*, 2, (London: Richardson, [1829]), v.

Although Gilderoy is fiercely passionate about his lawlessness, his passion has become an ordering point of principle, a moral stricture, in his life. Gilderoy is as courageous and exultant in his crime as a Gothic villain or a Renaissance revenger, but he differs sharply from them in his intelligence, sensitivity and ingenuity. He has no relish for violence or killing, but when it is necessary he justifies his deeds intellectually and even morally. After killing Sergeant Skewerem, for instance, he muses: 'it almost went against me, but in slaying him, I've saved the life of one whose value would outweigh an hundred such' (p. 22; I. 3).

As the play progresses, Gilderoy's romantic sentiments for his sweetheart gain ascendancy over his violent passion for plunder and revenge; bitterness and resentment against society are replaced by tender love for a member of that society. Eventually Gilderoy is ready to tell Jessy with honesty, 'to call thee mine, for ever I would quit the Riever's life' (p. 39; III. 3). Gilderoy subjugates his desire for revenge to his immediate human impulse to protect the lives of Jessy and her father, even though both abide by society's laws and regard Gilderoy's actions as a 'vile perversion of charity's true maxim' (p. 13; I. 1). Gilderoy himself eventually comes to regard his crimes as unjustifiable, rejecting his former Robin Hood ethic. When he finds Jessy alive, he effuses:

oh, bounteous heaven! to thee I owe inexplicable bliss, deign then to pardon all my errors past, and for this act of gracious mercy, henceforward I become sweet virtue's convert, I'll quit the paths of crime, I'll err and sin no more. (p. 42; II. 5)

Eventually then, Gilderoy accepts society's concept of 'virtue' as adherence to society's laws. He proves himself to be, in the words of John Howie the farmer, 'a strange mixture of a man' (p. 44; II. 5). After spending most of his life defending an ethos of rebellion in which he passionately believes, he performs a perfunctory moral U-turn. To some this might seem fickle, or perhaps hypocritical, but within the context of the play, it is presented as admirable. Although the playwrights of romantic melodrama obviously present the courage, daring and passion of the rebel-villain as qualities to admire, the impulse behind this romantic melodrama is ultimately conservative. In *Blood and Thunder*, Disher places in perspective what I have called the Robin Hood ethos, by speaking of 'the ancient whitewash "robbing the rich to feed the poor" '. Disher

argues that in nineteenth-century melodrama this ethos 'does not come into it because it upheld the robber as virtuous because of his robberies. The Victorian idea was that he was virtuous despite his robberies'.<sup>86</sup>

'The Victorian idea' of the romantic criminal was in actual fact somewhat contradictory. The so-called Newgate controversy, for example, analysed at length in Chapter 5, highlights the confusion the Victorians felt regarding the figure of the daring outlaw. When the crimes of *The Newgate Calendar* (1773) were dramatised on the Victorian stage, they were nearly always romanticised. Most obviously, the criminal's acts were condemned while his nature and sentiments were admired. And more subtly, the criminal who mistakenly yet understandably justified his crimes in terms of the protection he tried to give to the poor, often discovered finally that he was a gentleman by birth (if he wasn't conscious of his status already). Even if the romantic wrongdoer did not discover that he was from a genteel background, he was usually presented as possessing a 'natural' gentility. This gentility was invariably regarded as a sign of innate virtue even in one who had spent most of his life crusading against the genteel classes.

In G. Dibdin Pitt's adaptation of *Rookwood*,<sup>87</sup> for example, the moral and social messages are typically confused. Cocking his pistol at Lady Rookwood, Dick Turpin 'gently' persuades her to be silent.

I am naturally polite, and have been accounted the best-bred man on the road by every female I've had the honour of addressing, and I should be very sorry to sully my well-earned reputation by anything like rudeness. I must use force of the gentlest kind. (p. 5; I. 3)

Again, later in the same play, Turpin announces his opposition to murder:

curse me, I'll lend no help to any underhand work - cold-blooded murder is altogether out of my line, and I wash my hands of it. A shot or two in self-defence is another matter, and rather than see two defenceless women injured I'd fire twenty, and allow myself to be led to the 'Nubbing Cheat' by Jack Ketch. (p. 9; II. 1)

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<sup>86</sup> p. 121.

<sup>87</sup> *Rookwood!* (24 February 1840, S.W.), *Dicks*, [No.] 307 (London: Dicks, [1882?]).

The emphasis here is on Dick's romantic gallantry and chivalry, rather than on his readiness to commit a serious crime. The Victorian idea, to readjust the words of Disher, was that the romantic villain/hero was not so much 'virtuous' as *genteel* despite his robberies. In Buckstone's famous adaptation of *Jack Sheppard* (28 October 1839, Adel.), Jack's appearance is that of a man of taste and fashion:

*JACK stands laughing in the centre - his coat is of brown flowered velvet, laced with silver - a waistcoat of white satin, richly embroidered - smart boots with red heels - a muslin cravat, or steenkirk, edged with pointed lace - a hat smartly cocked and edged with feathers.*<sup>88</sup>

That at least was the initial idea; sooner or later, however, the idea of the genteel status of the romantic criminal became so familiar to playwrights and audiences alike that romantic stage protagonists began to commit crime *in order to become genteel*. From one perspective, virtue is ultimately identified with gentility; from another perspective, gentility is crime. Romantic melodrama typifies the ambiguity expressed in Victorian literature generally towards gentility; it is untypical, however, of the unambiguously anti-aristocratic impulse of most melodrama.

Other illustrations of the ambiguous relations between morality and gentility found in romantic melodrama will readily occur to a reader of the melodramas of the period. In Fitzball's musical adaptation of Edward Bulwer's 'Newgate' novel, *Paul Clifford* (1830),<sup>89</sup> for example, Clifford claims that his 'errors' have been 'of the head, not of the heart' (p. 18; III. 4); he becomes a highwayman in order to become a 'gentleman' (p. 4; I. 1) and eventually - as befits the true son of an unlikely parental combination, and aristocratic father and an aristocratic mother-turned-robber - he reforms and conforms. The villain of Fitzball's *Jonathan Bradford; or, The Murder at the Roadside Inn* (12 June 1833, Surrey) almost parodies the emergence in romantic melodrama of the unprincipled rogue who poses as a gentleman. Macraisy's mother's last advice to him is, 'beg, borrow and stale [i.e. steal], if you wish to be respectable'.<sup>90</sup> Although Macraisy, in the tradition of

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<sup>88</sup> *Acting Nat. Drama*, 7 (London: Chapman and Hall, [1840?]), 37 (III. 1).

<sup>89</sup> *Paul Clifford* (28 October 1835, C.G.), *Dicks*, [No.] 367 (London: Dicks, [1883?]).

<sup>90</sup> *Dicks*, [No.] 370 (London: Dicks, [1883?]), 5 (I. 2).

romantic criminality, begs pardon in an attempt to show his essential virtue, we have moved full circle from Gilderoy.

But whatever the precise relationship between criminality and gentility in romantic melodrama, of most relevance here is the fact that the romantic criminal's desire to appear genteel makes it necessary for him to become a master at manipulating his presentation of self. The romantic criminal is thus significant in melodrama in that he is the first among melodramatic malefactors to develop a consciousness of his abilities as an actor. Indeed, Paul Clifford - in Bulwer's novel and Fitzball's adaptation - originally thought of pursuing a career as an actor, but employed his theatrical talents in the service of crime instead. The romantic criminal is conscious and even proud of his theatrical talent. Moreover, genteel society often accepts the criminal's social performances and disregards his immorality. Fitzball's *Paul Clifford* and *Jonathan Bradford* expose society's complicity in criminality, its elevation of manners over morals.

The part of the romantic criminal offered a great deal to the nineteenth-century actor. On the one hand, we must not forget that the romantic criminal is passionate; on the other hand, he develops a complex theatrical self-consciousness, a self-consciousness which is the child of intellect and reason. He is a curious amalgam, entirely subversive of stereotypical conceptions of villainy and heroism. We could never, for instance, argue that he conforms to Michael Booth's earlier description of 'the genuine villain' as 'heartless, unprincipled, hateful and entirely evil'. However, the genteel manners and theatrical awareness, which are part of the romantic criminal's make-up, are presented in a far more sinister light when they reappear in the villain of domestic melodrama.

### **2. 2. 3 - Villainy in Domestic Melodrama**

In John Walker's *The Factory Lad*, Hatfield defines 'a true English gentleman' as 'he who feels for another'.<sup>91</sup> In *The Factory Lad* and other domestic melodramas, however, the hallmark of gentility is lack of humane feeling for others. Gentility in domestic melodrama is usually synonymous with

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<sup>91</sup> *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, I, 201-33 (p. 219; I. 5).

villainy. Whether the villain of the piece is wicked seducer, oppressive landlord or superficial dandy, he is nearly always presented as devoid of emotion. Of course, definitions of what constituted the gentleman differed greatly in the Victorian period, as the middle-classes grew in number and in wealth. Again, if one wanted to be pedantic, one could argue that it was impossible to be a gentleman villain - for if one was a villain, one could not be a true gentleman. It goes without saying therefore that the villains of domestic melodrama are not gentlemen in the strictest sense of the word. Chapter 7 of this thesis examines the problem of defining gentility in some detail, but for the purposes of this chapter, my selection of villainous gentlemen shall include 'gentlemen' of the old and the new schools, aristocrats, dandies and self-made men.<sup>92</sup>

Whatever the particular breed, most villainous gentlemen are untypical of melodramatic characters generally; they are undemonstrative, and seldom employ exaggerated language or gesture. A class-based dichotomy is regularly created in domestic melodrama; calculating intellect and emotional emptiness are associated with the ruling-class, whilst honesty and passionate intensity are associated with the working-class. Emotional openness is presented here as a positive moral virtue; the villain is all art and no heart. The gentleman villain is the nearest melodrama comes to the villainy of Iago, that ruthless exploiter of a society he sees as a 'theatrum mundi'.

Amongst representatives of the working-class in nineteenth-century melodrama, the common feeling is that the genteel classes imitate or feign humane emotions which they do not possess. Whatever their specific crimes in domestic melodrama, gentlemen are universally distrusted as creatures of the surface. In Watts Phillips's *Lost in London*, for instance, Gilbert Featherstone, seducer and mine owner, is described by his servant Blinker in the following terms:

Featherstone's no 'art - never had. To hear him speak when he's got on his company manners, you'd think butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. These hoily, insinuating chaps, they twists and they winds like corkscrews, till once they've got a *hold* and then - pop! - (*imitates drawing cork*) - who likes may 'av the hempty bottle. (p. 242; II. 3)

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<sup>92</sup> Of course, the situation of the theatre and the time that the play was produced made a difference to the exact species of 'genteel' villainy presented. From the mid-century onwards, when West End theatre began to thrive once more, and the middle and upper-classes returned to the theatre, the villain was more likely to be a successful member of the commercial middle-classes, or a dandified, pleasure-loving gentleman, than an old-style aristocratic oppressor.

Blinker's point obviously is that Featherstone imitates virtues in order to serve his own selfish ends. Although at the end of the play Featherstone - unusually for domestic melodrama - offers to atone for his sins, Job Armroyd's description of him as 'a base, cold-hearted villain' (p. 267; III. 1) dominates the vision of the upper-classes offered in *Lost in London*. In *The Factory Lad*, the cold-heartedness of genteel villain Squire Westwood is focused in his choosing to use steam instead of manpower at his factory. For the twentieth-century reader, the personal tragedies and redundancies caused by industrialisation may be a familiar theme, but Walker's play has all the urgency of spontaneous protest. The most interesting aspect of the play is the fact that for the factory workers the Squire is both villainous in himself, and a hated symbol of industrialisation and the class system. Westwood answers the complaints of his unemployed workers with effusive generalisations about the class system. He wonders that his men dare 'to violate the laws, well framed to subject them to obedience' (pp. 217-18; I. 4); he asks 'is England's proud aristocracy to tremble when brawling fools mouth and question? No, the hangman shall be their answer' (p. 218; I. 4).

Westwood is incapable of recognising that the members of the working-class are human beings with emotional lives - not to mention families. His lack of humane feeling is contrasted throughout the play with the intense passion of the outcast Rushton, who ironically is a villain according to laws that defend aristocratic power. In the eyes of the playwright, Rushton is a hero. He is at first distrusted by the factory workers for his anarchic ways - 'While I have my liberty, or power, or strength, I will live as well as the best of 'em' (p. 210; I. 2) - but the unemployed men soon realise that they too are now social outcasts. Allen tells the landlord to allow Rushton into the pub: 'he may wear as honest a heart as many who wear a better garment; [...] let him in. The outcast should sojourn with the outcast' (p. 221; I. 5). Allen expresses the underlying sentiment of domestic melodrama, that honesty of heart is more important than social respectability.

In the light of social changes like industrialisation and the shifting of the rural population to the cities, it is easy to see why 'gentlemen', in domestic melodrama, became symbols of

heartlessness and corruption. The ruling-classes, in the opinion of the working-class characters in domestic melodrama - and probably working-class audiences too - cared more about machines, the law, money, fine clothes, or hedonistic pleasure, than they did about the lives of other human beings. Montagu Slater, in his introduction to the crime melodrama *Maria Marten*, claims that

in the 1830s and 1840s, whenever an aristocrat - that is an actor in a silk hat and gloves - appeared on the stage of the City of London, Whitechapel Road, or the Pavilion Theatre, Mile End, there was immediately a howl. There was no choice but to make him the villain.<sup>93</sup>

Tom Taylor's adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities* (30 January 1860, Lyc.) thus simplifies the ambiguous class attitudes expressed in Dickens's original novel, by making his play more straightforwardly anti-aristocratic. The character of the Marquis appears on stage far more frequently than he does in the pages of the novel, and the death of Madame Defarge's sister at the hands of the Marquis and his brother - who does not appear in the original novel - is foregrounded in the first scene in the stage version. The Marquis's brother, the Chevalier, is depicted as arguably more inhuman than the Marquis himself. He tells the Marquis that he has just watched a human being dying in great pain, 'as if *it* were a wounded bird, a hare, or rabbit, not as if *it* were a fellow creature'.<sup>94</sup> (Italics mine)

The animal imagery used by the Chevalier and the Marquis to describe the working-class is matched in many melodramas by the imagery of coldness, deadness, or specifically of machinery, applied by workers to their social oppressors. In Walker's *The Factory Lad*, for example, Hatfield says of Squire Westwood, 'You cannot expect iron to have feelings' (p. 209; I. 1). In William Bayle Bernard's *The Farmer's Story* (13 June 1836, Lyc.), Lockwood the farmer resents working so that Mortlake the gentleman landlord will reap the rewards of his labour:

And all this, whilst a rascal with a heart like a harrow - a lump of clayey earth, in which not a thought will vegetate - may roll in riches, ride in his carriage - aye, and splash poor barefoot honesty, who happens to be walking.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *Maria Marten; or, The Murder in the Red Barn*, ed. by Montagu Slater (London: Heinemann, 1971; repr. 1973), p. x. *Maria Marten* cannot be attributed to any single author.

<sup>94</sup> *Lacy*, 45 (London: Lacy, [1850, etc.]), 6 (Prologue, II).

<sup>95</sup> *Dicks*, [No.] 434 (London: Dicks, [1883?]), 4 (I. 1).

In John Thomas Haines's *The Factory Boy; or, The Love Sacrifice* (8 June 1840, Surrey), Eve Allison says of the rich mill owner, Magnus Mule, that 'he would suck the heart's blood of his poorer fellow-worm, then crush its weakness for his sport'.<sup>96</sup> Again, when Blereau, the overlooker of Mule's factory, reveals that Barbara knows 'a secret of life and death', Mule describes his shock in unusual terms: 'A bolt of ice seemed rushing through my blood' (p. 18; III. 2). And Blereau himself, ultimately more unpleasant than his repentant master, muses, 'Bah! what has *feeling* to do with business? - and honour - pshaw! another pretty bye-word' (p. 20; III. 3).

The familiarity of the character of the villainous gentleman is effectively exploited by Douglas Jerrold in *The Rent Day* (25 January 1832, D.L.). Old Crumbs, the steward of Squire Grantley's estate, manipulates the prejudices of the rural population about the aristocracy to his own advantage, by claiming that it is the absent Squire who demands so much money from them when actually, Old Crumbs himself is their oppressor. The country tenants are only too eager to believe in the stereotype of the villainous Squire. Ironically, Grantley is a good man, while Crumbs is exploiting the tenants. The twist in the tale, however, is that Old Crumbs has not been motivated by sheer greed, but by a desire to revenge himself on both Grantley in particular, and the class system in general. He reveals to the Squire: 'I took ten guineas from a rich usurer, and was condemned for Tyburn. Your father took the wife of my bosom, and lived a wealthy, charitable gentleman'.<sup>97</sup>

Though not a melodrama, the light-hearted comedy by Edward Bulwer, *Not So Bad As We Seem; or, Many Sides to a Character* (16 May 1851, Devonshire House)<sup>98</sup> also illuminatingly questions the common association, on the nineteenth-century stage, of gentility with villainy. In *Not So Bad As We Seem* - a play in which Dickens acted many times - the plot revolves around the competition between Lord Wilmot (played by Dickens), an aristocrat and Hardman (played by

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<sup>96</sup> *Dicks*, [No.] 641 (London: Dicks, [1885]), 5 (I. 1).

<sup>97</sup> (London: Chapple, 1832), p. 63; II. 4.

<sup>98</sup> This play was originally performed in front of the Queen and Prince and a large audience for the Guild of Literature and Art. There then followed many performances in Hanover Square rooms, London, and in various parts of the country at intervals during 1851 and 1852. See Forster's *Life*, p. 517.

Forster), a self-made man. The play investigates the prejudices of domestic melodrama; Lord Wilmot is actually a virtuous character who ironically feigns immorality in order to enhance his reputation as a fashionable gentleman; Hardman feigns honesty and simplicity in order to gain social advancement. The latter's belief that 'the world's something more than a stage', that the world is a battle between the 'darlings of fortune' and the 'stern sons of labour'<sup>99</sup> is a succinct summation of the message of domestic melodrama. Those who view the world as 'theatrum mundi' in domestic melodrama are regarded with intense distrust and hatred; those who possess 'deep feelings' are treated with admiration. Those who are actors by instinct are always gentlemen; those who feel by instinct are members of the working-class.

Lord Wilmot is, on the other hand, perhaps more similar - in appearance if not in immorality - to the villains who became popular in the second half of the century, the so-called 'West End villains'. These differed from their predecessors, in so far as they were created not for a resentful working-class audience, but for bourgeois spectators who had returned to the theatre after years of absence. Michael Booth describes the West End villain as 'a polished and urbane villain of faultless dress'; these malefactors were 'well-bred [...] with suave and courtly manners, impeccable taste in clothes and jewellery, and devilish fine black moustaches'.<sup>100</sup> One such villain, according to Booth,<sup>101</sup> is Chateau Renaud, from Alexander Dumas's *The Corsican Brothers* (1845), who, in the words of the adaptation by E. Grangé and Xavier Montépin, 'treats a woman's reputation as the merest trifle in the world'.<sup>102</sup> The fact that what is said about Chateau Renaud is said about most old-style aristocratic seducers, emphasises the difficulty of segregating the old and the new types of villain. Gilbert Featherstone, to give another example of the difficulty, is both a refined man-about-town and a mine owner who oppresses the poor. Perhaps the main point of differentiation between the old and the new is that in the representation of the West End villain,

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<sup>99</sup> (London: Chapman and Hall, 1851), p. 44; II. 1.

<sup>100</sup> *English Melodrama*, pp. 145, 163.

<sup>101</sup> *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, II (1969), 5.

<sup>102</sup> (10 August 1850, Théâtre Historique, Paris), trans. by Charles Webb, *Cumberland*, 47 (London: Music-Publishing, [1860?]), 23 (II. 1).

elegance of dress, manner was emphasised to a far greater extreme than previously. This was in keeping with the tendency of melodrama in the second half of the century towards increased splendour of setting, character and costume.

The West End villain was often what Carlyle would have called a dandy, 'a Man whose trade, office and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes'.<sup>103</sup> In John Brougham's adaptation of *David Copperfield*,<sup>104</sup> Steerforth is represented a stereotypical dandy seducer. Betsey Trotwood tells Steerforth that Mr Dick is no more mad than he is, quipping: 'The whole end of his existence is not confined to the enriching of tailors' (p. 3. I. 1). If Brougham had presented his play for a genteel audience, however, he would have had to increase the importance of Steerforth, and minimise that of Uriah Heep - the centre of Brougham's drama. Dickens himself was intrigued with the dandy-villain, the man of heartless elegance, as Chapter 6 of this thesis demonstrates. Dickens perceived that the continuity between old-style villainous peers and squires was as important as the superficial discontinuity. Where Michael Booth maintains that 'the new, polished, gentlemanly villains' are 'not to be confused with the bad aristocrat of older melodrama, although his close relation',<sup>105</sup> Dickens would maintain that they are very definitely of the same family. What intrigued Dickens was the repression or negation of emotion which accompanied the dandy pose; the dandy's selfishness and passionlessness had much in common with that of the villainous squire, whatever the differences in their fashion taste.

Not all 'villains' in domestic melodrama are passionless, however. In admonitory domestic melodrama - that highly moralistic branch of the domestic which warns its audience against evils of modern living like alcohol or gambling - the central malefactor is always passionate and often a member of the working-class. T. P. Taylor's *The Bottle* (1 October 1847, C.L.) is a classic example of the genre and William Bayle Bernard's *The Farmer's Story* interestingly combines

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<sup>103</sup> *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), ed. by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; rep. 1991), p. 207.

<sup>104</sup> *David Copperfield* (6 January 1851, Brougham's *Lyc.*), *Dicks*, [No.] 374 (London: Dicks, [1883]).

<sup>105</sup> *English Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, II, 5.

protest against the ruling-classes with warning against the evils of alcohol. The protagonists in both melodramas morally deteriorate at a remarkably rapid rate - after taking a drink, in the case of Taylor's Thornley, and winning the lottery, in the case of Bernard's Lockwood. Douglas Jerrold's Vernon, in *Fifteen Years of a Drunkard's Life* (24 November 1828, Cob.) is uncharacteristically passionate about the effects of alcohol on a gentleman. All three protagonists are, however, presented as victims as well as villains - victims of a passion beyond their control. Often, the real villain is presented as alcohol or the gambling table, respectively. In Taylor's *The Bottle*, for example, Thornley's wife Ruth is enough to drive anyone to drink, with her endless tirades against the evils of the bottle. When Thornley offers her a drink on their tenth wedding anniversary, for example, she calls alcohol:

the pest of the humble home; [...] the withering curse of the happy circle; the deadly poison that corrupts and withers, changing the good to bad; it fascinates but to destroy; it charms in its progress, but its end is the grave.<sup>106</sup>

Ironically and satisfyingly, Ruth is killed by her husband before he reaches the grave, but not before she has provided the audience with numerous lessons on the evil of this 'one absorbing passion' (p. 19; I. 5).

But to conclude, temperance melodramas and gambling melodramas are not so fundamentally different from other domestic melodramas. The real problem in admonitory domestic melodrama is the dissolving of the close familial and communal ties which allow people to live happily and healthily together - the fragmentation of a caring society. Domestic melodrama in general is a drama of protest - against industrialisation, urbanisation, social oppression, the seduction of simple girls, the disintegration of the family, and the evils of the city. Above all, it is a protest against dehumanising forces at work in both society and the self.

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<sup>106</sup>Lacy, 17 (London: Lacy, [1850, etc.]), 5-6 (I. 1).

### 2. 2. 4 - Villainy in Crime Melodrama

It is particularly difficult to generalise about villainy in crime melodrama, as crime melodrama itself takes several different forms. Roughly speaking, however, crime melodramas can be divided into three different categories; firstly, there were topical dramas like *Maria Marten* and *Sweeney Todd*<sup>107</sup> which exploited sensational real life murders for melodramatic effect; secondly, there were plays such as Moncrieff's *The Scamps of London; or, The Cross Roads of Life* (13 November 1843, S.W.) and Charles Selby's *London by Night* (12 May 1845, Strand) which, influenced by Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* and Egan's *Life in London*, represented not one dramatic crime, but a quasi-realistic, panoramic view of the underworld in the metropolis. The third type of crime melodrama was unusual; a play like Leopold Lewis's *The Bells* (25 November 1871, Lyc.) could be described as a psychological suspense story, focusing as it does on the tortured conscience of the criminal. In its concentration on inner psychology and its almost sympathetic view of the villain, *The Bells* seems to defy categorisation as melodrama, but its overall moral conclusion and its use of elaborate scenic devices for sensational effect are, in the words of Michael Booth, 'truly melodramatic'.<sup>108</sup>

But to start with topical crime melodrama - if Booth's argument that 'the evil of melodramatic villains can make Iago look like a mere dabbler' is true of any breed of melodramatic villain, it is true of the murderer in crime melodrama. This murderer has none of the intelligence of Iago and in fact is essentially similar to the Gothic villain - passionate and demonstrative - but his brutality and violence is as chilling in its own way as Iago's cold intellectual evil. The murderer in topical crime melodrama differs from the Gothic villain in only one basic characteristic: *the criminal represented to the audience may have actually existed*. Thus, the immediacy of the stage crimes in this type of melodrama arouses more terror and fear in the audience than the fictional feats of Gothic monsters. Even when the melodrama is not actually based on reality, when the

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<sup>107</sup>The date of the Lord Chamberlain's MS for G. Dibdin Pitt's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* is 22 February 1847.

<sup>108</sup>*Hiss the Villain*, p. 29.

villain only typifies a London street criminal, the hatred of the audience for the brute is more intense than for any Frankenstein's monster. When Dickens's murder of Nancy by Sikes, for instance, was performed on the London stage, the actor who played Sikes was often pelted by the audience with glass beer bottles.<sup>109</sup>

The secret of crime melodrama's power is obviously realism. But we must be careful when we use this slippery term. When applied to crime melodrama, realism is a term usually more pertinent to subject matter than style. Crime melodrama, for the most part, relies as heavily as any other form of melodrama on melodramatic techniques of presentation: simplification, idealisation, exaggeration, externalisation, a fantastic ethical structure, are all essential components of its architecture. But both topical crime melodramas and metropolitan crime melodramas differ from previous brands of the genre in their inclusion of the classes Pierce Egan calls 'the Base' of society. Crime melodrama in its most typical forms, then, does not deny that:

The most bare-faced villains, swindlers and thieves, walk about the streets in the daytime, committing their various depredations, with as much confidence as men of honesty. In short, the most vicious and abandoned wretches, who are lost to every friendly tie that binds man to man, are to be found in swarms in the Metropolis; and so depraved are they in principle as to be considered, from their uncalled-for outrages upon the inhabitants, a *waste of wickedness*, operating as a complete terror in spite of the activity of the police. (*Life in London*, Book 1, Chapter 2, p. 23)

The main difference between the topical and the metropolitan crime melodrama is that topical melodrama often focuses on the most terrible crime of one 'vicious and abandoned wretch', whereas in metropolitan melodrama the metropolis is viewed, in the words of Pierce Egan, as a 'complete CYCLOPAEDIA' (*Life in London*, Book 1, Chapter 2, p. 23). This inevitably means that there are certain structural differences between the two types; the topical melodrama is more traditional in structure, concentrating on one main villain and his battle against the forces of virtue; the metropolitan melodrama, although embracing the melodramatic principle that good always triumphs, presents 'a Camera Obscura View of the Metropolis, with the Light and Shade attached to "Seeing Life"' (*Life in London*, Book 1, Chapter 2, p. 18). Indeed, it is in metropolitan crime

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<sup>109</sup>Disher, *Blood and Thunder*, p. 183.

melodrama that realism begins to affect style as well as subject matter. Apart from structure, dialect is the main area affected; in a drama like Charles Selby's *London by Night* (15 August 1868, P'cess),<sup>110</sup> for example, underworld characters speak the language of the street rather than that of the stage. Characters like Shadrack and Hawkhurst use jargonised terms like 'peach' (turn informer) and 'squeeze' (loot). It is interesting that only the villainous characters use street slang, whilst the virtuous, who are usually from the genteel classes, employ formal stage rhetoric. The effect of contrast, to the modern reader, is highly comical. Exchanges like the following, for instance, between Ned and Frank Marchmont, are common:

NED 'Never say die' is the cadger's motto. You shall regale, now. We are going to sit down to supper, and as far as an ingun, pannum, and cheese, and a drop of heavy goes, you are perfectly welcome.  
FRANK My abject necessities compel me to accept and thank you for such generosity. (p. 229; I. 2)

When Henry Marchmont formally denounces the chief villain Hawkhurst in the terms -

Villain! You are at present all-powerful, I defenceless. But heaven, who watches over all its creatures, will never in the end suffer so cowardly, heartless, and infamous a man as yourself to triumph. (p. 239; I. 6)

- his rhetoric is so stilted and wooden that he seems to be in the wrong melodrama.

That curiously hybrid play, Leopold Lewis's *The Bells* again mixes realism with melodrama, but this time in a different combination. *The Bells* is, paradoxically, for the genre we are considering, a dramatisation of the inner moral and psychological conflict of a conscience-ridden murderer. It maintains the traditional presentational methods of melodrama - especially externalisation - and exploits them to great effect. On the first entrance of the play's villain, Mathias, there seems nothing unusual about this melodramatic villain; he appears, whip in hand, accompanied by musical chord and scenic tableau.<sup>111</sup> Before long, however, the same

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<sup>110</sup>*London by Night* is actually a hybrid play whose authorship, date and even title have a confused and uncertain history. The text discussed here is that included by James L. Smith in his collection, *Victorian Melodramas: Seven English, French and American Melodramas* (London: Dent, 1976), pp. 219-49; it originally appeared in *Dicks' Standard Plays* in 1886. See *Victorian Melodramas*, pp. 220-23 for further details of the publishing and stage history of the play.

<sup>111</sup>*Hiss the Villain*, ed. by Booth, pp. 343-82 (p. 355; I. 1).

methods of musical and scenic symbolism are being used to dramatise Mathias's inner life. Mental action replaces, or perhaps becomes, physical action. At the end of the first Act and Scene, for instance, Mathias's imaginative reliving of his killing of the Jew is enacted on stage (pp. 358-59), and at the climax of the play, Mathias's dream, the dream which kills him, becomes the play's reality (pp. 374-81; III). Mathias dreams that his crime will be discovered before a jury when a mesmerist hypnotises him; in his dream, he is found guilty and sentenced to hang; in reality, he is discovered dead the next morning with his hands around his throat (p. 382; III). *The Bells* seems more Dostoevsky than nineteenth-century stage melodrama. It is typical yet untypical of melodrama; inner moral and psychological conflict is faithfully externalised, dramatised in visual terms; but melodrama is a genre of simplification and idealisation which does not usually recognise inner moral conflict.

By this point, however, it should be clear that crime melodrama is less significant for its villains than for the tentative disintegration of pure melodrama which characterises the genre. Although all forms of crime melodrama maintain the basic style and ethos of melodrama, realism is the 'dram of eale' which complicates the usually uncomplicated melodramatic world. In topical crime melodramas, the only claim the plays have to be called realistic is the fact that they represent actual newsworthy crimes, and that the villain represented often existed. But in metropolitan crime melodrama, elements of realism have spread to dialogue and structure; the villain speaks the language of the underworld criminal. By 1871, the year of *The Bells*, a further advance in realism gives us the conception of human beings as divided both morally and psychologically, a concentration on inner division.

### **2. 3 - Conclusion**

Most commentators agree that melodrama is in certain ways escapist; Michael Booth defines the genre as 'a dream world inhabited by dream people and dream justice', 'an allegory of human experience dramatically ordered', and adds that, 'in spite of an incredible amount of violence,

physical disaster, and emotional agony, the world of melodrama is neither tragic nor depressing'.<sup>112</sup>

The majority of critics would support Booth's argument, yet the majority would also endorse his seemingly contradictory analysis of the stereotypical melodramatic villain quoted previously: 'The genuine villain is heartless, unprincipled, hateful and entirely evil. [...] The evil of melodramatic villains can make Iago look like a mere dabbler'. Booth's quotations represent the paradoxical problem of the melodramatic villain. How can the evil of melodramatic villains even compare with the evil of Iago, if melodrama as a genre is 'neither tragic nor depressing'? How can we take seriously a description of melodrama's villain as 'heartless, unprincipled, hateful and entirely evil' if melodrama immunises us from any sort of emotional involvement with its action, or with the suffering of the victims of villainy (to return to the moral and aesthetic yardstick employed in Chapter 1)? Ultimately, can we take either melodrama or its villains seriously, or are they irrelevant to human problems outside the theatre?

Robert B. Heilman is one of the few critics who attempts to answer these questions. In *Tragedy and Melodrama*, he explains why melodrama is 'neither tragic nor depressing' in the following terms:

In the structure of melodrama, man is essentially 'whole'; this keyword implies neither greatness nor moral perfection, but rather an absence of basic inner conflict that, if it is present, must inevitably claim our primary attention. He may indeed be humanly incomplete, but his incompleteness is not the issue. It is in tragedy that man is divided [...] In tragedy the conflict is within man; in melodrama, it is between men, or between men and things.<sup>113</sup>

When watching melodrama, Heilman argues, the audience responds to 'the pleasure of experiencing wholeness':

the sensation of wholeness which is created when one responds with a single impulse or potential which functions as if it were his whole personality [...] man is freed from the anguish of choice.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *English Melodrama*, p. 14.

<sup>113</sup> p. 79.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

The consequence of wholeness in characterisation, for Heilman, is that the reader/spectator cannot 'identify' with the characters presented. He quotes Philip Thody's argument that identification is only possible for the reader, where character appears to be 'free':

The reader cannot do this [identify with character] if he suspects that each move the character makes is predetermined, for he can only lend his powers of anticipation and sympathy to someone he believes to be free.<sup>115</sup>

Succinctly then, Heilman's theory is that melodrama is 'neither tragic nor depressing', to quote Booth, because the characters possess that 'wholeness' which makes them humanly incomplete, and lack that freedom of character which, he maintains, makes imaginative identification possible.

My investigation of melodramatic villainy should have made it clear that melodrama does not always present 'wholeness' of character. The melodramatic villain, for example, may be the self-conscious centre of intelligence in melodrama, and yet also ultimately represent what Heilman calls 'one impulse or strain of reality among the diverse and contradictory elements that constitute human actuality'.<sup>116</sup> This does not mean, however, that the reader is disengaged from such characters. The fictional destiny of some of the most memorable characters in literature - for instance, Tom Jones, Don Quixote, Mr Pickwick, Fagin, etc. - is predetermined. Readers know from the outset that Mr Pickwick is a thoroughly good man whose story will end happily, just as they know that the opposite is true of Fagin. But this foreknowledge does not prevent identification with them. What needs to be emphasised is that different kinds of identification are possible.

The key to the melodramatic perspective is its tendency, in the words of Axton, 'to estrange reality without dispensing with it',<sup>117</sup> melodrama is an *allegory* of human experience, not a realistic representation of it. Axton captures the method of melodrama when he describes the 'outstanding feature of the nineteenth-century theatre' as, 'this very *mélange*, this "balance or reconciliation of the opposite or discordant qualities," of realism and fantasy'.<sup>118</sup> In melodrama, it is so obvious

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 249; quoted from Thody's *Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 42-43.

<sup>116</sup>*Tragedy and Melodrama*, p. 249

<sup>117</sup>*Circle of Fire*, p. 28.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

from the outset that the audience is watching an allegorical or symbolic representation of reality, that the expectations and reactions it rouses are bound to be different from those created by tragedy.

To come back to the idea of suffering explored in Chapter 1 (and touched on in my Introduction): in melodrama, members of the audience do not feel the suffering of the victim of villainy to the extent that they do when watching tragedy. On the other hand, they are not as immunised against suffering as they are when watching comedy or pantomime. The readers or spectators of melodrama experience a unique and paradoxical involvement with its characters and action; they are engaged, yet disengaged, emotionally involved yet detached, imaginatively immersed though cynically conscious of contrivance. Some would argue that readers/spectators respond in the same way to all art, and in a sense this is true; but I would argue that it is *more* true of melodrama. That is, the spectator experiences extreme immersion and extreme detachment, at the same time. The drama is of the utmost relevance and of the utmost irrelevance to the viewer, simultaneously - hence the huge success of modern television soap operas. Audiences want to escape from their troubles and relive them - at a distance.

For an admirable description of the Victorian audience's reaction to melodrama's peculiar *mélange*, I am indebted to William Axton:

Victorian audiences thus were to a peculiar degree involved in that willing suspension of disbelief - as well as of belief - which constitutes theatrical illusion. Indeed, they were simultaneously called upon to lose themselves in imaginative identification with the personages on stage as if they were real, and yet to remark the artifices of actor and designer as well - to be equally engaged by the actor and designer as well - to be equally engaged by the actor and by his impersonation. Victorian audiences seem to have been able to sustain this ambiguous state throughout the four to six hours of an average theater's evening bill and [...] to take pleasure in it.<sup>119</sup>

In melodrama, 'willing suspension of disbelief' - as well as of belief - permeates all levels. Actor, audience and writer are all *conscious* that melodrama is more an allegorical than a realist literary mode, but are nonetheless capable of identification with its characters and themes. Thus, in

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-27.

melodrama, there is 'an incredible amount of violence, physical disaster, and emotional agony', but the world of the drama 'is neither tragic nor depressing'. It is not 'harmless', as Dickens described the world of pantomime,<sup>120</sup> but neither is it dangerously real. The audience is saved from total identification with the drama, by its *semi*-consciousness that this is a fiction in which, to return to Miss Prism, 'The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily'.<sup>121</sup>

The allegorical nature of melodrama both estranges the genre from reality and brings man closer to the primitive urges and first instincts which are a human reality. It presents relevant, topical issues within a schematised, moralistic framework. As an artistic model, it offered much to the writer of vision. Unfortunately, the condition of the Victorian theatre did not allow such a dramatist to emerge. Yet Charles Dickens was able to perceive the potentially serious relevance of melodrama and its villains to the human condition, and the subsequent possibilities of melodrama as an artistic mode. He appreciated that, in the words of Peter Brooks, melodrama can be a means of 'putting us in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things'.<sup>122</sup> In Dickens's novels, the melodramatic vision is at its most challenging. As Peter Brooks argues:

At its most ambitious, the melodramatic mode of conception and representation may appear to be the very process of reaching a fundamental drama of the moral life and finding the terms to express it.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> See Introduction, p. 15 above and *Letters* (Pilgrim), V, 640.

<sup>121</sup> *The Importance of Being Earnest*, p. 376 (II).

<sup>122</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 4.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

### Chapter 3 - Periodical Villainy: Dickens, Crime and the Theatre

On Saturday, 21 June 1856, 'A Criminal Trial', the opening article in *Household Words*, claimed: 'GREAT crimes are commonly produced either out of a cold intensity of selfishness, or out of a hot intensity of passion'.<sup>1</sup> Though the *Household Words* contributors book attributes this article to Henry Morley,<sup>2</sup> Morley's polarised vision of criminality could be Dickens's own. Dickens's thoughts on villainy are in no way simplistically schematic, or even consistent; but throughout his journalistic commentary on contemporary criminals, his writings on the theatre, and of course, his novels, the primitive opposition between passionate and passionless villains anchors Dickens's aesthetic and moral experience of human evil.

Dickens's understanding of this dichotomy appears primarily to have been affected by contemporary influences, in particular his crime reporting and theatre-going. Most critics of Dickens acknowledge, like George Augustus Sala, that 'what he liked to talk about was the latest new piece at the theatres, the latest exciting trial or police case, the latest social craze or social swindle, and especially the latest murder and the newest thing in ghosts';<sup>3</sup> but few seem to appreciate the extent to which Dickens's novelistic villains are shaped by his two great interests, crime and the theatre. As a result of this strange combination of preoccupations, Dickens is highly conscious of the role theatricality has to play in real life villainy, and, by contrast, of the influence of actual criminals on stage villains. This chapter will juxtapose the observations made in Dickens's journals on the villains of the day with the commentary therein on the contemporary stage and its villains. It is my belief that such an investigation will show up as inadequate any interpretation of

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<sup>1</sup> *HW*, 13 (21 June 1856), 529-534 (p. 529).

<sup>2</sup> See *Household Words: A Weekly Journal, 1850-1859, Conducted by Charles Dickens: Table of Contents, List of Contributors and Their Contributions Based on the 'Household Words' Office Book*, compiled by Anne Lohrli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973). Lohrli's book is based on the *HW* office book, which is kept in The Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Princeton University Library.

<sup>3</sup> *Things I Have Seen and People I Have Known*, 2 vols (London: Cassell, 1894), I, 76; quoted by Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 1. It is important to state at the outset that my discussion of Dickens's crime reporting will not be venturing into the realms of criminology and penology so admirably discussed in Collins's work, but will limit itself to the relationship between villainy and theatre.

Dickens's novelistic villains as nothing more than stereotypical replicas of nineteenth-century stage villains.

Moreover, this chapter will examine not only articles known to be written by Dickens, but also anonymous pieces and articles by identified contributors. This approach is not random or self-serving; it is based on detailed research into Dickens's beliefs and practices as an editor. There is unanimous agreement amongst diverse experts on Dickens's journals about the main features of Dickens's editorial theory and practice, especially as regards *Household Words*.<sup>4</sup> In an early article, for example, Gerald Giles Grubb demonstrates with convincing supporting material that 'Dickens considered himself personally responsible to the public for the truth and authenticity of every article that went into his periodicals'.<sup>5</sup> Grubb quotes a letter from Dickens to Mrs Gaskell written at the outset of his career as *Household Words* editor in which he explains why published articles will be anonymous: 'every paper will be published without any signature; and will seem to express the general mind and purpose of the Journal'.<sup>6</sup> The 'general mind and purpose of the journal', of course, meant Dickens's mind and purpose. Critics agree that he essentially saw his journals as a mouthpiece for his views and vision of life. Remarkably, every number had to be submitted to him for inspection, wherever he was in the world.<sup>7</sup> And perhaps more importantly, Dickens edited and over-wrote many articles to such an extent that the proofs looked like 'inky fishing net[s]', to use his own phrase,<sup>8</sup> when he had finished them. Articles in Dickens's journals had to coincide with Dickens's own views<sup>9</sup> and Dickens even encouraged them to be written in his

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<sup>4</sup> See *Charles Dickens as Editor: Being Letters Written by Him to William Henry Wills his Sub-Editor*, selected and ed. by R. C. Lehmann (London: Smith and Elder, 1912), P. A. W. Collins, 'Dickens as Editor: Some Uncollected Fragments', *Dickensian*, 56 (1960), 85-96, Philip Collins, ' "Inky Fishing-Nets": Dickens as Editor', *Dickensian*, 61 (1965), 120-28, Gerald G. Grubb, 'Dickens's Editorial Methods', *Studies In Philology*, 40 (1943), 79-100, Gerald Giles Grubb, 'The Editorial Policies of Charles Dickens', *PMLA*, 58 (1943), 1110-24, Anne Lohrli's Introduction to *HW* above.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Editorial Policies of Charles Dickens', p. 1110.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1111 (31 January 1850); *Letters* (Pilgrim), VI, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald G. Grubb, 'Dickens's Editorial Methods', p. 83. The exception was Dickens' American tour of 1868.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79. The phrase is quoted from a letter to Forster of 22 June 1856. See *Letters* (Nonesuch), II, 782.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Lohrli explains the exception to this rule, that 'when an article accepted for publication did

own style. In effect, Dickens's editorial tyranny meant that, in the words of Anne Lohrli: 'For all that the reader knew to the contrary, almost any article might be Dickens's own writing'.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. 1 - Villainy: Theatre in Life

I have provided this detail on Dickens's practice as editor not only to justify my own critical approach, but also to cast some light on Henry Morley's article, 'A Criminal Trial', which shows a notable similarity to 'The Demeanour of Murderers', an article by Dickens on the same subject in the previous number of *Household Words*.<sup>11</sup> Both articles refer to the recent trial of William Palmer (1824-56), the famous Rugeley poisoner. They are uncannily alike in subject, ideas and style. Not only do they both establish and develop the dichotomy between passionate and passionless villainy; they also express a conviction that 'passionless' villainy is more dangerous than the passionate variety. For instance, in 'A Criminal Trial', the author argues that:

The visible ferocity, the glare of envy or wild hatred in the criminal who slays his enemy - foul and detestable as it must ever be - is not so loathsome as the tranquil good-humour of the wretch utterly lost in self-content, ready without a particle of malice or compunction to pluck neighbours' lives, as fruit, for his material refreshment. Of course he is the most affable of liars. Never recognising any use for language but the gaining of the low ends of his most base life, he is meanly false with as much natural placidity as belongs usually to the exercise of everyday habits. Such a being would seem kind to those about him; and, indeed, feel kindly as men usually do towards their own possessions. He might be inclined most amiably - after his selfish and proprietorial way - towards his wife whilst he was slowly putting her to a slow and painful death by poison. (p. 529)

This cold self-possessed form of villainy reminiscent of the evil of Iago, is described in similar terms, but in considerably more detail, in Dickens's 'The Demeanour of Murderers'. Again, the author's main preoccupation is the fact that the poisoner appears to be more 'affable' than the villain who shows 'visible ferocity', but is in fact far more dangerous. Dickens warns the public not

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express opinions that ran counter to Dickens's, that fact was stated' - Lohrli, *HW*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Lohrli, *HW*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *HW*, 13 (14 June 1856), 505-507. Besides the evidence of the *HW* contributors book, Dickens himself proudly claims authorship of 'The Demeanour of Murderers' in a letter to Miss Coutts dated 1 June 1856: 'In the next No. but one, by the bye, I wish you would read an opening paper of mine, with the rather alarming title of The Demeanour of Murderers. It is a quiet protest against the newspaper descriptions of Mr Palmer § in Court: shewing why they are harmful to the public at large, and why they are, even in themselves, altogether blind and wrong. I think it a rather curious and serviceable essay!' - *Letters* (Nonesuch), II, 776.

to be taken in by either the cool and glamorous façade of the poisoner or the newspaper descriptions of his manner:

THE recent trial of the greatest villain that ever stood in the Old Bailey dock, has produced the usual descriptions inseparable from such occasions. The public has read from day to day of the murderer's complete self-possession, of his constant coolness, of his profound composure, of his perfect equanimity. Some describers have gone so far as to represent him, occasionally rather amused than otherwise by the proceedings; and all the accounts we have seen, concur in more or less suggesting that there is something admirable, and difficult to reconcile with guilt, in the bearing so elaborately set forth. (p. 505)

The 'complete self-possession', 'constant coolness', 'profound composure', and 'perfect equanimity' described in the above quotation are bound to put us in mind of the 'self-content' and 'natural placidity' observed in 'A Criminal Trial'; likewise, the description of a villain 'rather amused' by his own trial reminds us of the 'loathsome [...] tranquil good-humour' noted in the later article, where the poisoner's composure is viewed as the sign of a pathological emotional deficiency. Again, in 'The Demeanour of Murderers', Dickens writes:

Can any one, reflecting on the matter for five minutes, suppose it possible [...] that in the breast of this Poisoner there were surviving, in the day of his trial, any lingering traces of sensibility, or any wrecked fragment of the quality which we call sentiment? [...] An objection to die, and a special objection to be killed, no doubt he had [...]. Beyond this emotion, which any lower animal would have, with an apprehension on it of a similar fate, what was to be expected from such a creature but insensibility? (p. 529)

The insensibility here described is what we would expect from a man who, we had been told in 'A Criminal Trial', feels towards other human beings as he would feel towards his possessions. Our discussion of Iago in Chapter 1 has already made this type of villain frighteningly familiar to us. It is along these lines, for instance, that Bernard Spivack argues that Iago and Shakespeare's other 'artist-criminals' feel towards their victims:

a nearly complete emotional indifference; for their whole action remains essentially an artistic demonstration that is not concerned with practical ends.<sup>12</sup>

In some ways, for Dickens's poisoner, as for Iago, evil does not exist; it is 'for them solely an organic function of artistic pleasure'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, p. 45. See Chapter 1 above.

It may seem inappropriate to compare a literary critic's analysis of villainy in drama with a journalist's analysis of the psychology of a murderer. Dickens, however, would not have considered such distinctions valid, and indeed he himself formulates a fascinating analysis of the poisoner's vision of the world as theatre. It is, in Dickens's view, the poisoner's illusion that the world is a stage which makes him unable to regard other human beings as anything other than possessions, or perhaps as fellow actors who fake but do not experience emotion.

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Dickens's article, 'The Demeanour of Murderers', contains an exploration of an idea crucial to my own argument, the link between the Machiavellian villain's 'cold intensity of selfishness' and his sophisticated theatrical consciousness. For instance, the poisoner's confidence that he will be acquitted, according to Dickens, stems from his consciousness that he is a consummate actor of virtuous roles. He 'kept up his place as a good fellow and a sporting character; he had made a capital friend of the coroner, [...] he was a great public character' (p. 506). The poisoner is not only able to play a part, but he is aware of the convincing effect his acting will have on his audience. The poisoner has, in the words of Dickens, 'an artful fancy (not wholly without foundation) that he disseminates [...] an impression that he is innocent' (p. 506). But the most overt recognition of the link between villainy and acting comes when Dickens compares Palmer with the prominent early nineteenth-century criminal, John Thurtell (1794-1824). Besides coming from very similar genteel backgrounds, Dickens tells us that 'Thurtell's demeanour was exactly that of the Poisoner's', and Thurtell 'makes a speech in the manner of Edmund Kean' (p. 506).

In the periodicals which Dickens edits, the villain who is aware of his own abilities as an actor becomes a recurring subject of enquiry. Moreover, the villain who sees all as *theatrum mundi* is rarely one who sins from 'a hot intensity of passion'; it is almost always 'a cold intensity of selfishness' which motivates his actions. Though *Bentley's Miscellany* contains fictional tales of passionate villainy, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* pay very little attention to the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

hot-headed breed of villain, unless he is a character in a play. Dickens is essentially fascinated in his observations on actual crime by the concept of life imitating the theatre. In Dickens's journals, the absence of crime reports discussing hot-headed villainy suggests that he finds this villainous type less intellectually challenging than the other. It is certainly repeated in both 'A Criminal Trial' and 'The Demeanour of Murderers' that the villain who commits crime 'out of a cold intensity of selfishness' is fundamentally more dangerous than his passionate brother. And the main reason for Dickens's distrust of 'cold' villains is that they disregard the barriers between life and the theatre, often acting virtuous roles convincingly. They use their chameleonic talents to deceive and manipulate. By contrast, as I argued in Chapter 2, passionate villains, from world or stage, can be paradoxically honest about their dishonesty. Their emotions will out, leaving the audience in no doubt about their destructive passions.

'A Few Pleasant French Gentleman'<sup>14</sup> and 'Coolness Amongst Thieves'<sup>15</sup>, two articles from *Household Words*, take a comparatively light-hearted view of the subject, but both are model examples of the villain-as-actor theme which, as we will see, runs through Dickens's periodicals. In 'A Few Pleasant French Gentlemen', the particular gentleman of relevance to this study is Anthelme Collet. Originally the keeper of a wardrobe in a theatre company, he steals the costumes and literally passes his life acting different roles - including that of priest - to cheat others out of their money. In 'Coolness Amongst Thieves', the villains again use theatrical versatility for their own criminal ends. The principal thief, on his arrival at prison appears, 'among a herd - for the most part of dirty vagabonds' as 'a well-dressed young man'. He tells the governor that he is in prison because of:

A lamentable mistake, [...] I am accused of having picked the pocket of an officer of the Guards, at a Bazaar; but I am a *gentleman*, connected with one of the best families in the country. My name is Hawkesbury. My father is a Major in the Army; and he will be thrown into a state of great distress by my apprehension.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> [Eliza Lynn], 'A Few Pleasant French Gentlemen', *HW*, 15 (18 April 1857), 366-69.

<sup>15</sup> [George Laval Chesterton], 'Coolness Amongst Thieves', *HW*, 3 (17 May 1851), 189-90.

<sup>16</sup> p. 189.

Hawkesbury is released when the governor meets the 'father', but reappears two years later as 'Hawkesworth', with his fellow conman (previously his 'father') imitating a well-connected friend.

An unidentified article on the French assassin Lacenaire in *All the Year Round*, takes a far from light-hearted look at the relationship between psychopath and actor.<sup>17</sup> Pierre François Lacenaire (1800-36), we are told, 'ran away to Paris with the illusion that he could gain his livelihood by literature' (p. 418). This aspiring literary man, apparently 'fixed in the popular imagination as the type of the polished, methodical and lettered villain', was nevertheless

a speculator in whose eyes a murder was merely a matter of business - a man who conceived and calculated the chances of an assassination with the coolness of a banker, and who performed the operation with the calmness of a surgeon. (p. 417)

In his 'coolness' and 'calmness', in his manner of regarding murder as 'business', Lacenaire is reminiscent of Dickens's poisoner, who is always cool, even when murdering his wife, whom he feels towards 'as men usually do towards their own possessions'.<sup>18</sup> Lacenaire, however, is even more conscious of his acting talent than Palmer; in fact, he is as interested in the world of the theatre as he is in the theatre of the world. The narrator of 'Lacenaire' overtly explains how, in the mind of this psychopath, the two worlds of reality and stage have become one. Lacenaire 'was passionately fond of dramatic art and artists, and succeeded in making acquaintance with several of them'. He even instructs M. Albert, one of the stars of the Boulevard, on how to act: 'occasionally you exaggerate; but there is no harm in that. On the stage [...] you must hit hard to strike home'.

Lacenaire consciously regards his appearance in court as a theatrical performance:

He regarded the audience complacently. The gravity of his position did not extinguish his literary mania; he caused to be passed about the court a copy of verses. (p. 421)

While his accomplice is being executed, the narrator tells us, Lacenaire is 'exactly like an actor waiting in the wing to go upon the stage' (p. 421).

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<sup>17</sup> 'Lacenaire', *AYR*, 5 (27 July 1861), 417-22. Authors of articles in *AYR* are identified - where possible - in Ella Ann Oppenlander's *Dickens's 'All the Year Round': Descriptive Index and Contributor Book* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Morley, 'A Criminal Trial', p. 529.

Harvey Peter Sucksmith, in his excellent article 'The Melodramatic Villain in *Little Dorrit*', claims that Lacenaire is the real life prototype of Dickens's Rigaud Blandois.<sup>19</sup> Sucksmith's argument is that far from being a carbon copy of a stereotypical melodramatic villain, Rigaud is 'Dickens's recognition of the phenomenon of life attempting to imitate drama'.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Lacenaire was a devotee of the French Romantic theatre, which shaded into melodrama,<sup>21</sup> meant that his performances could seem exaggerated. But Lacenaire was a paradoxical person, just as Rigaud Blandois is a paradoxical character. Both give performances that are simultaneously 'powerfully realistic' and 'artificial'. Their 'falseness is dramatically presented'. Rigaud is ultimately

a triumphant assertion of the true and vital hollowness that lies at the core of the psychopathic criminal's theatrical yet authentic performance.<sup>22</sup>

George Henry Lewes's analysis of the relationship between human emotion and theatrical performance in *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (1875) to some extent illuminates Sucksmith's paradoxical yet accurate descriptions of 'true and vital hollowness' and 'theatrical yet authentic performance'. It is Lewes's major premise that

he [the actor] also loses all power over his art in proportion to his deadness to emotion. If he really feel, he cannot act, but he cannot act unless he feel. [...] Although it is quite possible for an actor to have sensibility without the talent of expression, and therefore to be a tame actor though an impassioned man, it is wholly impossible for him to express what he has never felt, to be an impassioned actor with a cold nature.<sup>23</sup>

Lewes's observations may well be true for stage actors, but if applied to actors in life, and indeed, to my immediate subject, villain-actors, his theory must be questioned. Where Lacenaire, for example, feels little for his fellow human beings, he is passionate about the stage. As his acting is modelled on stage representations rather than real life models, his performances may seem 'artificial' to his audience. But although he, like Rigaud Blandois, announces himself as an actor by nature, he nevertheless possesses the actor's presence and passionate power of expression. The

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<sup>19</sup> *Dickensian*, 71 (1975), 76-83.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Evergreen, LXI (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 93.

audience of such men are simultaneously hypnotised and conscious that they are false. William Axton's description of the state of mind of Victorian theatre audience, discussed in Chapter 2, seems as relevant to the nineteenth-century criminal court as it is to the stage:

Victorian theatre audiences thus were to a peculiar degree involved in that willing suspension of disbelief - as well as belief - which constitutes theatrical illusion. Indeed, they were simultaneously called upon [...] to be equally engaged by the actor and by his impersonation.<sup>24</sup>

The power of Lacenaire and indeed Rigaud, to engage, to create theatrical illusions, would have been a source of anxiety and fascination to Dickens. Even if the performance of a Lacenaire or a Rigaud is in one way 'artificial', it still succeeds in attracting and confusing the audience which - like the poisoner's audience - would expect emotion from a guilty man.

It seems to me that Dickens has a far more sophisticated understanding than Lewes of the relationship between human emotion and theatrical performance. The words 'sincerity', 'authenticity' and 'artificiality' are of relevance here. Lewes never questions the sincerity of extra-theatrical emotion, regarding it as the unpolluted raw material from which the actor shapes his art. Dickens, by contrast is far more Byronic, in the sense that he questions the sincerity and authenticity of all our emotions. Indeed, Byron's poetry suggests the possibility that man is essentially a performer, whose performances represent truth, whose emotions are fundamentally unstable. Of course, Lewes's comments are made specifically about the art of stage acting, whereas Byron's poetry and Dickens's crime reports are written about the importance of performance to life as it is lived outside the theatre. But I would justify my discussion of these two spheres in conjunction by referring to Dickens himself, whose writing constantly assimilates life and stage into an organic whole with only permeable barriers between the two areas of experience.

### **3. 2 - Villainy: Life in Theatre**

In *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, G. H. Lewes analyses the performance of one of Dickens's heroes, Charles Mathews, in the role of melodramatic villain. He highlights certain prejudices

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<sup>24</sup> *Circle of Fire*, pp. 26-27.

which have always surrounded melodrama's most interesting character. The part offered an opportunity, according to Lewes:

unique in his [Mathews's] varied career, [...] of portraying a melodramatic villain. [...] Imagine a Count D'Orsay destitute alike of principle and of feeling, the incarnation of heartless elegance, cool yet agreeable, admirable in all the externals which make men admired in society, and hateful in all the qualities tested by the serious trials of life; such was the Count presented by Charles Mathews. Instead of 'looking the villain,' he looked like the man to whom all drawing-rooms would be flung open. [...] No critic capable of ridding himself of conventional prepossession would see such a bit of action and forget it.<sup>25</sup>

Lewes's praise of Mathews's performance as villain is based on the premise that his interpretation of melodramatic villainy is innovative and original; but it also suggests his surprise at the nature of the role itself. Lewes assumes that villains in melodrama usually 'look the villain', wear their hearts on their sleeves, lack subtlety and announce their villainy openly. Lewes is like Dickens in his manner of regarding the passionless, intellectual species of villain as more threatening, but he is unlike Dickens in regarding the villain who commits crime 'out of a cold intensity of selfishness' as new to the melodramatic stage. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, undemonstrative, calculating villains were as prominent in nineteenth-century melodrama as their passionate brothers. However, because laymen, lay critics and even critics like Lewes, associate melodrama with simplification and externalisation of character, with a raw appeal to our primitive enjoyment of crude emotions like horror and fear, the 'melodramatic villain' is often still associated unquestioningly with the villain governed by a 'hot intensity of passion'.

Dickens, however, relishing detail as well as overall experience at the theatre, is no uncritical observer of melodrama. His journalism, letters and novels make frequent reference to both 'hot' and 'cold' villains from nineteenth-century melodramas. Before I attempt to analyse some of the attitudes which emerge from Dickens's observations on these villains as characters in melodrama, I would like to compile a selection of references in Dickens's writing to stage villains with whom he was familiar. This collection of snippets will be in no way complete, but will present a cross-section of rogues from the nineteenth-century stage of whom, according to documentary

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<sup>25</sup> *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, p. 64.

evidence, Dickens had direct knowledge. The breadth of Dickens's experience of contemporary melodrama cannot be over-emphasised. Dickens's involvement in the theatre at every level has been well documented, perhaps over documented, and it is not my aim to rewrite the story that has been told by others.<sup>26</sup> I shall discuss a scattering of Dickens's more interesting references to villains, or more generally to plays containing villains, which will enrich our understanding of Dickens's perception of stage villainy. It is highly probable that Dickens had read or witnessed most of the melodramas discussed in Chapter 2. However, actual quotations from Dickens's comments on theatrical villainy, like the examination of the context of theatrical allusion, has the advantage of capturing his tone, a factor all-important in my later analysis of Dickens's attitude towards melodrama and its villains.

Dickens's familiarity with stage villains motivated by 'a hot intensity of passion' came early. Pocock's *The Miller and his Men*, for example, and its villain Grindoff, discussed in Chapter 2, is mentioned numerous times in his writings; moreover, according to Forster, it was one of the primary influences on Dickens's love of the theatre.<sup>27</sup> Forster tells us that Dickens first came into contact with this play as a child enthusiastic about amateur theatricals. One of Dickens's schoolfriends claimed that he and his playmates at the Wellington Academy 'mounted small theatres, and got up very gorgeous scenery to illustrate *The Miller and his Men* and *Cherry and Fair Star* [(8 April 1822, C.G.)]'.<sup>28</sup> According to Forster, 'Dickens's after taste for theatricals might have had its origin in these affairs'.<sup>29</sup> Dickens's childhood experience from afar of passionate villainy, however, neither started nor stopped with *The Miller*, *Tales of the Genii*, and *The Arabian Nights* were earlier yet lasting influences on him, as the numerous references to the above

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<sup>26</sup> In addition to texts already mentioned, see for example, Philip Collins, ed., *Charles Dickens: The Public Readings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), George Dolby, *Charles Dickens as I Knew Him: The Story of the Reading Tours in Great Britain and America, 1866-70* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1885), S. J. Adair Fitz-Gerald, *Dickens and the Drama* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1910), Edgar and Eleanor Johnson, eds., *The Dickens Theatrical Reader* (London: Gollancz, 1964)

<sup>27</sup> See Ley's note on Dickens's lifelong interest in *The Miller and his Men*, in Forster's *Life*, ed. by J. W. T. Ley (London: Palmer, 1928), p. 51. Ley holds that the play 'retained a fascination for Dickens all his life'.

<sup>28</sup> Forster's *Life*, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

in his novels prove.<sup>30</sup> Although these eastern stories were not originally written for the theatre, the young Dickens showed his disregard for strict generic boundaries when he based his first play, a tragedy entitled *Misnar, the Sultan of India*, on one of the *Tales of the Genii*.<sup>31</sup> Closer to home, there is evidence that Dickens was introduced early to that Shakespearean hot-head, Macbeth, at the Little Theatre Royal in Rochester. It was also in Rochester that he became familiar with the coldly selfish Richard III. Dickens describes his early experience of the two forms of villainy which were to mould his imaginative understanding of human evil, in the following irreverent terms:

It was within those walls that I had learnt as from a page of English history, how that wicked King [Richard III] slept in war-time on a sofa much too short for him, and how fearfully his conscience troubled his boots. [...] Many wondrous secrets of Nature had I come to the knowledge of in that sanctuary: of which not the least terrific were, that the witches in Macbeth bore an awful resemblance to the Thanes and other proper inhabitants of Scotland; and that the good King Duncan couldn't rest in his grave, but was constantly coming out of it and calling himself somebody else.<sup>32</sup>

The same early comic irreverence towards theatrical tales of passionate villainy is shown in a description of a production of *The Dog of Montargis*,<sup>33</sup> set up by Dickens, his schoolfriends and their mice at the Wellington Academy. The original melodrama tells the story of the rivalry between two soldiers, Aubri and Macaire. Aubri achieves promotion and Macaire is so full of the passion of jealousy that he murders his rival in the forest. The real murderer is only discovered because of the detective skill of the dog of Montargis. Dickens's description of his toy theatre production reads:

The boys trained the mice, much better than the masters trained the boys. We recall one white mouse, who lived in the cover of a Latin dictionary, who ran up ladders, drew Roman chariots, shouldered muskets, turned wheels, and even made a very creditable appearance on the stage as the Dog of Montargis. He might have achieved great things, but for having the misfortune to mistake his way in a triumphal procession to the Capitol, when he fell into a deep inkstand, and was dyed black and drowned.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The following are just a sample of references in Dickens's mature works to *Tales of the Genii* and *The Arabian Nights*: in *MC*, Chapter 5, p. 71, *DC*, Chapter 4, p. 48, *GE*, Volume II, Chapter 19, p. 30, *OMF*, Book 1, Chapter 3, p. 20, 'A Christmas Carol' (1843), in *CB*, pp. 1-76 (Stave 2, p. 28), 'The Haunted Man' (1848), in *CB*, pp. 314-99 (Chapter 1, p. 319).

<sup>31</sup> Forster, *Life*, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> 'Dullborough Town', in *The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958; repr. 1987), pp. 116-26 (pp. 120-21).

<sup>33</sup> William Barrymore's translation of Pixérécourt's original (*The Forest of Bondy; or, The Dog of Montargis*) was first performed on 30 September 1814, C.G.. See Hodgson's *Juvenile Drama* (London: Hodgson, c.1825).

<sup>34</sup> Quoted by Edgar and Eleanor Johnson, *The Dickens Theatrical Reader*, p. 9.

It is interesting that a later reference to *The Dog of Montargis* in *Dombey and Son* retains the comic tone of the earlier description. When Diogenes 'comes straight away at Mr Toots's legs', he 'tumbles over himself in the desperation with which he makes at him, like a very dog of Montargis' (Chapter 41, p. 555).

The fact that Dickens both laughs at *The Dog of Montargis* and refers to it in his mature fiction focuses Dickens's paradoxical and complex attitude to both melodrama and its villains. There is undeniably plenty of material to support Michael Booth's argument that Dickens's 'main purpose in going to see and writing about melodrama was to laugh at it';<sup>35</sup> but there is also primary evidence to the contrary. It is well known, for instance, that Dickens the young adult thought very seriously about entering the theatre as a profession. As 1844 turned into 1845, he reminisced to Forster that his time at Doctors' Commons had made him 'think of the theatre in quite a business-like way':

I went to some theatre every night, with a very few exceptions, for at least three years; really studying the bills first, and going to where there was the best acting: and always to see Mathews whenever he played. I practised immensely (even such things as walking in and out, and sitting down in a chair): often four, five, six hours a day: shut up in my own room, or walking about in the fields. I prescribed to myself, too, a sort of Hamiltonian system for learning parts; and learnt a great number.<sup>36</sup>

There is obviously nothing condescending or flippant about such 'business-like' dedication to theatre. Nor is there anything but seriousness in the well known episode of the twenty year old Dickens's missed audition with Bartley and Charles Kemble.<sup>37</sup> And it is certainly difficult to reconcile a lifelong obsession with the theatre with a desire for a few cheap laughs.

Yet when we examine Dickens's written accounts of the contemporary theatre and its productions, laughter is often the keynote. The passionate villains who were all the rage in Dickens's childhood and adolescence, and who never really deserted the stage, were regularly the main object of Dickens's satiric eye. In 'Greenwich Fair' from *Sketches by Boz*, for instance,

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<sup>35</sup> *English Melodrama*, p. 178.

<sup>36</sup> *Letters* (Pilgrim), IV, 245 (?30-31 December 1844 and 1 January 1845).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 244-45.

Dickens ridicules the villain's elaborate expressions of passion, in the following terms. The villain, or wrongful heir:

comes in to two bars of quick music (technically called 'a hurry'), and goes on in the most shocking manner, throwing the young lady about as if she was nobody, and calling the rightful heir 'Ar-recreant - ar-wretch!' in a very loud voice, which answers the double purpose of displaying his passion, and preventing the sound being deadened by the sawdust. (p. 116)

In both Dickens's articles in *Household Words* entitled 'The Amusements of the People',<sup>38</sup> hot-headed villains are mocked. In the first, the chief villain can be recognised immediately by 'his boots, which, being very high and wide, and apparently made of sticking-plaister, justified the worst theatrical suspicions to his disadvantage' (p. 14). In the later article, though there is a coldly selfish villain, in the shape of Geoffrey Thornley the Younger, it is the fiery Wilbert the Hunchback who provides the most laughs. The hero of the piece, a young sailor called Walter More, rescues Wilbert from rough treatment, but

This misguided person, in return, immediately fell to abusing his preserver in round terms, giving him to understand that he (the preserved) hated 'manerkind, wither two eckerceptions'. (p. 59)

Wilbert can't even die without getting worked up about it. He

died extremely hard, knocking himself violently about, to the very last gasp, and certainly making the most of all the life that was in him. (p. 60)

One of the most absurd manifestations of melodrama's need to equate inner with outer nature in its characterisation of the passionate villain is its habit of dressing him in high boots, which Dickens continuously mocks. In 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre', for instance, the villain is referred to as 'Wickedness in boots':

Virtue never looked so beautiful or Vice so deformed as when we paused, sandwich in hand, to consider what would come of that resolution of Wickedness in boots, to sever Innocence in flowered chintz from Honest Industry in striped stockings.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *HW*, 1 (30 March 1850), 13-15 and *HW*, 1 (13 April 1850), 57-60.

<sup>39</sup> *The Uncommercial Traveller*, pp. 29-39 (p. 34).

In 'Strollers at Dumbledowndeary', the narrator surmises that the stroller wearing boots must be playing the part of the Emperor of Russia, on the grounds that 'these boots seem to oppress their wearer with a deep and awful sense of the responsibility they involve'.<sup>40</sup> Another extreme example of melodrama's correlation of inner moral fibre and external appearance or gesture is ridiculed in 'Mr. Whelks Over the Water', where:

It was to be expected that [the villain] Hongree would turn out badly, for his first entrance was over a bridge. (Attentive students of the British drama must have observed that the villains enter over bridges or down steps, while the virtuous characters come in modestly at the sides).<sup>41</sup>

In 'Mr. Whelks at the Play',<sup>42</sup> the 'synopsis' of *The Watercress Girl* abounds with villains, but the principal rogues are pigeon-holed in a comically crude fashion. John Leicester could be a caricature of Palmer the poisoner:

a man of fair outside but foul within, not old in years, but old in guilt and sin, the unnatural husband, conspiring against the lives of his wife and infant child. (p. 564)

Octavius Croft is

cunning and cruel, though he wears a smile, and serves your friend to rob you all the while, and bad specimen of a rascally lawyer. (p. 564)

The mention of 'rascally' lawyers is typical of Dickens's lifelong hatred of this particular species of hypocrite. Moreover, the entire synopsis of *The Watercress Girl*, especially the characters' names, may be an elaborate joke at the expense of Dickens's own work *Bleak House*, emphasising the influence that melodrama had over his imagination even while he laughed at it. The heroine 'Ada Leicester, young, fair, and pallid, on the morning light, her young life darkened by a villain's blight' is in some ways similar to Dickens's Ada. Miserable Jenny, 'an outcast and a wanderer, who always suffers' is an exact replica of Dickens's brickmaker's wife of that name. Of Bob Nobody, we are told, 'none asked him where he went or whence he came, he walked the world a man without a name (a mystery afterwards explained)', hence reminding us of Nemo. There are numerous other

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<sup>40</sup> [George A. Sala], *HW*, 9 (3 June 1854) 374-80 (p. 378).

<sup>41</sup> [Andrew Halliday], *AYR*, 15 (30 June 1866), 589-92 (p. 590).

<sup>42</sup> [Andrew Halliday], *AYR*, 15 (23 June 1866), 563-66.

'doubly-dyed villains' in *The Watercress Girl* which seem to have no obvious place in our parallel, but in both play and novel the basic plot holds true. The heroines have 'a sad time of it', though virtue is eventually 'triumphant against all the odds' (p. 564).

Dickens's benevolently mocking attitude towards the absurd conventions of melodrama - specifically the melodramatic expression of passion - is not confined to his journalism, but spills over into his novels. Perhaps the best example of Dickens's comic criticism of the extravagant artificiality of the minor stage comes in *Nicholas Nickleby*. The section describing the Crummleses' rehearsal of *The Indian Savage and the Maiden*, for example, is a classic exposure of the illegitimate drama's representation of passion:

the savage, becoming ferocious, made a slide towards the maiden; [...] after a little more ferocity and chasing of the maiden into corners, he began to relent, and stroked his face several times with his right thumb and four fingers, thereby intimating that he was struck with admiration of the maiden's beauty. Acting upon the impulse of this passion, he (the savage) began to hit himself several thumps in the chest, and to exhibit other indications of being desperately in love, which being rather a prosy proceeding, was very likely the cause of the maiden's falling asleep. (Chapter 23, p. 289)

After such a critique of the Crummleses' acting techniques, the reader holds little hope that the protagonist of *The Blood Drinker*, another piece in their repertoire, will be any more convincing. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, so strange are the conventions of acting in Astley's theatre to little Jacob, that he has greater belief in the reality of the horses than in that of characters like 'the tyrant':

Then the play itself! the horses which little Jacob believed from the first to be alive, and the ladies and gentleman of whose reality he could be by no means persuaded, having never seen or heard anything at all like them. (Chapter 39, p. 293)

In *Great Expectations*, Mr Wopsle's rendering of Collins's *Ode on the Passions*, and particularly his representation of Revenge - 'throwing his blood-stain'd sword in thunder down, and taking the War denouncing trumpet with a withering look' - is 'venerated' by the young Pip, but implicitly mocked by the older narrator (Volume I, Chapter 7, p. 45).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Angus Calder, in a note in the Penguin edition of *GE* argues that Wopsle seems to have best displayed his gifts in the following passage from Collins's *Ode on the Passions*:

Revenge impatient rose,  
He threw his bood-stain'd Sword in Thunder down,  
And with a with'ring Look,

It would be distorting the picture, however, to claim that Dickens consistently regards melodrama and its passionate villains as laughably artificial or conventional. Though 'the affecting tragedy of George Barnwell'<sup>44</sup> (*GE*, Volume I, Chapter 15, p. 116) was not a nineteenth-century melodrama, it was regularly performed and transformed on the minor stage. It is often referred to by Dickens throughout his works, not always mockingly. In *Great Expectations*, for example, Wopsle's melodramatic reading of the tale to Pip still has a strangely powerful effect on the hero of Dickens's novel, who identifies with George Barnwell, the villain whose downfall was intense passion:

WITH my head full of George Barnwell, I was at first disposed to believe that I must have had some hand in the attack upon my sister. (Volume I, Chapter 16, p. 119)

In *Circle of Fire*, William Axton argues extremely convincingly that George Barnwell and Pip are linked throughout *Great Expectations* by two passions, the love of a woman and the desire for gentility;<sup>45</sup> the minor play is thus interwoven with the moral fabric of the novel. In *David Copperfield*, when David refers to Jack Maldon as 'a modern Sinbad' (Chapter 16, p. 208), this is a serious criticism of David's habit of seeing life through a screen of romance which obscures his moral perception. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Eugene Wrayburn's ejaculation 'Mysteries of Udolpho!' (Book 2, Chapter 15, p. 405) is a cynical yet accurate comment on Lizzie's situation as a heroine who needs protection from the unimaginable horrors around her. In *Barnaby Rudge*, when Dolly Varden asks her father about Geoffrey Haredale's mysterious affairs, Gabriel advises her to 'Read Blue Beard, and don't be too curious' (Chapter 41, p. 311) - a comment which has a certain aptness, since both tales involve horror and secret murder. In Chapter 5 of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the mere sight of *The Tales of the Genii* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* in a book shop has as great an impact on the mind of Tom Pinch as they had on the mind of the youthful Dickens (p. 71).

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The War-denouncing Trumpet took,  
Were ne'er Prophetic Sounds so full of Woe.

- (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965; repr. 1986), p. 501.

<sup>44</sup> George Lillo, *The London Merchant; or, The History of George Barnwell* (1731), ed. by William H. McBurney, Regents Restoration Drama (London: Arnold, 1965).

<sup>45</sup> pp. 110-36.

This is just a small sample of Dickens's more respectful allusions to tales of passionate villainy which were popular on the early Victorian stage. More illuminating than a catalogue of such references, however, is the fact that Dickens typically uses in his novels the stage conventions he mocks, as my analysis of Dickens's passionate villains in Chapter 4 will demonstrate. Revealing also is Dickens's overt praise for the 'passionate' school of acting which in Dickens's eyes was best represented by his French friends, Frédéric Lemaître and Fechter. According to Disher, after Edmund Kean's interpretation of Shakespeare's villains as exultant fiends, there developed in the nineteenth century an 'evil spirit in acting'.<sup>46</sup> Before Kean, Disher argues, 'human villains are maudlin. They did not become exultant until actors had exhibited Shylock, Iago and Richard III as fiends incarnate'.<sup>47</sup>

Fechter's performance in *Pauline* (July 1848, Théâtre Historique, Paris) by Grangé and de Montépin - which Disher argues 'displayed Fechter as the most admirable of villains in the style of crime exultant'<sup>48</sup> - was typical of the passionate performances in villainous roles which won him respect from many, including Dickens. Lemaître followed in the tradition of Kean, yet differed from him in one important respect; Lemaître was 'an actor who made passion exult, not in tragedy but melodrama'.<sup>49</sup> Dickens's admiration for Lemaître's emphasis on passion in acting is captured in his wonderful description of Lemaître's performance as melodramatic villain in Ducange and Dinaux's *Trente Ans; ou, La Vie D'Un Joueur* (19 June 1827, le Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin). In a letter dated [13-14?] February 1855, Dickens wrote to Forster from Paris:

Incomparably the finest acting I ever saw, I saw last night at the Ambigu. [...] Old Lemaître plays his favourite character, and never did I see anything, in art, so exultedly horrible and awful. [...] He did the finest things, I really believe, that are within the power of acting.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Blood and Thunder*, p. 113.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>50</sup> *Letters* (Pilgrim), VII, 536.

Lemaître's repertoire was dominated by the role of villain.<sup>51</sup> In one performance, Lemaître told the leader of the orchestra that he had no need of the help of music to strike fear into the audience: 'your violins are worse than useless. I need a very simple accompaniment. The tune is [...] myself'.<sup>52</sup> Lemaître was able to transform even the poorest melodramatic role into an affecting representation of human passion. In Dickens's childhood favourite *The Dog of Montargis*, for example, Lemaître took the part of passionate villain, Robert Macaire. With Lemaître as Macaire, Lewes argued, 'A common melodrama without novelty or point became [...] a grandiose symbolical caricature'.<sup>53</sup>

Dickens, like Lemaître, perceived that melodrama as an art form always had the potential to be something more than an exhibition for intellectuals 'to laugh at'. As I concluded in Chapter 2, Dickens recognised that, far from being a laughable departure from reality, melodrama at its most ambitious could comprise what Peter Brooks calls 'the expressionism of the moral imagination'.<sup>54</sup> Dickens never abandoned the nineteenth-century theatre or its dominant melodramatic mode because he was conscious of its potential relevance to the primal emotional and moral life of its audience. He was continuously searching for the realisation of his vision of melodrama as a medium through which a truly mixed audience could enrich its understanding of the moral conflicts at the root of human existence.

Lemaître elevated stage melodrama to the height of Dickens's ideal. Dickens himself, on the stage, tried to do so too. From a personal point of view, his most satisfying experience of the primitive power of melodrama came perhaps when he acted the role of Richard Wardour in Wilkie Collins's *The Frozen Deep* (6 January 1857, Tavistock House). Wardour is a man consumed by passion, love for a woman and bitterness because the object of his desire loves another. He has all the qualities of a melodramatic villain, but the mainspring of the play's drama is derived from Wardour's unpredictable emergence as the hero who spares his rival. To Dickens, the part of

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<sup>51</sup> See Disher, *Blood and Thunder*, pp. 170-71.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>53</sup> *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, p. 72.

<sup>54</sup> *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 55.

Wardour had immense relevance to his own well documented emotional crisis. On 9 January 1857, he wrote to Sir James Emerson Tennent about the experience of acting in *The Frozen Deep*:

As to the play itself; when it is made as good as my care can make it, I derive a strange feeling out of it, like writing a book in company; a satisfaction of a most singular kind, which has no exact parallel in my life; a something that I suppose to belong to a labourer in art alone, and which has to me a conviction of its being actual truth without its pain that I never could adequately state if I were to try never so hard.<sup>55</sup>

Dickens also, of course, gained fulfilment of a different and possibly destructive kind, when he re-enacted the murderous deeds of that most passionate of villains, Bill Sikes, in a reading which Macready found as frightening as 'TWO MACBETHS!'<sup>56</sup>

The phrase 'actual truth without its pain', used by Dickens to capture the experience of acting in *The Frozen Deep*, is an accurate description of what for Dickens is the furthest reach of drama for both actor and audience. It is a pity that an objective reader or audience member cannot react with the same enthusiasm to either *The Frozen Deep* or Dickens's collaboration with Collins, *No Thoroughfare* (26 December 1867, Adel.). It can be fairly said that Dickens as playwright comes no closer to representing 'actual truth' on the stage than the hacks he so unrelentingly mocks. Jules Obenreizer, for instance, the passionate villain of *No Thoroughfare* would have been an easy target for the satire of Dickens the journalist, who could not have resisted conventional revelations like 'you are a fool! I have drugged you! Doubly a fool, for I am the thief and forger'.<sup>57</sup> In *The Village Coquettes* (6 December 1836, St.J.), Mr. Sparkins Flam is Dickens's attempt to embody the dandyish aristocratic seducer, a villain who cares for nothing but his clothes and his own ego. Flam is a possible prototype of John Chester in *Barnaby Rudge*. As befits a stage villain, he is defeated, and his humiliation is carefully directed towards his one sensitive point, his appearance. But the appearance of the vanquished Flam, '*his clothes torn, and face disfigured*',<sup>58</sup> is the closest the play comes to seriousness or subtlety.

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<sup>55</sup> *Letters* (Nonesuch), II, 825.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 704 (15 February 1869).

<sup>57</sup> *Complete Plays and Selected Poems of Charles Dickens* (London: Vision Press, 1970), pp. 171-222 (p. 214; IV. 3). Obenreizer was originally played by Fechter, whose passionate style of acting Dickens admired tremendously.

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The nineteenth-century stage could boast no creation, passionate or passionless, hero or villain, who revealed an understanding of the role-playing and its moral implications comparable to that of Shakespeare's Iago or Hamlet, or indeed to that of the poisoner, William Palmer. It is relevant here to examine a contentious comment made by Dickens on Hamlet. In his Preface to the recent Folio Society publication of *A Christmas Carol*, Frederick B. Adams Jr. notes that after Dickens's early reference to 'Hamlet's Father' in *Carol*, he originally digressed as follows:

Perhaps you think that Hamlet's intellects were strong. I doubt it. If you could have such a son tomorrow, depend upon it, you would find him a poser. He would be a most impracticable fellow to deal with, and however creditable he might be to his family, after his decease, he would prove a special incumbrance in his lifetime, trust me.<sup>59</sup>

Despite its apparent flippancy, this comment is demonstrative of Dickens's sophisticated and thoughtful understanding of the relationship between acting, emotion and morality. Most critics would disagree with Dickens's argument that Hamlet's 'intellects' were 'not strong', but his comments stem from his questioning of the sincerity of Hamlet's projected roles. Hamlet, like the Byronic hero, is self-conscious to such a degree that the genuineness of his performed angst must be questioned. However, whereas Byron's poetry presents a fascinatingly ambiguous picture of the relationship between man's inner and outer selves, Dickens damns Hamlet as an empty emotional vessel when he brands him 'a poser'. To Dickens, Hamlet's understanding of the emotional life of others is impaired by his love affair with his own intellect, and thus in consequence, his intellectual life is paradoxically incomplete. He is 'a poser' because he is trapped in obsessively self-conscious observance of his own role-playing and intellectual gymnastics. To poach and reapply the words of T. S. Eliot, Hamlet's self-consciousness makes him unable to 'experience' thought in a manner that modifies his sensibility; he is unable to 'feel [...] thought as immediately as the odour of a rose'.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-89 (p. 86; II. 5).

<sup>59</sup> Quoted by Michael Slater in his notes to *A Christmas Carol* in *The Christmas Books*, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), I, 257.

<sup>60</sup> 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), in *Selected Prose*, ed. by John Hayward (London: Penguin, 1953), pp. 111-20 (p. 117).

Thus, if Dickens feels that he can 'see through' Shakespeare's Hamlet, it is hardly surprising that he was rarely completely satisfied by the simplistic melodramatic representations of intellectual villainy of his own day. In nineteenth-century melodrama, bad guys of all kinds remain first and foremost bad guys. Perhaps surprisingly, however, Dickens never lost interest in representations of villainy that seemed so remote from his own pondering on the reality of the criminal courts. He often laughed at them, but he laughed at them thoughtfully.

### **3. 3 - Postscript: Dickens, Mr Welks and their Theatre**

On 6 April 1846, on the first anniversary festival of the General Theatrical Fund Association, Dickens made the following claim during his speech:

I tried to recollect, in coming here, whether I had ever been in any theatre in my life from which I had not brought away some pleasant association, however poor the theatre, and [...] out of my varied experience, I could not remember even one from which I had not brought some favourable impression.<sup>61</sup>

Such a comment must be taken seriously, but at first sight seems inconsistent with the thoughtful laughter of Dickens the theatre critic. There is, however, a certain logic behind the apparent inconsistencies of Dickens's commentaries on the theatre; but neither this logic, nor Dickens's loyalty to the theatre, can be appreciated without a background knowledge of the fundamental beliefs coherently expressed through Dickens's journals concerning the role of theatre and entertainment in society.

Dickens's two best known articles on the theatre, both entitled 'The Amusements of the People', in many ways represent Dickens's manifesto on the contemporary theatre. Dickens's approach to the theatre, in these commentaries and in many others, is based on the premise that

It is probable that nothing will ever root out from among the common people an innate love they have for dramatic entertainment in some form or other. It would be a very doubtful benefit to society, we think, if it could be rooted out. (p. 13)

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<sup>61</sup> *The Speeches of Charles Dickens: A Complete Edition*, ed. by K. J. Fielding (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), p. 76.

Dickens argues that the working-class who form the bulk of the audience of the illegitimate theatre are no different from any other class in so far as they possess 'a range of imagination [...] which no amount of steam-engines will satisfy' (p. 13). He reasons further that

The lower we go, the more natural it is that the best-relished provision for this should be found in dramatic entertainments; as at once the most obvious, the least troublesome, and the most real, of all the escapes out of the literal world. (p. 13)

Dickens's belief that 'dramatic entertainments' are the best form of amusement for the lower-classes is in no way condescending; in context, it is part of an essay which argues that drama as an educational medium could be used to improve the taste and understanding of the common man, hence helping to eradicate class barriers. Illiterate and literate alike can appreciate 'the most obvious, the least troublesome, and the most real, of all the escapes out of the literal world'. The terms of the latter description of the appeal of the theatre is of the highest relevance to our understanding of Dickens's attitude to the contemporary theatre; he admits that theatre is 'the most obvious' and 'the least troublesome' of 'escapes', implying that it simplifies reality, yet this does not prevent Dickens from regarding the theatre as 'the most real' of all forms of entertainment. We are reminded of the phrase 'actual truth without its pain' which Dickens applies to the experience of acting in *The Frozen Deep*. The contemporary stage at its most ambitious, for Dickens, presents the 'actual truth' or 'reality' of the human condition, by dramatising the fundamental moral and emotional conflicts common to all social classes.

The keynote of Dickens's criticisms of the theatre, however, is that the contemporary stage was often not ambitious enough. For Dickens, the fact that the theatre was rightly the major form of entertainment for the working-classes does not mean that the dramatic productions presented should be of a low standard. Dickens regards the theatre as a medium of educational and moral improvement for the uneducated, represented throughout his journalism by the character he calls Joe Wheelks. We are first introduced to Mr Wheelks in 'The Amusements of the People':

Joe Wheelks, of the New Cut, Lambeth, is not much of a reader, has no great store of books, no very commodious room to read in, no very decided inclination to read, and no power at all of presenting vividly before his mind's eye what he reads about. But, put Joe in

the gallery of the Victoria Theatre; [...] tell him a story [...] by the help of live men and women dressed up, confiding to him their innermost secrets, in voices audible half a mile off; and Joe will unravel a story through all its entanglements, and sit there as long after midnight as you have anything left to show him. (p. 13)

The question which arises from Dickens's description of Mr Whelks is one that is repeated on his subject's behalf throughout Dickens's crusading writings on the theatre:

The question, then, might not unnaturally arise, [...] whether Mr. Whelks's education is at all susceptible of improvement, through the agency of his theatrical tastes. (p. 13)

The present state of the theatre, as described by Dickens, is very similar to the picture of deterioration and decay painted in Chapter 2. Dickens is eager to point out, however, that the state of the theatre is not solely the fault of the playwrights and actors:

Heavily taxed, wholly unassisted by the State, deserted by the gentry, and quite unrecognised as a means of public instruction, the higher English Drama has declined. Those who would live to please Mr. Whelks, must please Mr. Whelks to live. (p. 13)

The state of the theatre is not, on the other hand, the responsibility of Mr Whelks's poor taste, as this quotation might imply. Dickens's main argument is that unsubsidised theatres 'must please Mr. Whelks to live', and because Mr Whelks appears to be pleased with the 'trash' (p. 13) meted out to him, managers and actors assume that 'trash' is the only way to make money. The main problem, in Dickens's eyes, is that Mr Whelks's intelligence is underestimated both by theatre staff and by Mr Whelks himself. Although Mr Whelks is easily pleased - he is seen 'applauding mightily', for instance, at an 'incongruous heap of nonsense' in the later article entitled, 'The Amusements of the People' (p. 59) - this does not suggest that he would cease to be pleased with a better class of entertainment. The later article in *All the Year Round*, for example, 'Mr. Whelks at the Play', concludes:

Another great mistake is made in acting on the principle that low prices will only afford a low class of entertainment. [...] A really first-rate entertainment will always draw the people, and exhibits the nonsense and unreason of another great mistake, which cants about 'playing down' to Mr. Whelks, instead of recognising the fact that Mr. Whelks should be 'played up' to a higher level than he holds now, and that it may be gradually and hopefully done by good sense, good purpose, and good art. (p. 566)

Dickens points out throughout his writings the confusion which surrounds the role of the theatre in the education of Mr Whelks. Even though the decay of the illegitimate theatre may mean that 'trash' and 'incongruous [...] nonsense' is often presented on its boards, Dickens still feels that it would be of 'doubtful benefit to society' if Mr Whelks's education was undertaken elsewhere. Many of Dickens's contemporaries, for example, felt that Mr Whelks could learn more at a Polytechnic Institution, or indeed at church or through religious lectures, than he could at the theatre. In 'Dullborough Town', Dickens reveals his dislike for the snobbery which he believes to lie behind such attitudes. Finding that no mechanics belong to the Dullborough Mechanics Institution, the narrator takes a closer look at its activities, concluding:

I fancied I detected a shyness in admitting that human nature when at leisure has any desire whatever to be relieved and diverted; and a furtive sliding in of any poor make-weight piece of amusement, shamefacedly and edgewise. (p. 122)

Dickens despises what he calls in the same article, 'the masking of entertainment, and pretending it was something else - as people mask bedsteads [...] and make believe that they are book-cases' (p. 122). It is ironic that Dickens's novels are victims of this kind of intellectual masking of bedsteads; it is even more ironic that Dickens, as a staunch defender of the value of 'entertainment' and 'amusement', would have relished F. R. Leavis's derogatory description of him as a 'great entertainer'. In 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre', Dickens again crusades against those who see entertainment as incompatible with educational improvement. Commenting on the recent practice of holding sermons in theatres on a Sunday, Dickens concludes:

That these Sunday meetings in Theatres are good things, I do not doubt. Nor do I doubt that they will work lower and lower down in the social scale, if those who preside over them will be very careful on two heads: firstly, not to disparage the places in which they speak, or the intelligence of their hearers; secondly, not to set themselves in antagonism to the natural inborn desire of the mass of mankind to recreate themselves and to be amused. (p. 38)

To Dickens, instruction and amusement are more than just compatible; they are inseparable when the 'amusement' is of a high standard. Those who are unable to see this point are mocked in

Andrew Halliday's article aptly entitled, 'Mr. Welks Combining Instruction With Amusement'.

Again, the satirical butt is the Polytechnic Institution, on his way to which Mr Welks

looked subdued and depressed, as if he were labouring under a saddening sense of the grave respect due to amusement when combined with instruction.<sup>62</sup>

On a 'wonderful optical illusion entitled "Shakespeare and his Creations, Hamlet, Launce and Macbeth" ', the narrator comments with marked irony:

In this portion of the entertainment, amusement and instruction were so thoroughly blended that it was difficult to recognise either the one or the other in its own individual character. (p. 612)

The ideal put forward in Dickens's journals, then, is a theatre which 'plays up' to Mr Welks, which educates by appealing to 'the natural inborn desire of the mass of mankind to recreate themselves and be amused'.<sup>63</sup> Dickens's ambitions for the future role of the theatre in society were never fully realised, and even Mr Welks becomes openly dissatisfied with the dramatic wares on offer to him by the end of Dickens's career. Admittedly the Mr Welks of 'Mr. Welks at the Play' has tastes which have been 'refined by contact with fashion' (p. 563), but he remains a servant, and he differs from the Mr Welks of Lambeth only in the fact that he lives in a fashionable area of London. We are told that *The Watercress Girl*, discussed earlier in this chapter, does not impress Mr Welks:

Mr. Welks applauds a little in a patronising manner, but at the same time laughs derisively. His feelings are not stirred in the slightest degree, and he returns to his cold potato with the air of a philosopher who has found everything in life vain and hollow, except that which ministers to the man physical. (p. 565)

Of the conscious crusade conducted on behalf of Mr Welks in Dickens's journalism, we are told:

It is really surprising how much of the complaint which found in Household Words sixteen years ago, still remains to be reiterated in these pages, with regard to the humble class of theatres and their entertainments. (p. 566)

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<sup>62</sup> *AYR*, 15 (7 July 1866), 610-13 (p. 610).

<sup>63</sup> 'Two Views of a Cheap Theatre', p. 38.

Finally, it is perhaps surprising that despite Dickens's disappointment in the failure of popular theatre to improve their standard of entertainment, he never lost faith in the theatre of his day. He regarded its universal appeal and educational potential as essential to the moral and imaginative health of society. It is ironic, finally, that Dickens's idealistic plans for the theatre as a universal instrument of amusement and instruction were realised not on the stage, but in the pages of his own novels.

#### Chapter 4 - Passionate Villains: From Stage to Novel

This chapter will focus primarily on those Dickens villains who have most in common with the original melodramatic villain, the Gothic villain.<sup>1</sup> I am not concerned here with the associations of the adjective 'Gothic' with the supernatural, the exotic and the unfamiliar. More important to my study and of greater influence on Dickens's novelistic villains is the emotional extravagance of this breed of melodramatic villain. They are creatures controlled by emotion rather than reason. The Gothic villain is histrionic in so far as he externalises all that he feels; inner life must always be expressed, transmuted into easily intelligible language and symbol. To reappropriate the terms of Robert Heilman, the Gothic villain is the archetypal 'monopathic individual',<sup>2</sup> that is, he is characterised by 'monopathy' or 'singleness of feeling that gives one the sense of wholeness'.<sup>3</sup> This singleness of feeling and wholeness of character represented by the Gothic villain is typical of melodrama's overriding trend towards simplification of moral and emotional complexity. But the monopathy and wholeness of these villains also captures a human phenomenon which exists off the stage - that of passionate, impulsive evil.

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The influence of Gothic melodrama on the interpolations in *The Pickwick Papers* is common knowledge. Yet some critics see only 'Gothic' and 'melodramatic' qualities in the tales,<sup>4</sup> whilst others find such elements less striking than the influence of the dark side of Dickens's sub-conscious mind. For example, 'The Stroller's Tale', 'The Convict's Return', 'A Madman's Manuscript', 'The Old Man's Tale About the Queer Client', and 'The Story of the Goblins who Stole a Sexton' all contain in some form elements of 'the macabre and terrible'<sup>5</sup> which Humphry House and Edmund Wilson have isolated in the writing and personality of Dickens. In an effort to

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 2 above. The passionate villains of admonitory domestic melodrama are also of obvious relevance to this chapter, particularly to the presentation of Bill Sikes.

<sup>2</sup> *Tragedy and Melodrama*, p. 243; cf. Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> See William Axton, *Circle of Fire*, p. 75, John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, p. 24, Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> House, 'The Macabre Dickens', p. 183.

emphasise the morbid side of Dickens's psychology, however, Wilson in particular plays down the fact that 'the macabre and terrible' were staple ingredients of popular Gothic fiction. He claims that:

even allowing here also for an element of the conventional and popular, of the still-thriving school of Gothic horror, we are surprised to find rising to the surface already, the themes which were to dominate his later work.<sup>6</sup>

The influence of literary convention, the play of typicality and cliché is thus minimised.

In all the aforementioned tales, the protagonists can be broadly classified as villains. A detailed study of the stylistic methods employed in their presentation will reveal the extent to which Dickens borrowed from Gothic models. Moreover, the same analysis will reveal Dickens's realisation that 'morbid and near-morbid psychology'<sup>7</sup> can be revealed through the unlikely presentational methods of the popular theatre. These villains are surprisingly early examples of the symbiosis of the 'dark' and the 'theatrical' elements apparent throughout Dickens's writing.

The main similarity between the villains of Gothic melodrama and those of the interpolated tales is that all are motivated by 'a hot intensity of passion'. Moreover, there is a direct correlation between felt passion and passionate language and conduct; the latter is rendered through the conventional gestures of the playhouse. In 'The Convict's Return', for instance, when John Edmunds revisits his former unhappy family home and finds his mother dead and a happy family in her place, his hatred for his villainous father is conveyed through the fact that 'his fist was clenched, and his teeth were set, in fierce and deadly passion' (Chapter 6, p. 91). 'A Madman's Manuscript', the most Gothic of the tales in its repeated mention of supernatural forces, is also closest to Gothic melodrama in the intensity of passion of the central figure, and in the behaviouristic methods used to express this passion. Like the exultant villains of Gothic melodrama, the madman feels he is almost superhuman in his invincibility and shows no remorse or pity for his evil nature. For much of the tale, however, he tries to hide his villainy and madness, but even the repression of passion is paradoxically conveyed through the bold gestures of the melodramatic stage:

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<sup>6</sup> 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', p.10.

<sup>7</sup> House, 'The Macabre Dickens', p. 187.

I could have rushed among them, and torn them to pieces limb from limb, and howled in transport. But I ground my teeth, and struck my feet upon the floor, and drove my sharp nails into my hands. (Chapter 11, pp. 163-64)

The madman himself is conscious that his speech, like the emotive language of melodrama, is 'heightened'. He is also aware that inner passion is one of the main impulses propelling him to externalise the violence of his character:

I screamed rather than talked, for I felt tumultuous passions eddying through my veins, and the old spirits whispering and taunting me to tear his heart out. (Chapter 11, p. 165)

The postscript to the tale reveals that the madman's villainy is accompanied by precisely the same imbalance between passion and intellect characteristic of the Gothic villain on the stage. The difference between the madman and his theatrical brother, is that the madman has ruined his own intelligence, and is not innately stupid. It was a wonder to those

acquainted with the vices of his early career, that his passions, when no longer controuled by reason, did not lead him to the commission of still more frightful deeds. (Chapter 11, pp. 166-67)

Finally, 'The Old Man's Tale about the Queer Client' could be described as a revenge melodrama. The protagonist Heyling externalises his vengeful passions in a manner equally as impressive in its histrionicism as Mr Wopsle's representation of Revenge from Collins's *Ode on the Passions* (*GE*, Volume I, Chapter 7, p. 74), which is implicitly mocked by the mature Pip.

Mature critics have reacted similarly to the theatrical artificiality of the representation of passion in the *Pickwick* interpolations. Too little attention has been paid, however, to the numerous variations on melodramatic themes and techniques that are in progress in the interpolations.

Although Dickens borrows heavily and not always advantageously from the boards of the playhouse, these stories exhibit an abundance of original innovations when compared with their crude melodramatic prototypes. It is remarkable, for example, that inner conflict is at the centre of all the tales under discussion, whereas it is only the focus of stage melodrama in later crime melodrama and, to a lesser degree, in Gothic melodrama. In 'The Stroller's Tale', the dying clown is

plagued by a tortured conscience resulting from past maltreatment of his wife; 'The Convict's Return' focuses on the repentance and moral transformation of John Edmunds; in 'A Madman's Manuscript' the protagonist is the victim of confused and conflicting passions; in 'The Old Man's Tale about the Queer Client', Heyling is transformed from a good husband full of love for his wife to a vengeful obsessive driven by hatred for his wife's father; 'The Story of the Goblins who Stole a Sexton' is more influenced by pantomime or fairy tale than melodrama, but nonetheless it is a tale of moral transformation foreshadowing *A Christmas Carol*.

But the villains of the interpolated tales differ from primitive melodramatic models in that their passion is sometimes controlled by their intellect; their self-presentation is not always naïve. The madman in his manuscript, for example, repeatedly reminds us that he was 'too cunning for them, madman as they thought me' (Chapter 11, p. 160). His cunning resides chiefly in his ability to deceive others by hiding his insanity. Like the genteel villain of domestic melodrama, he is conscious both of his acting ability and of his evil nature.

Indeed, the influence of domestic melodrama on both the interpolations and their villainous protagonists needs emphasising here. It is remarkable that to my knowledge no critic has observed the fact that the *Pickwick* interpolations are flavoured as much by domestic as by Gothic melodrama. 'The Stroller's Tale', 'The Convict's Return' and 'The Old Man's Tale about the Queer Client' are drenched in the atmosphere and preoccupations of domestic melodrama. The first two tales are activated by the alcoholism and domestic violence of a tyrant patriarch; 'The Old Man's Tale', like the melodramas described in Chapter 2, shows the effects of oppression of the poor, but this time the oppressor is a family member rather than an aristocratic outsider.

As an illustration of the intelligent originality of Dickens's use of melodramatic models in the interpolated tales, I can think of no better example than 'The Stroller's Tale'. A tale told by an actor (dismal Jemmy)<sup>8</sup> about an actor-villain (the low pantomime clown) in the presence of another

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<sup>8</sup> 'The Stroller's Tale' is also curiously relevant to my investigation of the relationship between passionate and passionless villainy. It appears to be a story about passionate villainy related by the melancholy Dismal Jemmy, a nineteenth-century model of the malcontent. But near the end of the novel, Jingle tells us that Jemmy is not in fact 'dismal' but Job Trotter's brother, who is a

actor-villain (Jingle), 'The Stroller's Tale' is of obvious relevance to this thesis. It is a conscious investigation of the relationship between life and the stage, a fact made clear by dismal Jemmy's prefatory remarks:

Ah! poetry makes life, what lights and music do the stage. Strip the one of its false embellishments, and the other of its illusions, and what is there real in either, to live or care for?

[...]

To be before the footlights, [...] is like sitting at a grand, court show, and admiring the silken dresses of the gaudy throng - to be behind them, is to be the people who make that finery, uncared for and unknown, and left to sink or swim, to starve or live, as fortune wills it. (Chapter 3, p. 41)

The relationship between life and the stage is more complex, however, than Jemmy's remarks, and the ostensible action of the tale, suggest. On the surface, the tale contrasts the comic appearance of the clown's stage existence with the tragic reality of his alcoholism and wife-beating:

His voice was hollow and tremulous, as he took me aside, and in broken words recounted a long catalogue of sickness and privations [...] I put a few shillings in his hand, and, as I turned away, I heard the roar of laughter which followed his first tumble on to the stage. (Chapter 3, p. 43)

Beneath the surface, however, Dickens is consciously investigating the complex ironies and paradoxes which surround both the actor's existence and the stage which forms his livelihood.

Jemmy opens the tale by rooting its subject matter in the everyday world, consciously dissociating it from the popular sensationalism of the popular Gothic genre:

There is nothing of the marvellous in what I am going to relate, [...] there is nothing even uncommon in it. Want and sickness are too common in many stations of life, to deserve more notice than is usually bestowed on the most ordinary vicissitudes of human nature. (Chapter 3, p. 41)

Yet before the narrative has progressed too far, the tale contradicts the teller. After informing his audience, for example, that his story would contain 'nothing of the marvellous', Jemmy's first lengthy description of the clown contrives in the manner of Gothic fiction, to emphasise the marvellous, terrible and other-worldly aspects of the clown's appearance:

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'hoaxing-genius' (Chapter 53, p. 818). This discovery means that his tale of passion was nothing but a con-artist's cynical or passionless fabrication. It also, of course, means that Jemmy, like Jingle and the low pantomime clown in his story, is in fact an actor-villain.

Never shall I forget the repulsive sight that met my eye when I turned round. He was dressed for the pantomime, in all the absurdity of a clown's costume. The spectral figures in the Dance of Death, the most frightful shapes that the ablest painter ever portrayed on canvas, never presented an appearance half so ghastly. [...] All gave him a hideous and unnatural appearance, of which no description could convey an adequate idea, and which, to this day, I shudder to think of. (Chapter 3, pp. 42-43)

Jemmy's horror at the sight of his dying friend makes the clown assume the supernatural proportions of a Gothic monster in his eyes. Again, a strong element of Gothic horror finds its way into the tale when the clown's guilty delirium convinces him that he is in 'a tedious maze of low arched rooms' full of 'insects [...] glistening horribly amidst the thick darkness', repulsive reptiles and familiar men trying to torture him with heated irons (Chapter 3, pp. 46-49). The clown's wild imaginings are uncannily similar to the regular setting in a dungeon of many Gothic melodramas.

I would argue that in 'The Stroller's Tale' and the other interpolations under discussion, Dickens is consciously conducting generic exploration.<sup>9</sup> On one level, he is investigating melodramatic sub-genres and their paradoxical relevance and irrelevance both to each other and to the dying clown. We have seen, for instance, how elements of the 'marvellous' permeate even the misery of a poor actor's unglamorous existence. Indeed, there are not just elements of drama in the clown's off-stage reality; the cruel irony is that the clown's life is a model domestic melodrama. Whilst the narrator repeatedly emphasises the gap between life and stage, the reader is conscious of the truth and the lie behind this statement. The theatrically aware Dickens often bemoans the lot of struggling actors,<sup>10</sup> but he also knows that a man's 'progress downwards, step by step, until at last he reached that excess of destitution from which he never rose again' (Chapter 3, p. 41) represents the plot of a pure admonitory domestic melodrama.

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<sup>9</sup> As well as the generic experimentation discussed above, Dickens is of course contrasting the dark - potentially tragic - subject matter of some of the interpolations with the comedy of the main narrative.

<sup>10</sup> See *Speeches*, p. 75. On 6 April 1846, at the first anniversary festival of the General Theatrical Fund Association, Dickens as Chairman made the following remarks in his toast: 'there is no class of actors who stand so much in need of a retiring fund as those who do not win the great prizes, but who are nevertheless an essential part of the theatrical system, and by consequence play a part in contributing to our pleasure. [...] We owe them a debt which we ought to pay. The beds of such men are not of roses, but of very artificial flowers indeed. Their lives are [...] hard struggles with very stern realities. It is from among the poor actors [...] that the most triumphant favourites have sprung'.

Dickens's most important generic experiment in the interpolated tales, however, focuses on the larger question of the relationship between narrative and theatre. When critics talk generally of the 'Gothic' and 'melodramatic' elements of the interpolations, the problem is that they tend to ignore the transmutation these elements undergo in the narrative context. My discussion of Dickens's use of melodramatic sub-genres has illustrated that the author was not quite as naive and uninformed as his critics in his treatment of the 'melodramatic'. In my analysis of the Gothic elements of 'The Stroller's Tale', I have already pointed out that they are projected through the consciousness of Jemmy and the clown. This seems to be a narrative technique consciously deployed in the interpolations and one which he uses to great effect in the later novels; Gothic melodrama is not employed at the ostensible level of the action, but is conveyed through the - often tortured - minds of the villainous protagonists. In 'A Madman's Manuscript', for example, elements of the marvellous and the terrible are produced by the insanity of the narrator. In 'The Old Man's Tale', Heyling imagines murdering his enemy in various ways 'in the wildest ravings of fever' (Chapter 21, p. 315). The Gothic is related by 'telling' rather than 'showing'; moreover, Gothic elements are often totally in keeping with the character and situation of the emotionally troubled protagonist, thus acquitting the author from accusations of gratuitous sensationalism.

William Axton has correctly pointed out that the interpolated tales in *Pickwick* offer subjective visions of experience, whereas the main narrative concentrates on externals described by the 'objective' viewpoint of the narrator.<sup>11</sup> A related point of paramount importance to this thesis, however, needs to be added to Axton's account: the interpolations are capsules of passionate emotional intensity which make the larger narrative look passionless by contrast. But curiously and characteristically, Dickens does not neglect the externalising techniques of the larger narrative when conveying subjective passion. The young artist's interpolated tales thus give us a taste of a style to come: they offer a distinctive blend of inner personal experience and the popular theatre's impulse towards externalisation, within a narrative context. In *The Pickwick Papers*, the best

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<sup>11</sup> *Circle of Fire*, p. 78.

example of the peculiarly Dickensian fusion of personal 'telling' or narrative and theatrical 'showing' or externalisation of experience, is Jemmy's description of the dying Clown's last delirious ravings:

The theatre, and the public-house, were the chief themes of the wretched man's wanderings. It was evening, he fancied; he had a part to play that night; it was late, and he must leave home instantly. [...] A short pause, and he shouted out a few doggerel rhymes - the last he had ever learnt. He rose in bed, drew up his withered limbs, and rolled about in uncouth positions; *he was acting - he was at the theatre*. A minute's silence, and he murmured the burden of some roaring song. He reached the old house at last; how hot the room was. He had been ill, very ill, but he was well now, and happy. Fill up his glass. Who was that, that dashed it from his lips? It was the same persecutor that had followed him before. He fell back upon his pillow, and moaned aloud. (Chapter 3, p. 46) (Italics mine)

'*He was acting - he was at the theatre*' (Italics mine). This phrase is crucial to an understanding of Dickens's style both in the *Pickwick* interpolations and throughout his career. Moreover, it is the key to an analysis of Dickens's novelistic presentation of passionate villainy. The clown is acting out his inner fears and passions; the display we witness could almost be psychodrama. But it is not a display; it is narrative. But whose narrative? Is the clown the teller, or Jemmy, or Dickens?

It should be apparent by this stage that all these questions converge on a single focal point: the study of the relationship in fiction between feeling and form. Any evaluation of the influence of passionate melodramatic villains on Dickens's passionate novelistic villains therefore calls for a general consideration here of the respective genres of the theatre and fiction as vehicles for the expression of passion.

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In a rare discussion of Dickens's representation of passion, Barbara Hardy argues that Dickens never entirely outgrows the artificial, theatrical methods of Collins's *Ode on the Passions*, mocked in *Great Expectations*:

From *Pickwick* to *Edwin Drood* the Collins method is conspicuous. It is the theatrical and behaviouristic rendering, and it has certain disadvantages. [...] The disadvantages of the rendering of passion by passionate conduct, for which Dickens's sources are probably theatrical, are plain. The conduct, as in acting, tends to be exaggerated and extreme, and the passions tend to appear simplified and separated. Moreover certain falsities arise: it gets to look as if passions are always acted out and formulated, never inner and introverted, private and secret. [...] More oddly, there is no particular reason for all the

passionate externals. These are not actors, this is not a stage. Dickens has access to all the novelist's means of rendering strong feeling.<sup>12</sup>

Hardy's commentary on Dickens's technique appears to betray a prejudice common to many modern writers - namely, that the novel is superior to the theatre as a genre capable of rendering and analysing human passion. Elsewhere, Hardy makes her opinion more explicit:

The novel's formal mixture of dramatic, narrative and discursive forms equips it to reflect on its own analysis and emotion. One of its great subjects has been the affective life.<sup>13</sup>

Implicit in the latter remark is the suggestion that the novel is the form best equipped to explore emotion because it is the highest form of fiction. S. W. Dawson agrees with Hardy's implication that the novel somehow includes and surpasses the theatrical and dramatic arts, describing the novel as 'a dramatic form capable of surpassing the drama of the theatre in depth and vitality'.<sup>14</sup>

Mikhail Bakhtin establishes the novel as the darling of fictional forms in his essay, 'Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel', where he argues that

The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding.<sup>15</sup>

Bakhtin maintains that the novel 'is plasticity itself'<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, his theory of 'novelization' claims that the elasticity of the novel form 'infects' other genres:

In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness.<sup>17</sup>

For all the respect paid to the novel as the vehicle for the rendering of passion, however, surprisingly little attention has been paid by critics to the kind of consideration raised by Barbara Hardy. It is principally to the critical utterances of the novelists themselves, and not to critics, that

<sup>12</sup> 'Dickens and the Passions', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 24 (1970), 449-66 (p. 452).

<sup>13</sup> *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London: Owen, 1985), p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Drama and the Dramatic*, The Critical Idiom Series, XI (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 3-40 (p. 7).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

we must look for guidance in exploring the relationship between the novel and the feelings. In D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), for instance, there is the superb analytical digression:

It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives. And here lies the vast importance of the novel, properly handled. It can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead. Therefore, the novel, properly handled, can reveal the most secret places of life: for it is in the passional secret places of life, above all, that the tide of sensitive awareness needs to ebb and flow, cleansing and refreshing.<sup>18</sup>

In *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27), Proust appreciates the difficulty of rejecting emotional certainty and simplification; he urges the use of intelligence 'to distinguish, and with how much intelligence, the shape of that which we have felt'<sup>19</sup>. For Proust, as for Lawrence, 'the shape' of emotion is obscure, mysterious, inward, and perhaps most importantly, metamorphic. Stephen's analysis of the lyric, narrative and dramatic forms in *Portrait of the Artist* (1914-15) again emphasises the flow and fluidity of emotion in narrative and dramatic form:

The lyrical form is in fact the simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion [...]. He who utters it is more conscious of the instant of emotion than of himself as feeling emotion. [...] The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea. [...] The dramatic form is reached when the vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life. The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluent and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak.<sup>20</sup>

However different Lawrence, Proust and Joyce are as novelists, all emphasise the metamorphic quality of human emotion in art. All three quotations give the sense of the ideal art form as a living, mobile organism. This sense is admirably captured in Susanne K. Langer's description of music as an 'organic' vehicle for feeling:

The essence of all composition [...] is the semblance of *organic* movement, the illusion of an indivisible whole. Vital organization is the frame of all feeling, because feeling exists only in living organisms; and the logic of all symbols that can express feeling is the logic of organic processes.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ed. by John Lyon (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960; repr. 1990), p. 105.

<sup>19</sup> *Time Regained*, Chapter 3; quoted by Hardy, *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Seamus Deane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp. 232-33.

<sup>21</sup> *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from 'Philosophy in a New Key'* (London:

This emphasis on fluidity, metamorphosis and organicism in artistic representation of emotion seems a long way, however, from the 'instant' passions of nineteenth-century stage comically mocked in Gilbert Abbott à Beckett's *The Quizziology of the British Drama*:

The Passions, [...]  
 Ranting, stamping, screaming, fainting,  
 Faces chalking, corking, painting,  
 By turns they bellow'd like the wind,  
 And then to whisper had a mind,  
 Till each resolved to act a part  
 And give a spec'men of his art.  
 All display'd in half an hour,  
 A taste of their expressive power.<sup>22</sup>

Conceptions of the novel as a vehicle for the expression of nebulous inner passion also seem very different from theories of the novel formulated by nineteenth-century novelists. It is significant that, in an effort to elevate the artistic status of the developing novel form, several contemporaries of Dickens emphasise the essential similarity and equality between the novel and the established, respected drama. Modern reverence for the novel as the all-encompassing genre which can include and surpass the limits of other imaginative forms, is conspicuously missing. In the dedication of *Basil* (1852), for instance, Wilkie Collins justifies his use of extraordinary incidents in the following terms:

Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also, I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to everyday realities only.<sup>23</sup>

For Collins, the novel and the play are equally effective media through which emotion can be expressed. It is interesting, moreover, that Collins's description of emotions as 'strong and deep' conveys the impression that to him emotion is something definite, fixed and expressible rather than

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Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> (London: Punch, 1846), p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Basil: A Story of Modern Life*, ed. by Dorothy Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; repr. 1992), p. xxxvii.

fluid, secret and intangible. Ainsworth's introduction to *Rookwood* (1834) is relevant in this respect. Again, the novelist's subject is the similarity between the novel and the stage:

The novelist is precisely in the position of the dramatist. He has, or should have, his stage, his machinery, his actors. His representation should address itself as vividly to the reader's mental retina, as the theatrical exhibition to the spectator. The writer who is ignorant of dramatic situation and its effects, is unacquainted with the principles of his art, which requires all the adjuncts and essentials of the scenic prosopopeia. [...] The Romance constructed according to the rigid rules of art will, beyond doubt, eventually, if not immediately, find its way to the stage. - It is a drama, with descriptions to supply the place of scenery.<sup>24</sup>

This time the novelist's emphasis is on rigidity of form; to Ainsworth, it is a merit and not a defect that both the novel and the drama are constructed 'according to the rigid rules of art'. Moreover, Ainsworth stresses the importance of visual exhibition; he shows no veneration for the unseen. 'The shape of that which we have felt' should be represented in bold, near pictorial form.

Collins and Ainsworth are not alone in their novelistic theorising. In his penetrating work *Realizations*, Martin Meisel argues convincingly that:

the nineteenth century revealed a powerful bent in whole classes of fiction to assimilate themselves with drama, while drama itself was under a compulsion to make itself over as a picture.<sup>25</sup>

This finding has important implications for the development of the nineteenth-century novel form. For instance, the drama's impulse to imitate pictorial form is evident in the theatre's use of such devices as 'situation', 'tableau' and 'tableau vivant'. Edward Mayhew's *Stage Effect: or, The Principles which Command Dramatic Success in the Theatre* defines 'situation' as:

some strong point in a play likely to command applause; where the action is wrought to a climax, where the actors strike attitudes, and form what they call 'a picture', during the exhibition of which a pause takes place [...]. In its purposes it bears a strong resemblance to the conclusion of a chapter in a novel.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of a 'situation' begging applause has obvious relevance to the periodical form of novel publication, which must have increased the awareness of authors that they were writing for an

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<sup>24</sup> *Rookwood: A Romance*, 4th edn (London: Macrone, 1836), pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>25</sup> p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> (London: Mitchell, 1840), p. 44.

audience that could respond with immediate approval or condemnation. The temptation to play to the gallery was one to which Dickens not infrequently succumbed in overly flamboyant chapter endings. Closely related to the 'situation', the 'tableau' is defined by Meisel as:

The fullest expression of a pictorial dramaturgy [...] where the actors strike an expressive stance in a legible symbolical configuration that crystallizes a stage of the narrative as a situation, or summarises it and punctuates it.<sup>27</sup>

The 'tableau vivant' is the reanimation of the tableau, its impulse to bring 'stillness to life'.<sup>28</sup>

The tendency of drama towards static pictorialism affected even the greatest actors of the day. Hazlitt, for instance, described Kean's Richard III and Shylock as 'a perpetual succession of striking pictures',<sup>29</sup> while Coleridge maintained that seeing Kean act was 'like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning'.<sup>30</sup> To G. H. Lewes, Kean was 'a consummate master of passionate expression'; though Lewes criticises Kean, like lesser actors for being 'fond, far too fond of abrupt transitions', he argues that Kean was one of the few actors able to express '*subsiding emotion*'. A fuller definition of this '*subsiding emotion*' is relevant here. Lewes argues that:

his [Kean's] instinct taught him what few actors are taught - that a strong emotion, after discharging itself in one massive current, continues for a time expressing itself in feebler currents.<sup>31</sup>

Lewes's description of emotion in terms of fluidity reminds us of the theories of feeling and form which opened this discussion. His stress on Kean's uniqueness, however, confirms our opinion that emotion in nineteenth-century drama was popularly imaged as static and finite. Hazlitt, for instance, referred to acting handbooks as 'old receipt-books for the passions'.<sup>32</sup> The impulse of the novel form towards the dramatic, and the movement of the dramatic towards the pictorial, in nineteenth-century art, had no small effect on the novelistic representation of emotion. All three

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<sup>27</sup> *Realizations*, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> 'A View of the English Stage; or, A Series of Dramatic Criticisms' (1814(-17)), in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1930-34), V (1930), 169-379 (p. 184).

<sup>30</sup> *Table Talk*, 2nd edn (1836) (repr. in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. by Jonathan Bate (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 160).

<sup>31</sup> *On Actors and the Art of Acting*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>32</sup> 'British Institution' (1814), in *Complete Works*, ed. by P. P. Howe, XVIII (1933), 10-16 (p. 10).

genres employ what Meisel calls 'iconography of character and emotion'.<sup>33</sup> Thus the popular novelist Bulwer-Lytton was able to see a 'duality of purpose' in his vocation; he aimed to unite 'interior symbolical signification with an obvious popular interest in character and incident'.<sup>34</sup> Inner nature must be expressed in terms intelligible to the public - a fact which explains the popularity and importance of the illustrations in many nineteenth-century novels.

Dickens's professed views on the novel as a genre, and in particular on the relationship between the novel and the drama, do not differ greatly from those of his contemporary popular novelists. Dickens's most famous and strident statement on the question - 'Every writer of fiction, although he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes, in effect, for the stage'<sup>35</sup> - is not random or inconsistent, but supported entirely by writings elsewhere. In those most private of scribbles, for instance, the working plans for his novels, he would use terms which referred to the theatre. Indeed, his plans for *Hard Times* employ language of theatre - for example, 'separation scene' and 'the great effect' - and phrases suggestive of pictorialism - for example, 'Mill Pictures', 'Wet night picture' and 'moving picture of Stephen moving away from Coketown'.<sup>36</sup> His advice to contributors to his periodicals is likewise drenched in a belief in the novel as theatre. To Mrs Brookfield, he writes:

you constantly hurry your narrative (and yet without getting on) *by telling it, in a sort of impetuous breathless way, in your own person, when the people should tell it and act it for themselves.* My notion always is, that when I have made the people to play out the play, it is, as it were, their business to do it, and not mine.<sup>37</sup>

He advises other would-be novelists:

The people do not sufficiently work out their own purposes in dialogue and dramatic action; [...] what you do for them, they ought to do for themselves.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Realizations*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> 'On Certain Principles of Art in Works of Imagination', *Caxtoniana: A Series of Essays on Life, Literature, and Manners*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1863), II, 129-69 (p. 152).

<sup>35</sup> This was made on 29 March 1858, at the Royal General Theatrical Fund, toasting Thackeray's health; see *Speeches*, p. 262.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Meisel, *Realizations*, p. 60. See also the Clarendon edition of *LD*, p. 813 ff. and *HT*, ed. by George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 234 ff. Moreover, in Forster's *Life*, the biographer analyses the qualities of Dickens's letter writing as follows: 'Unrivalled quickness of observation, the rare faculty of seizing out of a multitude of things the thing that is essential [...]. *Not external objects only, but feelings, reflections and thoughts, are photographed into visible forms with the same unexampled ease*' (pp. 245-46). (Italics mine)

<sup>37</sup> *Letters* (Nonesuch), III, 461 (20 February 1866).

there is too much of the narrator in it - the narrator not being an actor. The result is, that I can *not* see the people, or the place, or believe in the fiction.<sup>39</sup>

Even Wilkie Collins relies too much for Dickens's tastes on his own 'DISSECTIVE' resources, rather than those of his characters, 'forcing points on the reader's attention'. He advises Collins on *The Woman in White* (1859-60):

my own effort would be to strike more of what is got *that way* out of them [the characters] by collision with one another, and by the working of the story.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, when writing his own novels, Dickens takes his own advice literally; he is acting, he is at the theatre, to echo 'The Stroller's Tale'. His daughter Mamie's famous description of Dickens acting out his narratives in front of a mirror<sup>41</sup> is remarkable testimony to the integral relationship between novel and theatre in his conception of the creative writing process. Dickens, moreover, illustrates that the novel/stage equation works both ways in his striking description of the acting experience in terms of the novel, discussed in Chapter 3. Acting in *The Frozen Deep*, to Dickens, was 'like writing a book in company; [...] actual truth without its pain'.<sup>42</sup> Although Dickens never managed to write a book in company, his public readings are further evidence of his vision of the novel as theatre, and of the author as performer. Whether writing or acting, Dickens was convinced from the beginning to the end of his career that his duty was to perform for an audience, in particular to fuel 'that particular relation (personally affectionate and like no other man's)<sup>43</sup> which subsisted between him and the public.

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In *Realizations*, Martin Meisel maintains that:

Dickens was not simply a sport, however, an exceptionally theatricalized novelist; he represents a dominant school, international in its character and vigorously popular. He was exceptional in breaking through its limitations.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Letters* (Pilgrim), VII, 529 (Letter to Miss King, 9 February 1855).

<sup>39</sup> *Letters* (Nonesuch), III, 138 (Letter to Charles Collins, 19 November 1859).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 145 (7 January 1860).

<sup>41</sup> See J. B. van Amerongen, *The Actor in Dickens*, p. 256.

<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 3, p. 110; *Letters* (Nonesuch), II, 825.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted by Forster, *Life*, p. 646 (March 1858). He repeated this formulation three years later in a letter about the 1861 Readings tour (*Life*, p. 689). It also appears in a letter to his publishers, 16 March 1858 (*Letters* (Nonesuch), III, 11).

The rest of this chapter will test the validity of Meisel's claim through close analysis of those Dickensian villains who have most in common with the archetypal melodramatic stage villain: Monks, Sikes and Rudge. In all three characters, as in the villains of Gothic melodrama, passion controls intellect and emotional 'honesty' replaces wily deceit.

Dickens's stylistic affinities with the presentational techniques of melodrama are evident even at the physiognomical roots of characterisation. In *Oliver Twist*, for instance, Monks and Sikes are both characters 'in whom all evil passions have made the face an index to the mind', to adapt the words of Mr Brownlow (Chapter 49, p. 336).<sup>45</sup> Overall and facial appearance, moreover, are of a piece. Besides having a disfigured, diseased face, Monks, for example, is:

tall and dark: and wore a large cloak. He had the air of a stranger; and seemed, by a certain haggardness in his look, as well as by the dusty soils on his dress, to have travelled some distance. [...]

[...] Mr Bumble's awkwardness was enhanced by the very remarkable expression of the stranger's eye, which was keen and bright, but shadowed by a scowl of distrust and suspicion, unlike anything he had ever observed before, and most repulsive to behold. (Chapter 37, p. 224)

Monks the tall, dark stranger with a large cloak and a formidable scowl is in fact anything but 'very remarkable'. If Mr Bumble had paid more trips to the theatre, he would have immediately identified and comprehended the stranger as a villain from Gothic melodrama. Sikes is described as wearing the everyday 'costume' of the working man, rather than the more obvious stage costume of the cloak, but nonetheless, his violent, animalistic and passionate nature is visible in every lineament of his description. Bill Sikes is:

a stoutly-built fellow of about five-and-thirty, in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half boots, and grey cotton stockings, which enclosed a bulky pair of legs with large swelling calves; - the kind of legs, that in such costume, always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them. He had [...] a dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck: with the long frayed ends of which he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke; disclosing, when he had done so, a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days' growth: and two scowling eyes; one of which, displayed various parti-coloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow. (Chapter 13, pp. 76-77)

<sup>44</sup> p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Mr Brownlow's exact words are, 'you [...] in whom all evil passions, vice and profligacy, festered, till they found a vent in a hideous disease which has made your face an index even to your mind'.

Although Sikes's appearance and general demeanour announce his villainy, he is a curious amalgam. Related to the stage convict, he is typical of a breed Dickens calls 'the ruffian'.<sup>46</sup> He has all the fundamental characteristics of Gothic villainy, the obviousness, the lack of control and the passion, but is perhaps more strictly akin to the violent villains of admonitory domestic melodrama.

Rudge is also more of a mongrel than Monks, but he is nonetheless an instantly recognisable passionate villain from the melodramatic stage. Like Monks, he wears a cloak or 'loose riding-coat'; he is in addition 'wearing a hat flapped over his face' (*BR*, Chapter 1, pp. 3-4). Once these initial theatrical symbols of villainy are removed, we find

disclosed the hard features of a man of sixty or thereabouts, much weatherbeaten and worn by time, and the naturally harsh expression of which was not improved by a dark handkerchief which was bound tightly round his head [...]. If it were intended to conceal or divert attention from a deep gash, now healed into an ugly seam, which when it was first inflicted must have laid bare his cheekbone, the object was but indifferently attained, for it could scarcely fail to be noted at a glance. His complexion was of a cadaverous hue, and he had a grizzly jagged beard of some three weeks' date. (Chapter 1, p. 5)

The regulars at the Maypole inn immediately categorise Rudge as 'a highwayman!' or hero-villain from romantic melodrama. Indulging in a joke at the expense of the nineteenth-century taste for romantic vice, Dickens makes Parkes quip: 'Do you suppose highwaymen don't dress handsomer than that? [...] It's a better business than you think for, Tom, and highwaymen don't need or use to be shabby' (Chapter 1, p. 6). Parkes's joke in fact contains a serious meaning; the tendency of popular novelists and playwrights to glamorise villainy was one which Dickens detested.<sup>47</sup>

Although Dickens compares Rudge throughout the novel with a highwayman, he consciously divests his creation of the rose-tinted aura of romantic stage villains. Rudge thus appears as a representative of a different breed, surly, resentful, an outcast, overbrimming with negative passions; he has all the characteristics usually associated with Gothic villainy.

Rudge's dark passions, for instance, are externalised primarily through heightened and unambiguous language and gestures strongly reminiscent of melodrama. Although perhaps less

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<sup>46</sup> See Dickens's 'The Ruffian', *AYR*, 20 (10 October 1868), 421-24.

<sup>47</sup> See Preface to *OT* and *NN*, Chapter 16, p. 202 and Chapter 18, p. 215. See also Chapters 5 and 7 below for a fuller discussion of Dickens's attitude to romantic criminality.

garrulous than some melodramatic stage villains, Rudge has no qualms about openly expressing his feelings. On one of his early visits to Mrs Rudge, for example, he histrionically announces his moral nature:

'Hear me,' he replied, menacing her with his hand. 'I, that in the form of a man live the life of a hunted beast! that in the body am a spirit, a ghost upon the earth, a thing from which all creatures shrink, save those curst beings of another world, who will not leave me; - I am, in my desperation of this night, past all fear but that of the hell in which I exist from day to day'. (Chapter 17, p. 129)

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman describes the difference between a sincere performer and a cynical performer in the following terms:

When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term 'sincere' for individuals who believe in the impressions fostered by their own performance. It should be understood that the cynic, with all his professional disinvolvement, may obtain unprofessional pleasures from his masquerade, experiencing a kind of gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously.<sup>48</sup>

Rudge, Sikes and Monks are related to the villain of Gothic melodrama through what Goffman would call their sincerity. All are sincere believers both in their own performances and in the genuineness of their emotions. When Rudge and Varden cross paths unexpectedly, for example, early in *Barnaby Rudge*, Rudge's 'sullen and fierce' looks 'seemed to announce a desperate purpose very foreign to acting, or child's play' (Chapter 2, p. 20). With no real gap between inner nature and outward performance, character is 'whole' and can lack human complexity. Externalised passion can thus seem simplistic in its directness. In *Oliver Twist*, for instance, after Oliver has been wounded after the attempted robbery, Sikes expresses his anger and frustration in grotesquely exaggerated language and gesture:

'WOLVES tear your throats!' muttered Sikes, grinding his teeth. 'I wish I was among some of you; you'd howl the hoarser for it'. (Chapter 28, p. 179)

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<sup>48</sup> pp. 28-29. See *BR*, Chapter 24, p.183, where the narrator distinguishes between what could be called the sincere (or self-deceiving) and the cynical 'despisers of mankind': 'The despisers of mankind - apart from the mere fools and mimics, of that creed - are of two sorts. They who believe their merit neglected and unappreciated, make up one class; they who receive adulation and flattery, knowing their own worthlessness, compose the other. Be sure that the coldest-hearted misanthropes are ever of this last order'.

Sikes dislikes speech that does not resemble his kind of 'honest' plain-speaking. He orders Fagin to

Speak out, and call things by their right names; don't sit there, winking and blinking, and talking to me in hints. (Chapter 19, p. 122)

Monks likewise likes to make himself understood, and importantly for this study, waxes lyrical on the subject of intense passion. When Bumble tells him that he and his wife have been 'cooling themselves', Monks retorts:

Cooling yourselves! [...] Not all the rain that ever fell, or ever will fall, will put as much of hell's fire out, as a man can carry about with him. (Chapter 38, p. 250)

Inner turmoil unchecked by any strong intelligence often seeks an outlet in action.

Dickens's passionate villains are inclined to express themselves through images of action, particularly images of violence, since the passions which give rise to their speech are usually negative. Monks, for example, dramatises his passionate hatred of Oliver specifically and young boys generally, in the language of gesture:

A murrain on the young devils! [...] I speak of one; a meek-looking, pale-faced hound, who was apprenticed down here to a coffin-maker: I wish he had made his coffin, and screwed his body in it. (Chapter 37, p. 246)

Again, when Sikes describes the violent loathing he would vent on Oliver if he were to 'peach', his 'hot intensity of passion' is described through words descriptive of easily intelligible action:

'What then!' replied Sikes with a tremendous oath. 'If he was left alive till I came, I'd grind his skull under the iron heel of my boot into as many grains as there are hairs upon his head'. (Chapter 47, p. 319)

Obviously, words are sometimes bypassed completely. Dickens is explicit about Sikes's preference for direct action rather than words as a means of expressing feeling:

Whether his meditations were so intense as to be disturbed by the dog's winking, or whether his feelings were so wrought upon by his reflections that they required all the relief derivable from kicking an unoffending animal to allay them, is matter for argument and consideration. Whatever was the cause, the effect was a kick and a curse bestowed upon the dog simultaneously. (Chapter 15, p. 92)

Dickens himself is not above the novelistic equivalent of kicking and cursing to convey character. His description of Rudge's conscience-stricken reaction to the bell at the Warren, for example, bears many similarities to Leopold Lewis's later dramatisation of the same scenario in the crime melodrama *The Bells* (1871).<sup>49</sup>

It was not the sudden change from darkness to this dreadful light [...] that drove the man back as though a thunderbolt had struck him. It was the Bell. If the ghastliest shape the human mind has ever pictured in its wildest dreams had risen up before him, he could not have staggered back from its touch, as he did from the first sound of that loud iron voice. With eyes that started from his head, his limbs convulsed, his face most horrible to see, he raised one arm high up into the air, and holding something visionary back and down, with his other hand, drove at it as though he held a knife and stabbed it to the heart. He clutched his hair, and stopped his ears, and travelled madly round and round; then gave a frightful cry, and with it rushed away. (Chapter 55, p. 419)

The internal chaos of Rudge's guilty conscience is externalised in the most direct way possible. Rudge re-enacts the murder. Guilt is dramatised. Moreover, it is dramatised through heightened melodramatic gesture. This crucial sequence in *Barnaby Rudge*, moreover, borrows specifically from the stage's conventional language of the passions when the role of the murdered victim is dramatised. Reuben Haredale's final expression could be one of theatrical Despair:

What face was that, in which a friendly smile changed to a look of half incredulous horror, which stiffened for a moment into one of pain, then changed again into an imploring glance at Heaven, and so fell idly down with upturned eyes, like the dead stags' he had often peeped at when a little child. (Chapter 55, p. 420)

The 'stiffened' nature of Reuben's passions, the abrupt change from the emotion of happiness to horror to pain and then to despair, reminds us of the tendencies of the nineteenth-century stage towards static pictorialism. Dickens is perhaps not as adept as Kean at expressing what Lewes calls 'subsiding emotion'.

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It is important to consider the possibility that Dickens was nevertheless capable of depicting his own versions of the 'subsiding emotion' which Lewes elevates above stylised representations of passion. The often quoted passage from *Oliver Twist* in which Dickens overtly compares the art of

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<sup>49</sup> *Hiss the Villain*, pp. 358-59.

the novelist to that of the melodramatist is relevant here for both its general argument and, more particularly, for the terms in which this argument is expressed:

It is the custom on the stage: in all good, murderous melodramas: to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon. The hero sinks upon his straw bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; and, in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song. We behold, with throbbing bosoms, the heroine in the grasp of a proud and ruthless baron: her virtue and her life alike in danger, drawing forth her dagger to preserve the one at the cost of the other; and, just as our expectations are wrought up to the highest pitch, a whistle is heard: and we are straightaway transported to the great hall of the castle. [...]

Such changes appear absurd; but they are not so unnatural as they would seem at first sight. The transitions in real life from well spread boards to death-beds, and from mourning weeds to holiday garments, are not a whit less startling; only, there, we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on, which makes a vast difference. *The actors in the mimic life of the theatre, are blind to violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion or feeling, which, presented before the eyes of mere spectators, are at once condemned as outrageous and preposterous.* (Chapter 17, pp. 105-6) (Italics mine)

It is worth noting that Dickens is discussing not the stage in general, but 'good murderous melodramas'. Moreover, the plot he outlines is drenched in the trappings of the Gothic sub-genre - the baron, the great hall, the castle, and so forth. This fact not only makes nonsense of Disher's claim that Dickens was unaware that his plots were shaped like melodrama,<sup>50</sup> it reinforces my argument that Dickens experiments self-consciously with melodramatic sub-genres. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens employs a typical melodramatic plot structure, but more particularly he fuses the 'blood and thunder' violence and emotionalism of the Gothic brand with the social concern of the domestic variety. Finally and most importantly, however, Dickens argues - in the italicised quotation - that 'violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion and feeling' are not absurd or outrageous to the actors controlled by passion. Both in life and on the stage, Dickens maintains, abrupt, almost Brechtian transitions of passion are not unnatural to the person experiencing powerful feeling. It is only when we are 'mere spectators' or 'passive lookers-on', rather than 'busy actors' in scenes of passion, that startling or melodramatic outbursts seem incredible. Violent jolts and apparent stylisation in the rendering of emotion, by playwright or novelist, are thus justified by

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<sup>50</sup> *Blood and Thunder*, p. 173.

Dickens by referring to common human experience; that is, to the intensity of passion which is a reality to most actors in the theatre of the world.

As readers, however, we can only accept what amounts to Dickens's defence of his artistic methods in *Oliver Twist*, if we feel ourselves to be 'busy actors', not 'mere spectators', during the passionate scenes under discussion. By the terms of Dickens's own argument, it is necessary that the reader is involved in, or moved by, the novelistic rendering of emotion. There is no point in Dickens arguing, for instance, that 'violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion or feeling' are natural to those experiencing passion, if the reader of the novel is left in the same condition as Mr Whelks in 'Mr. Whelks at the Play':

His feelings are not stirred in the slightest degree, [...] for there was not a single natural incident, nor a single natural sentiment, that could in any way appeal to his knowledge of life or the sympathies of the heart.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, if we are to distinguish between the works of Dickens and those of the theatrical hacks who so bored Mr Whelks, it is also necessary that the effect of Dickens's 'violent transitions' should go beyond a superficial and temporary appeal to the sensations.

At this point it might be useful to invoke the Wagnerian distinction between 'effect' and 'wirkung'. Wagner explains that 'our natural feeling can only conceive of "*Wirkung*" [literally "a working"] as bound up with an antecedent *cause*'; the English word 'effect', by contrast, suggests 'a Working, without a cause'.<sup>52</sup> 'Effect' means that, in the words of Wagner, 'the whole of Art is resolved into its mechanical integers: the externals of Art are turned into its essence',<sup>53</sup> whereas 'wirkung' means that essence is expressed by means of externals.<sup>54</sup> Such a distinction is crucial to any study of Dickens's representation of passion. Though Dickens uses the techniques and types of the popular theatre, his art is far from superficial; the dominant theatrical school achieves 'effect', the innovator 'wirkung'. For instance, if we return to the passages from *Barnaby Rudge* discussed

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<sup>51</sup> [Andrew Halliday], *AYR*, 15 (23 June 1866), 563-566 (p. 565).

<sup>52</sup> *Opera and Drama* (1851), in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols (London: Kegan Paul, 1893), II, 95.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>54</sup> Meisel, *Realizations*, p. 71.

earlier in this chapter (Chapter 55, p. 419-20), which dramatise Rudge's guilt and Reuben's despair, we will find that in context the rendering of passion is anything but absurd or artificial. The gestures described are conventional, they are melodramatic - in that they borrow from the gestures of the popular theatre - but they are nonetheless transformed into symbols rich and strange within the narrative context. In 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', Brecht argues that

the pleasure given by representations [...] hardly ever depended on the representation's likeness to the thing portrayed [...]. All that mattered was the illusion of compelling momentum in the story told, and this was created by all sorts of poetic and theatrical means.<sup>55</sup>

Dickens's histrionic representations of guilt and despair may bear little resemblance to the corresponding expressions familiar to us in daily experience, but they are in keeping with the dominant key of his narrative prose and add to 'the illusion of compelling momentum'. The part is integrally related to the linguistic whole; the harmony of the piece is preserved throughout this sequence of violent action.

The impression of harmony is preserved, as Brecht argues with wonderful vagueness, 'by all sorts of poetic and theatrical means'. To achieve a better understanding of these means, however, demands close textual analysis of Dickens's narrative language. It is no vague claim to say of Dickens as Eliot said of Shakespeare, that 'words have often a network of tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires'.<sup>56</sup> Dickens's prose is unusual, however, in so far as it combines 'modes and conventions, that might well have seemed irreconcilable' within a 'richly poetic art of the word',<sup>57</sup> in the words of Leavis. The opening passage of *Barnaby Rudge* reveals many of the qualities of Dickens's unusual narrative language; moreover, detailed criticism of the texture of the prose helps us to understand how highly stylised melodramatic language and gesture

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<sup>55</sup> *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (1957), trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 182.

<sup>56</sup> 'Ben Jonson', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays On Poetry and Criticism*, 7th edn (London: Methuen, 1950; repr. 1969), pp. 104-22 (p. 115).

<sup>57</sup> F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, Pelican (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980) p. 322; F. R. Leavis, 'The Novel as Dramatic Poem: *Hard Times*', *Scrutiny*, 14 (1947), 185-203, (p. 191).

grows with paradoxical 'naturalness' and 'fluidity' from the linguistic soil. The description of the Maypole in many ways captures the peculiarities and paradoxes under examination:

The Maypole [...] was an old building, with [...] huge zig-zag chimneys, out of which it seemed as though smoke could not choose but come in more than naturally fantastic shapes. (Chapter 1, p. 1)

'Naturally fantastic' is a fitting description of all levels of a Dickens novel; from the tentacular roots of the prose to external manifestations of character, Dickens's vision is characterised by fantastic fidelity. Even a substance as intangible and nebulous as smoke - or feeling - cannot avoid being moulded into the grotesque visible structures sculpted by the artist.

The narrative environment of a Dickens novel very soon destroys our conventional, extra-novelistic expectations that the animate and inanimate, human and inhuman, worlds can be sharply differentiated. In his description of the Maypole, Dickens's inveterate habit of fusing humans and things is both demonstrated and made explicit:

With its overhanging stories, drowsy little panes of glass, and front bulging out and projecting over the pathway, the old house looked as if it were nodding in its sleep. Indeed, it needed no great stretch of fancy to detect in it other resemblances to humanity. The bricks of which it was built had originally been a deep dark red, but had grown yellow and discoloured like an old man's skin; the sturdy timbers had decayed like teeth; and here and there the ivy, like a warm garment to comfort it in its age, wrapt its green leaves closely round the time-worn walls. (Chapter 1, p. 2)

The opening paragraph in *Little Dorrit* is again relevant in this respect. Dickens's emphasis therein on the word 'staring' is fascinating because staring is a human activity which does not require movement or animation. The attribution of human life and animation to the inanimate world means that the dramatic or animate becomes the norm even in a piece of 'static' visual description.

Inactivity, in Dickens, is described in terms of activity. This is the essence of what some critics vaguely define as 'vitality' or 'energy' in Dickens's writing. Dickens once wrote that it was his 'infirmity to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally'.<sup>58</sup> We may dispute that it was his infirmity. The so-called 'exaggerated' Dickensian representation of reality awakens the reader's often sedated sense of what is the real. Dickens's narrative thus heightens our

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted by Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, p. 130.

sense of what is 'natural' or 'real'. Brecht's Dramaturg in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (1939-42) might have justified Dickens's method by arguing that, 'it's more fruitful to sacrifice that illusion (of reality) if one can change it for a representation that conveys more of actual reality'.<sup>59</sup>

Acceptance of the well-established argument that Dickensian prose blends the animate and the inanimate worlds has four extremely important findings for this study. Firstly, we discover that even the inhuman world externalises inner nature through gesture, thus establishing animation, action as the keynote of all description; in *Little Dorrit*, for instance, the animalistic environment of the novel is conveyed by the fact that 'something quivered in the atmosphere as if the air itself were panting' (Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 2). Secondly, it is highly significant that inanimate structures are represented as possessing an inner emotional life which can also be conveyed through externals; in *Nicholas Nickleby*, for example, we are told that 'the very chimneys appear to have grown dismal and melancholy, from having had nothing better to look at than the chimneys over the way' (Chapter 14, p. 160). Both these points illustrate, thirdly, that even at the roots of the narrative prose, Dickens was influenced by the prevailing tendency of the popular theatre to externalise inner nature. My fourth finding, however, enables us to understand why Dickens was a first rate novelist and not a playwright by profession. The fusion of the animate and inanimate worlds in his prose landscape means that barriers between different areas of experience are replaced by fluidity and metamorphosis. The realms of the human and the non-human, and most importantly, the words which signify both the human and the non-human within the novel, are open-ended. But Dickens is not pioneering a self-conscious Bakhtinian system of aesthetics. To Dickens, the open-endedness of language is both assumed and a means to an end. Christopher Ricks, arguing that linguistic subtlety exists beneath the 'titanic' surface of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), locates a verbal interplay of associations, of 'tincture or reflection' within the poetry.<sup>60</sup> A similar system of responsiveness exists beneath the surface of Dickensian prose. A universal nexus is established between words, and subsequently within the world which these words describe. In *Little Dorrit*, for instance,

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<sup>59</sup> Trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 22.

<sup>60</sup> *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 87.

'Marseilles, a fact to be strongly smelt and tasted, lay broiling in the sun one day' (Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 2). Even a fact has inner life. All elements of the physical and linguistic universe are part of a living, mysterious design.

When Dickens is writing at his best, characters who could be regarded as melodramatic 'types' in isolation, are transformed by their relation to the novelistic narrative. The linguistic substructure of the whole 'tunes' us to receive the deeper significance of the roles of even stereotypes. The incident of Rudge re-enacting his original murder to the sound of the bell is an excellent example of Dickens's ability to animate the stereotype. At the beginning of Chapter 54, for instance, he confesses that the action of the novel at this point is dominated by:

that appetite for the marvellous and love of the terrible which have probably been among the natural characteristics of mankind since the creation of the world. (p. 410)

The rioters subsequently fulfil the requirements of 'the terrible' by ransacking the Maypole in front of Willet. We have to wait until the next chapter until Rudge enters, surrounded by associations of the supernatural. At first, however, mention of a 'large, dark, faded cloak, and a slouched hat', together with 'speculations relative to the fashion of the stranger's boots' (Chapter 55, p. 418) remind us of the villains and conventions which Dickens found so laughable on the nineteenth-century stage. Before long, however, Rudge's nature and significance becomes fused with the narrative,<sup>61</sup> which is saturated with the guilt and fear Rudge felt after the original murder, and is now reliving:

What hunt of spectres could surpass that dread pursuit and flight! Had there been a legion of them on his track, he could have better borne it. *There would have had a beginning and an end, but here all space was full.* The one pursuing voice was everywhere: it sounded in the earth, the air; shook the long grass, and howled among the trembling trees.[...] It seemed to goad and urge the angry fire, and lash it into madness; everything was steeped in one prevailing red; the glow was everywhere; nature was drenched in blood: still the remorseless crying of that awful voice - the Bell, the Bell! (Chapter 55, pp. 419-20) (Italics mine)

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<sup>61</sup> In *Little Dorrit*, the language of the narrative likewise imparts a complex significance to the 'stagey' villain, Rigaud Blandois. The initial description of his staring eyes, for example (Book 1 Chapter 1, p. 5), 'reflects' the opening description of Marseilles and transforms him into a credible creature of the violent, soulless, oppressive world which is Dickens's Marseilles. See p. 154 below.

There are several points to be made about this passage. Firstly and most simply, melodramatic animation or externalisation of inner nature is the norm in this description of a bell which can goad, urge and even lash with its haunting voice. The conventional renderings of passion by Rudge and Reuben which frame this paragraph are thus tuned to the narrative whole. Secondly, Rudge's hair-clutching and Reuben's despair - also a dramatisation of Rudge's guilty turmoil - are given depth and intensity by the fact that even the inanimate world is alive with feeling, feeling moreover which either resembles Rudge's own, or is stimulated by a reaction against the murderer. The 'trembling trees' mirror Rudge's fear, while the 'angry' fire - the product of Rudge's guilt-ridden imagination punishes and pursues. The 'crying' of the Bell could be echoing the cries of Rudge's murdered victim; it could also represent the guilty pain of the villain-victim. 'Villain-victim' is indeed an essential phrase here. Like Sikes after the murder of Nancy, Rudge becomes a figure with whom we can sympathise - imaginatively if not morally - when he is at the mercy of his conscience.

*'There would have had a beginning and an end, but here all space was full.'* (Italics mine)

- This phrase is important to an understanding of our ability to identify with both Sikes and Rudge in the throes of guilt and fear. In the Preface to *Oliver Twist*, Dickens is obviously confused about whether wholly evil people actually exist, but suggests that Sikes may be an example of the breed (pp. lxiv-lxv). The heart of the problem for Dickens the writer, however, is not so much whether wholly evil men exist, but whether it is possible to animate them, to give them felt life as characters, within the novel. On 1 May 1848, Charlotte Brontë maintained in a letter to W. S.

Williams:

We can learn little from the strange fantasies of demons - we are not of their kind; but the vices of the deceitful, selfish man or woman humble and warn us.<sup>62</sup>

The 'humanising' of Sikes and Rudge is an important development both morally and artistically. In the case of Rudge, the conscience-ridden villain is transformed from a stock type superimposed on

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<sup>62</sup> *The Brontës: Life and Letters: Being an Attempt to Present a Full...Record of the Lives of the Three Sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë from the Biographies of Mrs. Gaskell and Others*, ed. by Clement Shorter, 2 vols (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), I, 413.

the narrative into a frightened human being who cannot escape from his environment or his victim. Thus, Rudge is not a mechanical and separate figure with 'a beginning and an end' whose rigid expressions of emotion protrude awkwardly from fluid, animate passages of narrative description. His nature not only blends with his environment; it is inseparable from that of another human being, his victim. The vision of Reuben's seemingly conventional rendering of despair is thus a complex visual demonstration of Rudge's own guilty despair. Villain and victim are fused with one another and with their world, in a passage which at first sight could seem little more than a 'picture' or 'tableau' from the nineteenth-century stage, a static representation of a single emotion. There is a fusion of symbol and inner significance, narrative imagery and theatrical gesture.

Rudge's passionate gesticulations are an attempt to contain his guilt, which is synonymous with the remembered pain of his victim. He wants to stop the inner bleeding of himself and his victim, which he sees mirrored everywhere - 'everything was steeped in the prevailing red; [...] nature was drenched in blood'. Rudge's externalisation of his inner bleeding provides temporary relief, but his blood, his guilt, cannot be contained or fixed, and once it has erupted from the veins of the narrative, there is no confining it within a single finite gesture. His vision of the despairing Reuben is paradoxically an inversion of the familiar use of conventional stage passion. Dickens employs the re-enactment to show that the emotion of a victim does not die with the gesture or the victim. It is not finite, but infinite, visiting itself on the villain. What could be called Rudge's stream of conscience, like Satan's Hell - as Dickens constantly reminds us - is always within and without him. But Rudge, unlike Satan, is visited intermittently by flashbacks from the past which take the form of 'tableaux' from the nineteenth-century stage, 'fixing' the last passion of the victim, but perpetuating the villain's own flow of guilty emotion.

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This combination of fluidity and temporary stasis is typical of Dickens's rendering of passion.

When commentators criticise Dickens for his 'behaviouristic rendering' of passion, they forget that Dickens is not a playwright, and that the behaviouristic rendering is never isolated, always wedded

to narrative prose with its own peculiar powers of transformation. Again, narrative context can have a similar deepening and intensifying effect on speech that, examined in isolation, appears to differ little from the heightened, rhetorical language of the melodramatic stage. Direct expressions of passion in Dickens, as we have already noted, often appear to simplify the complexity of human emotion laughably. Moreover, as George Worth has noted in his description of melodramatic speech,<sup>63</sup> the language of Dickens's characters is sometimes so rhetorically patterned and stylised that it appears too complex to be 'in character'. Worth fails to see the significance, however, of the fact that melodramatic speech grows out of narrative prose which he admits is melodramatic. As I suggested previously in my analysis of melodramatic gesture, the animation and externalisation which are marked features of Dickens's prose descriptions mean that Dickens's novels are composed in a heightened key from the outset. The language and gesture of feeling should thus mainly be judged by internal standards, by analysing the relationship between the part and the whole. Perhaps the best example of the chameleonic qualities of the language of feeling in context is the dying speech of Hugh, another of the passionate villains in *Barnaby Rudge*. Hugh has been likened throughout to an animal possessing physical strength, violent impulses, and little intelligence. Before his death, however, he finds a voice, and the novel finds an eloquent mouth-piece for its prevalent debate about the relative influences of nature and environment on villainy.<sup>64</sup> Hugh begins by pleading for Barnaby's pardon:

'You see what I am - more brute than man, [...] but I had faith enough to believe, and did believe as strongly as any of you gentlemen can believe anything, that this one life would be spared. [...]

'If this was not faith, and strong belief!' cried Hugh, raising his right arm aloft, and looking upward like a savage prophet whom the near approach of Death had filled with inspiration, 'where are they! What else should teach me - me, born as I was born, and reared as I have been reared - to hope for any mercy in this hardened, cruel, unrelenting place! Upon these human shambles, I, who never raised his hand in prayer till now, call down the wrath of God! On that black tree, of which I am the ripened fruit, I do invoke the curse of all its victims, past, and present, and to come. On the head of that man, who, in his conscience, owns me for his son, I leave the wish that he may never sicken on his bed of

<sup>63</sup> *Dickensian Melodrama*, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> The nature/environment question in this novel centres on the characters of Hugh, Barnaby and possibly Stagg.

down, but die a violent death as I do now, and have the night-wind for his only mourner. To this I say, Amen, amen!' (Chapter 77, p. 596)

By the end of his speech, Hugh has reached 'heroic' stature. In keeping with the prevailing atmosphere and imagery of transformation employed throughout the novel - men become fiends, the human becomes the superhuman, the natural becomes the supernatural<sup>65</sup> - Hugh is transformed from beast to 'savage prophet'. The omnipresent narrative metamorphosis means that Hugh's change is 'in tune' with the narrative whole, while his passionate nature and the intensity of the situation, 'justifies' the heightened nature of his speech. There is no such thing as a correct, autonomous language of feeling. Dr Johnson argues in his 'Preface to Shakespeare':

The dialogue of this author is so evidently determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with so much ease and simplicity, that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation and common occurrences.<sup>66</sup>

Though Hugh's speech and death are hardly 'common', what interests us here is Johnson's phrase, 'the dialogue [...] so evidently determined by the incident which produces it'. For the integrity of a work of art to remain intact, dialogue must grow from situation as well as character, must relate to the universal system of language of the work, as well as to individual personality.

It will be useful here to examine the apparently unrelated comments of two poet-playwrights, Brecht and T. S. Eliot, in order to achieve a better understanding of Dickens's unusual style. In his essay, 'Poetry and Drama' (1950), Eliot argues that 'the chief effects of style and rhythm in dramatic speech, whether in prose or verse, should be unconscious', and that the language

will only be 'poetry' when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> 'The more the fire crackled and raged, the wilder and more cruel the men grew; as though moving in that element they became fiends, and changed their earthly nature for the qualities that give delight in hell' (Chapter 55, p. 422); 'scores of objects, never seen before, burst out upon the view, and things the most familiar put on some new aspect' (Chapter 64, p. 492).

<sup>66</sup> *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. by W. K. Wimsatt, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 60.

<sup>67</sup> *Selected Prose*, pp. 67-86 (pp. 69, 70).

The emphasis is on 'unconscious' effects, on 'natural' utterances, in dramatic works which do not show the seams. Brecht, by contrast, insists that jolts from one plane of reality to the other can be exploited in the theatre. In his notes to *Mann ist Mann* (1931), Brecht extols the possibilities open to the 'epic actor', who has to be

able to show his character's coherence despite, or rather by means of, interruptions and jumps. Since everything depends on the development, on the flow, the various phases must be able to be clearly seen and therefore separated, and yet this must not be achieved mechanically.<sup>68</sup>

Though Dickens is a novelist, he weds the dramatic theories advocated by both Brecht and Eliot in his writing. Overt theatricality - flamboyant language and bold gesture - can be exploited to arouse the reader's sense of an occasion; alternatively, 'its chief effects can be unconscious'. Often, both effects are achieved simultaneously. Theatricality is 'clearly seen' and 'natural'. Dickensian narrative blends different registers and makes them seem of a piece.

Dickens's rendering of passion is prime evidence of this curious capacity. It is undeniable that overt expressions of passion in Dickens's novels often resemble superficially the passionate outbursts of melodramatic stage prototypes. Conventional gestures, 'tableaux' and stylised language of feeling are common features of both the stage and Dickens's novels. What makes Dickens's novels more than a series of theatrical sketches, however, are the 'bits-in-between' or the narrative prose. Dickens uses the resources of the novel to provide substance to shows of emotion which might otherwise appear hollow. What Leavis calls 'the richly poetic art of the word', that is, the use of imagery, tone and rhythm to form a linguistic, symbolic substructure in the novel, creates a universe alive with feeling, a world where man has a monopoly over neither passion nor the externalisation of passion. Such a narrative environment provides a perpetual flow of feeling, an emotive reservoir on which characters like Rudge and Sikes can draw to animate even the most rigid expressions of passion. We are back to the fusion of fluidity and stasis. Dickens differs from popular contemporaries like Collins and Ainsworth in the fact that he harnesses melodramatic

<sup>68</sup> *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 55.

rendering of passion to the 'passional' resources of the novel, to use the phrase of Lawrence. He mingles nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of the novel as a vehicle for the representation of feeling, combining a conventional stage language of the passions with a sense of the novel as a genre in which, to echo Joyce, emotion flows 'round and round the persons of the action like a vital sea'.<sup>69</sup>

#### **4. 1 - Postscript: Dickens's Dramatic Failures**

The preceding discussion is an attempt to rescue Dickens's passionate villains from the relentless barrage of critical abuse which has been directed at them.<sup>70</sup> It is essentially aimed at redressing an extreme imbalance in Dickens criticism which, for the most part, refuses to see anything but aesthetic ineptitude in these passionate malefactors. I do not want to give the impression, however, that Monks, Rudge and Sikes are triumphant examples of Dickens's art or moral insight. They are neither. All three are seriously flawed creations. By Dickens's standards, Monks and Rudge especially, are conspicuous failures. But there is gold among the dross; each member of the triumvirate exhibits seeds of the 'felt life' of later passionate villains such as Headstone and Jasper. Moreover, all are considerable improvements on stage prototypes. But fundamentally imperfect they remain, and this section of my study will explore the root cause of what can fittingly be called Dickens's dramatic failures. It is my belief that the worst moments in Dickens's writing come when he confuses the novel with the drama, when he takes literally his own belief that 'every writer of

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<sup>69</sup> In a letter to Forster about the interpolated chapter entitled 'The History of a Self-Tormentor' in *LD*, Dickens offers us a fascinating insight into his conception of narrative when he explains that the interpolation will flow from 'the blood of the book' - *Letters* (Nonesuch), II, 776 (June 1856). His language here is obviously of particular relevance to my discussion of *BR*.

<sup>70</sup> See G. K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (London: Dent, 1911), p. 179, Earle Davis, *The Flint and the Flame: The Artistry of Charles Dickens* (London: Gollancz, 1964), p. 234, George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (London: Gresham, 1903), p. 112, R. H. Home, ed., *A New Spirit of the Age, The World's Classics*, CXXVII (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), p. 14, T. H. Lister, 'Dickens's Tales', *Edinburgh Review*, 68 (1838), 75-97, (p. 96), 'Oliver Twist', *Quarterly Review*, 64 (1839), 83-102, (p. 94), J. C. Reid, *Charles Dickens: 'Little Dorrit'*, *Studies in English Literature*, XXVIII (London: Arnold, 1967), pp. 17, 37, Edmund Wilson, 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', p. 82.

fiction, although he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage'. Paradoxically, the best examples of Dickens's writing also stem from a wedding of novel and drama; but when he is writing at his best, he is conscious that he has not adopted the dramatic form, that dramatic techniques must enhance rather than neglect the resources of the novel. Failure comes when he makes the wrong choices, when generic confusion replaces experimentation.

Ironically, Dickens's greatest blunders are perfect instances of the novelist practising what he preaches. Harking back to his advice to contributors to his journals, for example, his regular doctrine -

The people do not sufficiently work out their own purposes in dialogue and dramatic action; [...] what you do for them, they ought to do for themselves.<sup>71</sup>

- is often his own downfall. Returning to *Barnaby Rudge*, a comparison between Chapter 62 and Chapter 65 will illustrate how a similar scenario can result in either success or failure, depending largely on whether the narrator does his share of the work. Chapter 62 starts promisingly, with a narrative description of the condemned Rudge's state of mind. The confusion and guilt of the arch-villain doomed to death is a Dickensian speciality, and the chronicler of the death of Sikes and the impending death of Fagin is very much in evidence in the following passage:

THE prisoner, left to himself, sat down upon his bedstead [...]. It would be hard to say, of what nature his reflections were. They had no distinctness, and, saving for some flashes now and then, no reference to his condition or the train of circumstances by which it had been brought about. The cracks in the pavement of his cell, the chinks in the wall [...] - such things as these, subsiding strangely into one another, and awakening an indescribable kind of interest and amusement, engrossed his whole mind; and although at the bottom of his every thought there was an uneasy sense of guilt, and dread of death, he felt no more than that vague consciousness of it, which a sleeper has of pain. It [...] is no bodily sensation, but a phantom without shape, or form, or visible presence; pervading everything, but having no existence; recognisable everywhere, but nowhere seen, or touched, or met with face to face, until the sleep is past, and waking agony returns. (p. 471)

Such a lyrical evocation of fluid, inner, metamorphic feeling, 'a phantom without shape or form, or visible presence', with its emphasis on the confused mingling of numerous, indistinct emotions, cannot, by its own terms, be replaced by a visual symbol. Such feeling is formless, the

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<sup>71</sup> *Letters* (Pilgrim), VII, 529. See p. 131 above.

narrative tells us. Furthermore, the tangled indistinctness of the somnambulant prisoner's thoughts and emotions implies that his inner life cannot be externalised in the bold language of melodrama. Moreover, it is made clear that Rudge does not understand his guilt-laden dream state well enough to articulate what he is experiencing. But despite this, and the fact that Rudge is not the most garrulous of villains, the reader is treated to an anguished outpouring from the prisoner on his troubled state, for much of the chapter. Stagg is Rudge's reluctant and virtually redundant audience for the thinly disguised stage soliloquies. When Stagg accuses the prisoner of having 'a strong fancy', Rudge becomes abstract and philosophical:

I have seen him, on quays and market-places, with his hand uplifted, towering, the centre of a busy crowd, unconscious of the terrible form that had its silent stand among them. Fancy! Are you real? Am I? Are these iron fetters, riveted on me by the smith's hammer, or are they fancies I can shatter at a blow? (Chapter 62, p. 473)

Rudge's mock questioning of the relationship between imagination and reality prompts another re-enactment of the murder, but this time in melodramatic rhetoric rather than gestures:

Did I go forth that night, abjured of God and man, and anchored deep in hell, to wander at my cable's length about the earth, and surely be drawn down at last? (Chapter 62, p. 474)

But unlike Rudge's former dramatisation of Reuben's murder, this rhetorical rerun is in keeping with neither character nor situation. Rudge is a man of violent action rather than a man of words, and the meeting in prison with Stagg has none of the tension or momentum of an incident like Hugh's hanging, where incident legitimately though momentarily transforms character. His 'soliloquising' is unnecessary and inappropriate in the novel form, where the narrator can take over the task of analysis from the unintelligent character - and indeed has done so in this chapter before Rudge 'takes the stage'. Rudge's appropriation of his own narrative deflates the narrator's preceding lyrical evocation of the condemned man's turmoil. In Chapter 65, by contrast, the narrator is the only teller, and the impetus and intrigue he generates temporarily reanimates Rudge. The devil imagery which sounded so forced from Rudge's own mouth in his speeches to Stagg, is far more in

keeping with the narrator's exploration of the workings of Rudge's 'guilty conscience' when Newgate is stormed:

His guilty conscience instantly arrayed these men against himself, and brought the fear upon him that he would be singled out, and torn to pieces.

Once impressed with the terror of this conceit, everything tended to confirm and strengthen it. His double crime [...] made him [...] the visible object of the Almighty's wrath. In all the crime and vice and moral gloom of the great pest-house of the capital, he stood alone, marked and singled out by his great guilt, a Lucifer among the devils [...] from whom the very captives in the jail fell off and shrunk appalled. (Chapter 65, p. 496)

The narrator analyses the reasons for Rudge's paranoia, thus making it real or understandable.

Uninstigated rantings from Rudge on the same subject, by contrast, seem hyperbolic and hollow.

Moreover, Chapter 65 - the storming of Newgate - is a narrative of action and suspense, whose first language is the inevitable product of the 'heightened' scene.

Again, if we compare Chapter 69 with Chapter 73, the detrimental effect of resorting to theatrical techniques where those peculiar to the novel would be more effective, is evident. In the earlier chapter, the narrator tells the reader about Rudge's character; in the later chapter, we are shown. Rudge is not intelligent enough to comprehend or articulate the mingled, contradictory emotions which churn inside him, so once more, narrative 'telling' is the more fitting vehicle of expression. In Chapter 69, we are told:

In the intense selfishness which the constant presence before him of his great crimes, and their consequences here and hereafter, engendered, every thought of Barnaby, as his son, was swallowed up and lost. Still, his [Barnaby's] presence was a torture and reproach; in his wild eyes, there were terrible images of that guilty night; with his unearthly aspect, and his half-formed mind, he seemed to the murderer a creature who had sprung into existence from his victim's blood. (p. 530)

The combination of Rudge's internal torture and insensitive selfishness is 'shown' but poorly in comparison, in Chapter 73, when Mrs. Rudge visits her husband to urge him to repent. She reminds Rudge of the thoughts that we know torment him; she argues that Barnaby's idiocy is 'the terrible consequence of your crime'. Yet Rudge's responses betray none of his inner chaos. They are the laughable curses of a stage villain from Gothic melodrama:

'Begone!' he cried. 'Leave me! You plot, do you! [...] A curse on you and your boy.'

[...]

'[...] The gallows has me in its grasp, and it is a black phantom that may urge me on to something more. Begone! I curse the hour that I was born, the man I slew, and all the living world!'. (p. 565)

Mrs Rudge is such a poorly realised presence throughout the novel, that Rudge's emotive responses to her seem grotesquely exaggerated and empty. These scenes between a passionate, murderous husband and a timid, mouse-like wife never generate enough dramatic tension to 'justify' the language of melodrama.

The failure of Monks in *Oliver Twist* is the direct result of 'showing' replacing 'telling'. We are told next to nothing about Monks's inner emotions; thus, his passionate melodramatic outbursts invariably seem empty and superfluous. Again, Monks is related to the narrative whole only by elaborate and unbelievable twists of plot. His speech appears ridiculous, therefore, not because of its intrinsic artificiality, but because it is in keeping with neither character - we are never given any convincing glimpse of his passionate depths - nor situation. For example, in Chapter 33, when Monks confronts Oliver at an inn, we read:

'Rot his bones!' murmured the man, in a horrible passion: between his clenched teeth; '[...] Curses on your head, and black death on your heart, you imp!'. (p. 217)

The encounter has no roots in the narrative; ultimately, therefore, the effect of Monks's speech is no more moving than the 'stagey' protestations of lifeless theatrical prototypes.

In *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction*, Barbara Hardy makes a useful distinction between 'the expressible feelings', which Dickens depicts through 'a simple language and gesture' and 'the inner currents' for which 'he devises complex forms of representation, which are reflexive and analytic'.<sup>72</sup> Dickens's best writing occurs when he 'swells the action to fix and mobilize the inner action of passion', when 'the violence within and without gradually connect'.<sup>73</sup> By contrast, his worst writing results from an imbalance between the intensity of inner and displayed passion, specifically when histrionic show appears to replace a fully realised presentation of the inner

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<sup>72</sup> p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

emotional life. To reuse the terms of Wagner, when Dickens does not harness theatrical techniques to the novelistic narrative, he achieves 'effect', or emotion without depth, rather than 'wirkung', or the fusion of essence with outward show.

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Dickens is highly conscious of the dangers of 'effect', of the separation of surface from substance. This consciousness is displayed throughout his novels by his fascinating use of eye imagery. For Dickens, eyes are truly the mirrors of the soul, hence one of his most disturbing yet frequent images is that of eyes that betray surface but no depth. This image suggests a severing of inner life from outward expression. It is used to describe passionless villains like Rigaud, whose eyes 'had no depth or change; they glittered, and they opened and shut. [...] A clockmaker could have made a better pair' (Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 5). Lifeless eyes are also, of course, used to describe corpses, or hint at death. Hence the extraordinary impact of the memory of Nancy's eyes on Bill Sikes. Isolated from all human contact, the eyes of Nancy, for Sikes, are both a reminder of his destruction of a human life, and a reminder that Nancy was the only human being who cherished any humane feelings towards him. The vision of her 'widely staring eyes, so lustreless and so glassy' (Chapter 48, p. 327) thus emphasises to Sikes that where there was once some channel of emotional warmth, there is now only 'a corpse endowed with the mere machinery of life' (Chapter 48, p. 327).

Moreover, Dickens demonstrates that the person on whom these lifeless, staring eyes are fixed, is also dehumanised. The image of Nancy's eyes thus frightens Sikes for another reason: they turn him into an object. The same effect is achieved at Fagin's trial, where he is stared at by 'a firmament, all bright with gleaming eyes':

But in no one face - not even among the women, of whom there were many there- could he read the faintest sympathy with himself, or any feeling but one of all-absorbing interest that he should be condemned. [...] He could glean nothing from their faces; they might as well have been of stone. (Chapter 52, pp. 358-59)

Significantly, Fagin sees 'one young man sketching his face in a little note-book' and 'he wondered whether it was like'. After his sentence is pronounced, Fagin seems transformed from an artist's

object into an artistic object: 'he stood, like a marble figure, without the motion of a nerve' (Chapter 52, pp. 359-60). The faces of the crowd that 'might as well have been of stone' have petrified the villain, killed the life in him. Dickens's association of death with the stasis of objects and life with animation is finally emphasised in *Oliver Twist* when the hanging apparatus is described:

Everything told of life and animation, but one dark cluster of objects in the very centre of all - the black stage, the cross-beam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death.  
(Chapter 52, p. 364)

The mechanism of murder which will literally take the life of the passionless villain (who is himself effectively a death-dealer), is momentarily the object which takes centre-stage for the audience of onlookers.

In *The Violent Effigy*, John Carey writes perceptively on Dickens's use of staring eyes:

The blank stare, not baleful but utterly impersonal, is the optic counterpart of dislocated language. It achieves no human communication. Staring eyes haunt Dickens. This is the final element in the spell which effigies cast over him. Their eyes stare intently, but there is no personality behind them to communicate with. They turn you into an object, because their stare acknowledges nothing human in you.<sup>74</sup>

Dorothy Van Ghent's analysis of the relationship between men and things in Dickens's writing is also of great relevance here. She relates Dickens's consciousness of the interaction between the animate and inanimate worlds to the processes of industrialisation manifest at the time and to his exploration of the relationship between good and evil:

People were being de-animated, robbed of their souls, and things were usurping the prerogatives of animate creatures - governing the lives of their owners in the most literal sense. This picture, in which the qualities of things and people were reversed, was a picture of a daemonically motivated world.<sup>75</sup>

I would like to extricate a line of thought of crucial importance to this thesis, latently present in the comments of both Carey and Van Ghent. Dickens's use of images of staring eyes is reflexive or self-conscious; Dickens perceives that the relationship figured thus between the human and the non-human, the animate and the inanimate, has an inevitable and weighty bearing on his own

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<sup>74</sup> p. 103.

<sup>75</sup> *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), pp. 128-29.

works. All the examples I have quoted, for example, associate either the owner of staring eyes or the object stared upon with either a lifeless mechanism or an artistic creation. A clockmaker could have given Rigaud better eyes; Nancy is now just 'a corpse endowed with the machinery of life'; Fagin is the artist's subject and also an object, 'a marble figure'; in the description of 'the black stage' set for Fagin's death, the lifeless man-made construct, or 'hideous apparatus of death' is contrasted with the 'life and animation' of human beings in the crowd.

Dickens is evidently aware that, in art, the divorce of surface from inner life, the resolution of essence 'into its mechanical integers', produces the effect of lifelessness - and that he can use that effect in order to evoke states of terror, self-alienation or dehumanisation. But in his weaker moments, characters like Monks or Rudge appear mechanistic or dehumanised in a lesser way; they seem what they are, figures in a work of art. By contrast, Dickens's animation of 'things', his attribution of inner lives and feelings to inanimate objects, is a deliberate and sophisticated device, calculated to create the illusion of human life where there is none. It is typical of Dickens's inconsistency that he can consciously evoke animation within the non-human world, yet unwittingly create characters who are remarkable examples of lifeless or mechanised fictional figures. As I have argued throughout this section, these partial failures of characterisation are the result of taking to the extreme the idea of the novel as theatre. But again, it is an example of Dickens's contrariness that we can witness innovative generic exploration on the one hand - for instance, in *The Pickwick Papers*, and in his application of techniques of theatrical presentation to his narrative prose - and elementary mistakes resulting from generic confusion, on the other.

Robert Garis among others<sup>76</sup> has commented on the unsuitability of the theatrical mode as a vehicle of the inner life. I have shown in this chapter that theatrical methods within the novel can provide a highly effective means of rendering emotions and passions. My argument then, is not that Dickens's use of theatrical methods is in itself at fault, but that in the early novels, in this case

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<sup>76</sup> *The Dickens Theatre*, p. 53; Garis argues that 'theatrical art is not an appropriate mode for dealing with the inner life, nor is an artist who works in this mode likely to be interested in the inner life'.

*Oliver Twist* and *Barnaby Rudge*, the young artist makes significant misjudgements concerning how and when to use his distinctive tools. In these early novels, however, Dickens is learning, experimenting, feeling his way, which accounts for the fact that even the much-derided Rudge is a character who possesses many striking features for the older artist to draw upon in his representations of passion.

Finally, Dickens discovers through these early passionate villains that the severance of inner emotional substance from outward show can create an effect of dehumanisation, which is itself a mode of developing and sustaining character. This finding is ironically put to good use in his representation of passionless dandy villains, who consciously deaden their passions in order to recreate themselves as works of art.

## Chapter 5 - *Oliver Twist*, Fictional Morality and Moral Fiction

### 5.1 - The Newgate Subtext: Romance vs. Realism

In writing of *Waverley*, Sir Walter Scott confessed:

I am a bad hand at depicting a hero properly so called, and have an unfortunate propensity for the dubious characters of borderers, Highland robbers, and all others of a Robin Hood description.<sup>1</sup>

Characters 'of a Robin Hood description' proved particularly problematic for Victorian critics. Neither heroes nor villains 'properly so called', they flaunted their moral ambiguity, both on the stage and in the novel, in a manner bound to irritate latent anxieties peculiar to the Victorian age. Popular novelists, especially admirers of Scott, like Ainsworth and Bulwer, caused a welter of critical controversy by making their protagonists criminals - and writers of stage melodrama, as we have seen in Chapter 2, exploited the public appetite for glamorous offenders. Bulwer's Paul Clifford, like Ainsworth's Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard, were no ordinary criminals; they were highwaymen, courageous, charming, gallant, attractive to women - and predictably, to the reading and theatre-going public. To their admirers, these characters were heroes; to their detractors, they were the worst type of villains. This chapter will examine firstly the impact of such characters on debates about the evolving novel form, and secondly Dickens's response, in the novelistic context of *Oliver Twist*, to the romanticising of crime.

Critics branded books sporting these morally ambiguous characters 'Newgate' novels. The term 'Newgate', of course, refers to both the famous prison whose destruction by fire in 1780 Dickens dramatises in *Barnaby Rudge*,<sup>2</sup> and to *The Newgate Calendar; or, The Malefactors' Bloody Register*, a popular collection of criminal biographies published in 1773. In his comprehensive work, *The Newgate Novel*, Keith Hollingsworth explains that as a literary critical term, the 'Newgate' tag is nothing but a convenient historical label. In practice, it was used insultingly by contemporary commentators about a series of novels published between 1830 and 1847 which had 'criminals as prominent characters'. According to Hollingsworth, 'a book was not

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by F. W. Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery*, 2 vols (London: Constable, 1907), II, 342.

<sup>2</sup> *BR* was predictably branded a Newgate novel.

likely to be damned with the accusing name unless it seemed to arouse an unfitting sympathy for the criminal'.<sup>3</sup>

As *Oliver Twist* was published in serial form between 1837 and 1838 in *Bentley's Miscellany* - the same journal that published the 'Newgate' novels of Ainsworth - it was in some ways inevitable that it would be labelled a Newgate novel. Indeed, the fact that Dickens chose to write *Oliver Twist* with its veritable rogues' gallery, despite critical antipathy to books about criminals, shows a typical Dickensian blend of courage and opportunism - that is, controversy sells. But in 1841, after *Oliver Twist* had been fiercely attacked as a Newgate novel, particularly by the staunchly 'anti-Newgate' journal, *Fraser's Magazine*, Dickens felt the need to add a preface to the third edition of his novel defending his artistic methods and motives.

The Preface to *Oliver Twist* is commonly acknowledged to be an attempt by Dickens to divorce himself from the Newgate novelists, and to clarify the moral, artistic and class issues surrounding the representation of crime in fiction. Two of the principal charges that Dickens was defending himself against were firstly, that his subject matter was *essentially* immoral, and secondly that it was 'low'. His choice of epigraph from Fielding mocks the stupidity of critics who automatically assume that because the subject matter of a novel is 'low', it is also immoral:

'Some of the author's friends cried, "Lookee, gentlemen, the man is a villain; but it is Nature for all that;" and the young critics of the age, the clerks, apprentices, &c., called it low, and fell a groaning.' - FIELDING. (p. lxi)

The implication of Fielding and Dickens is that nothing which is in nature - however immoral or 'low' - should be banned from the magic circle of fiction. That is, no subject is innately good or evil, beneficial or harmful. Dickens states outright:

I confess I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil. [...] I saw no reason, when I wrote this book, why the very dregs of life, so long as their speech did not offend the ear, should not serve the purpose of a moral, at least as well as its froth and cream. (p. lxi)

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<sup>3</sup> *The Newgate Novel, 1830-1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, and Thackeray* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), pp. 14-15.

In Dickens's view, the writer's treatment of his subject matter, artistic method or style, should be the true object of critical scrutiny; for the moral bias of a work depends on this.

This reading of the Preface is largely self-evident. But what is not often noticed is that, nowhere in the Preface does Dickens mention the term 'Newgate'. He makes one particularly dishonest and slippery reference to Edward Bulwer's 'Newgate' novel *Paul Clifford* (1830):

In fact, Gay's witty satire on society had a general object, which made him careless of example [...], and gave him other, wiser, and higher aims. The same can be said of Sir Edward Bulwer's admirable and most powerful novel of Paul Clifford, which cannot be fairly considered as having, or being intended to have, any bearing on this part of the subject, one way or another. (pp. lxii-lxiii)

Bulwer's novels obviously do have a bearing on the subject in every respect, but Dickens, by a rhetorical sleight of hand, chooses to divorce himself from such literary midgets by listing precedents for his own moral art set by giants like 'Fielding, De Foe, Goldsmith, Smollett, Richardson, Mackenzie' and Hogarth. All these writers, Dickens claims, 'for wise purposes [...] brought upon the scene the very scum and refuse of the land'. Yet all were reproached by 'the insects of the hour', the critics 'who raised their little hum, and died, and were forgotten' (p. lxiv).

No doubt the fact that Dickens deliberately avoids the word 'Newgate' can be explained if we acknowledge that the Preface is on one level a piece of literary propaganda designed literally to erase any associations between *Oliver Twist* and the Newgate novels, and to carve a niche for Dickens the novelist among the literary greats. But there is also a second, and far more important, reason why Dickens avoids mentioning Newgate and that is because he substitutes for it another key term - 'romance'. It seems strange that many critics today ignore the fact that the Preface signals itself as an attack on romance. Keith Hollingsworth, in fact, may have shifted critical interest away from importance of romance as a concept in the Newgate controversy, because in *The Newgate Novel* he incomprehensibly claims that the Newgate tag was not applied to 'romantic accounts of banditry'. He goes further, maintaining that 'picaro, gipsy, highwayman, and ordinary criminal all fall within the province of F. W. Chandler's inclusive work, *The Literature of Roguery*', rather than that of his own study.<sup>4</sup> Hollingsworth overlooks the glaring fact that

Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834) and *Jack Sheppard* (1839-40) are both subtitled 'A Romance'. Moreover, the eponymous hero of Bulwer's *Paul Clifford*, the first of the 'Newgate' novels, is a highwayman, as is Dick Turpin, the hero of *Rookwood*. Again, *Rookwood* is riddled with gipsies and other species of romantic bandits or outlaws, and it is in Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* that the 'romance of crime' enjoyed 'its wildest fling', in the words of Maurice Willson Disher.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter will argue that the term 'romance' lies at the heart of the Newgate controversy, and further, that the unacknowledged, perhaps subconscious project of those involved in the debate, was to establish the correct relationship in fiction between the romantic and the real. That is, Newgate novelists and critics were grappling semi-consciously with forms and concepts of 'realism' before the word emerged as a literary critical term, before the emergence of Balzac, and before British writers like George Eliot and G. H. Lewes tackled the many paradoxes and problems it presented.<sup>6</sup>

Newgate commentators were embroiled in, but not fully alive to, the complexity of the relationship between life and fiction - hence the confusion about moral and artistic issues which marks the debate. One point which was clear to many, however, was that romance was the enemy, since it was a genre which falsified reality and was therefore immoral. At the same time, definitions of 'romance' varied greatly. In the case of Dickens, anyway, his understanding of the word evolved and metamorphosed throughout his career. In the Preface to *Oliver Twist*, the term romance is

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Blood and Thunder*, p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> In the 1842 Preface to *La Comédie humaine*, ed. by Marcel Bouteron (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), Balzac claimed, 'French society was to be the historian, I had merely to be its secretary' (I, 7); repr. in *Realism*, ed. by Lilian R. Furst, *Modern Literatures in Perspective* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 29.

Ian Watt claims that "Réalisme" was apparently first used as an aesthetic description in 1835 to denote the "verité humaine" of Rembrandt as opposed to the "idéalité poétique" of neo-classical painting; it was later consecrated as a specific literary term by the foundation in 1856 of *Réalisme*, a journal edited by Duranty' - *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 10. Watt's source is Bernard Weinberg's *French Realism: The Critical Reaction, 1830-1870*, *MLA of America General Series* (London: [n. pub.], 1937), p. 114.

closely associated with fiction which glamorises crime and distorts reality; the term is in fact almost a convenient shorthand for Newgate novels. The Preface as a whole is an uncompromising attack on romance as a genre, but the attack is concentrated in the lines:

there are people of so refined and delicate a nature, that they cannot bear the contemplation of these horrors. Not that they turn instinctively from crime; but that criminal characters, to suit them, must be like their meat, in delicate disguise. A Massaroni in green velvet is quite an enchanting creature; but a Sikes in fustian is insupportable. A Mrs. Massaroni, being a lady in short petticoats and a fancy dress, is a thing to imitate in tableaux and have in lithograph on pretty songs; but a Nancy, being a creature in a cotton gown and cheap shawl, is not to be thought of. *It is wonderful how Virtue turns from dirty stockings; and how Vice, married to ribbons and a little gay attire, changes her name, as wedded ladies do, and becomes Romance.* (p. lxiii) (Italics mine)

Again, in a scarcely veiled reference to the protagonists of popular romance, Dickens writes in one place -

I had read of thieves by scores - seductive fellows (amiable for the most part), faultless in dress, plump in pocket, choice in horseflesh, bold in bearing, fortunate in gallantry, great at a song, a bottle, pack of cards or dice-box, and fit companions for the bravest. But I had never met (except in HOGARTH) with the miserable reality. (p. lxii)

- and in another:

Here are no canterings upon moonlit heaths, no merry-makings in the snuggest of all possible caverns, none of the attractions of dress, no embroidery, no lace, no jack-boots, no crimson coats and ruffles, none of the dash and freedom with which 'the road' has been, time out of mind, invested. (p. lxiii)

Dickens is in no doubt that the protagonists of romance, though fashionable or genteel, are nonetheless villainous. This in itself is not an artistic crime; an outlaw like Jack Sheppard, for instance, the 'hero' of Ainsworth's novel of that name and the darling of nineteenth-century stage productions, actually existed and should not thus be banned from novel or stage. It is the fact that Newgate villains are glamorised, presented as heroes and given what Thackeray calls 'poetic adornment[s]',<sup>7</sup> that is reprehensible. G. H. Lewes's term 'falsism' helps illuminate why Dickens objected to Newgate romances so particularly. In the *Westminster Review* in 1858, Lewes argued, 'Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not idealism, but *Falsism*'.<sup>8</sup> Dickens's

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<sup>7</sup> Cited from 'Hints for a History of Highwaymen', *Fraser's Magazine*, 9 (March 1834), 279-87 (p. 287).

attack on romance is an attack on what Dickens sees as romance's distortion of reality, rather than its subject matter.

In the Preface to *Oliver Twist* then, Dickens declares himself to be an opponent of romance and an exponent of a comparatively realistic style of writing. He states boldly

It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really did exist; to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid poverty of their lives; to shew them as they really are, forever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great, black, ghastly gallows closing up their prospect, turn them where they may; it appeared to me that to do this, would be to attempt a something which was greatly needed, and which would be a service to society. (p. lxii)

Again, he emphasises:

as the stern and plain truth, even in the dress of this (in novels) much exalted race, was a part of the purpose of this book, I will not [...] abate one hole in the Dodger's coat, or one scrap of curl-paper in the girl's dishevelled hair. (p. lxiii)

Comparing his project to that of Cervantes, he argues that:

It was my attempt, in my humble and far distant sphere, to dim the false glitter surrounding something which really did exist, by shewing it in its unattractive and repulsive truth. (p. lxiv)

Furthermore, Dickens's emphatic response to critics of Nancy - 'It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE.' (p. lxv) - is remarkably similar to the pronouncement by the forefather of French realism, Balzac, on his character, le père Goriot:

After reading about the secret misfortunes of Père Goriot, you will eat your dinner with relish, blaming the author for your insensibility, charging him with exaggeration, accusing him of poetic licence, but, let me tell you, this drama is not fiction or romance. *All is true*. So true that everyone can recognize its elements in his own circle, perhaps in his own heart.<sup>9</sup>

However, although on a superficial level, the Preface to *Oliver Twist* can be read as dramatising a straightforward debate between romance and a burgeoning 'realism', things are not

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<sup>8</sup> 'Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction', *Westminster Review*, 14 (1858), 488-518 (p. 493).

<sup>9</sup> *Père Goriot* (1834-35), trans. by A. J. Krailsheimer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991; repr. 1992), p. 2.

quite that simple. After all his fierce talking, for example, Dickens significantly qualifies his presentation of *Oliver Twist* as realistic:

No less consulting my own taste, than the manners of the age, I endeavoured, while I painted it in all its fallen and degraded aspect, to banish from the lips of the lowest character I introduced, any expression that could by possibility offend; and rather to lead to the unavoidable inference that its existence was of the most debased and vicious kind, than to prove it elaborately by words and deeds. (p. lxiv)

Indeed, Dickens hints at this qualification earlier in the Preface when he states that he saw no objections to presenting 'the very dregs of life' in fiction, 'so long as their speech did not offend the ear' (p. lxi).

The Preface to *Oliver Twist* was, after all, written as a piece of literary propaganda in a local critical debate. A more balanced understanding of Dickens's textual responses to the relationship between romance and 'realism' can be attained by spreading the critical net more widely. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens appears, at first sight, to be uncharacteristically consistent in his denunciation of the moral and artistic falsity of romance. Crummles's illegitimate fare is riddled with dramatisations of romantic criminality and Dickens leaves us in no doubt about the standard or style of theatrical productions which have little to do with realism or morality.

Crummles tells Nicholas:

'You shall study Romeo [...] - don't forget to throw the pump and tubs in by-the-bye - Juliet Miss Snevellicci, old Grudden the nurse. [...] Rover too; - you might get up Rover while you were about it, and Cassio, and Jeremy Diddler. You can easily knock them off; one part helps the other so much'. (Chapter 23, p. 298)

Shakespeare's heroes and such 'heroes' from romance such as Rover are treated with equally little respect. Spectacle, sensation and favour with the masses are more important than realistic portraits of vice. Elsewhere in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Crummles praises his wife's ability to play a

Shakespearean heroine and the wife of popular romantic 'hero', Rob Roy, in memorable terms:

'I didn't even know she could dance till her last benefit, and then she played Juliet, and Helen Macgregor, and did the skipping-rope hornpipe between the pieces'. (Chapter 25, p. 318)

Once more, the moral significance of romance is less important than its ability to provide entertainment.

But Dickens's most important statement on romance in *Nicholas Nickleby* is of essential relevance to this study and must be analysed alongside the Preface to *Oliver Twist* for an accurate understanding of Dickens's attitudes to romance. Ostensibly venting his distaste for the kind of misdirected charity later practised by Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House*, the narrator draws an unexpected comparison between the charity worker and the romance writer:

In short, charity must have its romance, as the novelist or playwright must have his. A thief in fustian is a vulgar character, scarcely to be thought of by persons of refinement; but dress him in green velvet, with a high-crowned hat, and change the scene of his operations, from a thickly-peopled city to a mountain road, and you shall find in him the very soul of poetry and adventure. *So it is with the one great cardinal virtue, which, properly nourished and exercised, leads to, if it does not necessarily include, all the others.* It must have its romance; and the less of real, hard, struggling work-a-day life there is in that romance, the better. (Chapter 18, p. 215) (Italics mine)

Initially, this passage appears to echo the militant anti-romance sentiments of the Preface to *Oliver Twist*, but if we look at it carefully, we find its meaning and tone to be slippery and elusive. In my view, this passage captures, perhaps more accurately than the earlier Preface - which is, after all, a fierce piece of rhetoric written with the ulterior motive of distancing himself from second-class writers - the true complexity of Dickens's attitudes towards romance. The crucial point is to be found in the italicised sentence. After all he has said about romance, Dickens insinuates subtly that, like charity - 'the great cardinal virtue' - romance, if it is 'properly nourished and exercised', can embrace the virtues of great writing. In the last sentence, however, Dickens appears to remember the contemporary critical climate and the state of popular romance and lashes out sarcastically at the expense of those romance writers who dispense with 'real hard struggling work-a-day life'. The vacillation in his response to romance is essential in so far as it explains Dickens's constant admiration for Walter Scott, which could otherwise seem paradoxical. In the novels of Scott, romance is 'properly nourished and exercised'; it is fused with 'work-a-day life'; artistic methods are modified by moral considerations. In retrospect then, it is significant that Mrs Crummles plays

Juliet and Helen MacGregor. Rob Roy MacGregor is, of course, the protagonist of Scott's novel, *Rob Roy* (1817); Dickens is lamenting the minor theatre's tendency to tarnish great works of art. Scott, the father of novelistic romance, is placed by him on a pedestal with Shakespeare.

Thus, behind the war cry against the theatrical and novelistic hacks, there is often, as we can see, a quieter voice in Dickens's writing, which acknowledges and exploits the possibilities of a nobler, less artificial, form of romance. Many writers at the time thought in terms of a dialectic between the real and the romantic, having only a vague grasp of the concept 'romance' and the concept which was to become known as literary 'realism'. Many critics and authors of the evolving novel form were divided and confused about how the real should be most appropriately represented in fiction.

In this context, it is perhaps no surprise that the critical reception of *OT* was marred by confusion about moral, artistic and class issues. Probably the most influential anti-Newgate reviewer was William Thackeray; his series of articles for *Fraser's Magazine*, published between 1834 and 1840, constantly highlights the centrality to the Newgate debate of defining the relationship between the romantic and the real. Moreover, his comments on Dickens reveal how far, in their critical writing, the two novelists differed in their ideas about how real life should be represented in fiction. In some ways, his attacks on Dickens, and Dickens's responses, represent a tug-of-war for the soul of the Victorian novel.

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Thackeray's first article, a review of Charles Whitehead's *Lives and Exploits of English Highwaymen, Pirates and Robbers* (1834), entitled 'Hints for a History of Highwaymen' (March 1834),<sup>10</sup> performs a remarkable U-turn. In the first half, reminiscing about his own childhood, Thackeray laments that 'the age of highwaymen is gone', and waxes lyrical about the harmlessness of highwaymen compared to contemporary politicians (pp. 279, 284). But in the second half, transforming himself from private citizen to public journalist, Thackeray complains that 'hitherto

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<sup>10</sup> *Fraser's Magazine*, 9 (March 1834), 279-87.

the English criminal' has not been shown, 'as he really is in action and in principle'; he has been camouflaged by 'poetic adornment and speculative reverie' (pp. 286-87).

U-turn aside, however, it would be thought that Thackeray the public man would have nothing but praise for *Oliver Twist*; his demands for the criminal to be 'displayed as he really is' are supported in Dickens's Preface by Dickens's decision to 'draw a knot of such associates in crime as really did exist' (p. lxii). But when we come to Thackeray's second article, 'Horæ Catnachianæ', published in *Fraser's Magazine* in April 1839, Thackeray groups Dickens with the 'Newgate' novelists:

We (that is, the middling classes) have been favoured of late with a great number of descriptions of our betters, and of the society which they keep; and have had also, from one or two popular authors, many facetious accounts of the ways of life of our inferiors. There is in some of these histories more fun - in all, more fancy and romance - than are ordinarily found in humble life; and we recommend the admirer of such scenes, if he would have an accurate notion of them, to obtain his knowledge at the fountain-head, and trust more to the people's description of themselves, than to Bulwer's ingenious inconsistencies, and Dickens's startling, pleasing, unnatural caricatures.<sup>11</sup>

Thackeray's objection to Dickens's portrayal of low-life villains is ironically, considering Dickens's aims in *Oliver Twist*, that it is not realistic enough. He states contentiously:

Let him [the reader] try, for instance, three numbers of the \_\_\_ twopenny newspaper; there is more information about thieves, ruffians, swindlers of both sexes, more real vulgarity, more tremendous slang, more unconscious, honest, blackguard NATURE, in fact, than Mr. Dickens will ever give to the public. [...] And when we say that neither Mr. Dickens, nor Mr. Ainsworth, nor Sir Lytton Bulwer, can write about what they know not, we presume that not one of those three gentlemen will be insulted at an imputation of ignorance on a subject where knowledge is not, after all, very desirable. (p. 408)

It hardly needs stating that Dickens did, of course, have first hand experience of low life, but Thackeray's assumption that Dickens, as a gentleman, could not have first-hand experience of the criminal classes, was impossible to answer publicly. What is more relevant to this discussion is that in this third article, Thackeray repeats his warning against 'investing the low ruffians of the *Newgate Calendar*, and their profligate companions, with all the interest and the graces of romance'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Fraser's*, 19 (April 1839), 407- 424 (p. 407).

<sup>12</sup> 'William Ainsworth and *Jack Sheppard*', *Fraser's*, 21 (February 1840), 227-45 (p. 228).

But Thackeray was attracted to these romance-tainted characters. In 'Horæ Catnachianæ', for example, after explaining in detail how there is 'no truth' in Dickens's underworld criminals, Thackeray trumpets what could be a witty sidesweep at Victorian mores, but is a paradoxical and breathtaking confession of hypocrisy nonetheless. He writes:

All these opinions are, to be sure, delivered *ex cathedra*, from the solemn critical chair; but when out of it, and in private, we humbly acknowledge that we have read every one of Mr. Dickens's tales with the most eager delight [...]. Mr. Long Ned, Mr. Paul Clifford, Mr. William Sykes, Mr. Fagin, Mr. John Sheppard [...], and Mr. Richard Turpin [...] are gentlemen whom we must all admire. We could 'hug the rogues and love them,' and do - *in private*. In public, it is, however, quite wrong to avow such likings, and to be seen in such company. (p. 408)

This passage concentrates Thackeray's highly Victorian difficulties with the gap between life and literature, public and private morality.

What is emerging from this comparison of the two authors is that while both despise popular romance, they have very different ideas about how reality should be represented in fiction; they both had a strong, yet shadowy and individual, sense of the importance of the phantasmic concept that was to become literary realism. For example, Dickens's low life characters speak in 'unrealistic' language, not because Dickens was unfamiliar with street slang, as Thackeray, from his upper middle-class pedestal assumes, but because Dickens makes an artistic decision to keep dialogue clean. He accepts from the outset of his career that there must always be a gap between life and fictional representations of life. My analysis of the 'fantastic fidelity' of Dickens's style in Chapter 4 goes some way to explaining Dickens's feeling that creative writing can be 'truthful' or 'realistic' without being either a dull, prosaic imitation of real life or an escapist flight into the realms of the improbable. 'The Spirit of Fiction', an essay on the subject in *All the Year Round*, does likewise. This late essay argues in a highly sophisticated manner that novels and romances

for the most part seek in the common and familiar life around us, rather than from ideal sources, for the materials of adventure. They aim, and properly, at the real; and great pains are taken, which only those who are practised in the art can adequately appreciate, to secure the correctness of local colouring, and of the actual manners of the day. But in both there is a large amount of the fictitious. To different authors, according to their different capacities and dispositions, the facts present a different appearance and receive a different interpretation. When transplanted to the story-book they are seen through an artificial

medium, and are exaggerated or diminished according to the purpose intended and the form adopted.<sup>13</sup>

Here the critic is equally as alive to the inevitable symbiosis of reality and fiction as those well known champions of realism, George Eliot and G. H. Lewes. Lewes, for example, acknowledges the inevitable artificiality of the artistic medium:

Art always aims at the representation of Reality, *i.e.* of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself.<sup>14</sup>

George Eliot's narrator, in *Adam Bede* (1859), emphasises that truth or reality will always be subjective, a fact which makes the realist artist's task extremely difficult, if not impossible:

I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.

[...]

So I am content to tell my simple story [...] dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult. The pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin - the longer the claws, and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvellous facility which we mistook for genius is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion. Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings - much harder than to say something fine about them which is *not* the exact truth.<sup>15</sup>

From the very outset of his career as a writer, Dickens acknowledges through his fiction the impossibility of art acting as an exact mirror of life, and further, explores the way in which people fictionalise their lives in the first place. 'Reality' is thus not a static, constant, raw material for the writer to copy, as Lewes in particular suggests, but it is constantly reinvented by the individual. In his awareness of the complexity of the relationship between life and fiction, Dickens belies the image passed down to us by Lewes and Eliot of a vulgar caricaturist, and indeed prefigures that most overtly self-conscious of all 'movements', postmodernism, in his imaginative explorations of the referentiality of reality. As early as *Sketches by Boz*, for example, as J. Hillis

<sup>13</sup> [Anon.], *AYR*, 18 (27 July 1867), 118-20 (p. 119).

<sup>14</sup> 'Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction', p. 493.

<sup>15</sup> Ed. by Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980; repr. 1985), pp. 221-23 (Book 2, Chapter 17).

Miller demonstrates in his perceptive essay, 'The Fiction of Realism',<sup>16</sup> Dickens exploits the possibilities of his perception that fiction can never be life, but that life can never be life either - and is always permeated by the 'spirit of fiction'. The title *Sketches by Boz* is itself pointed enough proof of Miller's major thesis - that Dickens was conscious of the necessary fiction of realism. Moreover, Dickens self-consciously explores the fictionality of art and life in many of his novels - *David Copperfield* is perhaps the best example.

It would be absurd, however, to maintain that Dickens was immune to the critical confusion of the time. Whilst generally he expresses an instinctive and conscious knowledge that there is a middle way between the extremes of romance and 'realism', criticisms like those of Thackeray's, of the unreality of his writing, always pained him - so much so that in the Preface to the first edition of *Bleak House*, probably in response to this type of adverse criticism, he announces that he has 'purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things' (p. xiv). Although, as I pointed out in my analysis of the passage on romance in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens is always quietly aware of the possibilities of romance - when it is wedded to a sense of 'real hard struggling work-a-day reality' - it is nonetheless strange that Dickens should overtly describe himself as an exponent of the 'romantic', in this way. In a novel containing a character like Skimpole who constantly presents his 'romantic', immoral and aesthetic vision of 'familiar things', I think it highly unlikely that Dickens is advocating a similar outright falsification of reality - or 'falsism', to use the language of G. H. Lewes. Dickens is again implying that the novel is not life, it is an imaginative reproduction of life; the novelist, by trade, reinvents and reshapes his raw material. Unfortunately, however, in a statement obviously directed at advocates of a pedantic 'realism', Dickens appears trapped in the terms of contemporary critical debate, reinforcing that false dialectic between realistic and the romantic by his choice of the word 'romantic'.

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<sup>16</sup> Repr. in *Realism*, ed. by Lilian R. Furst, pp. 287-318, from 'The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz, Oliver Twist, and Cruikshank's Illustrations*' in *Dickens Centennial Essays*, ed. by Ada Nisbet and Blake Nevius (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 85-126.

But to return finally to the Newgate controversy: it needs to be stated that Thackeray had indeed located what could be regarded as Dickens's Achilles heel in *Oliver Twist*. Allowing for the consciousness which Dickens generally expresses of the necessarily artificial nature of fictional versions of reality and the subjective nature of reality itself, according to Dickens's own terms in the Preface to the novel, a novelist who shies away from showing crime as it really is, falsifies reality and can produce a morally pernicious work of art. Thackeray saw the moral consequences of his belief that Dickens's style was larger-than-life, theatrical and caricatured crime. For Thackeray, if Dickens did not show the true ugliness of criminals, warts and all, his novels could be nothing more than entertaining and empty fictions.

### **5. 2 - The Reality of Morality and the Vulnerability of Youth**

In 'Horæ Catnachianæ', Thackeray lauds the 'unconscious' kind of theatricality employed in Fielding's representations of villainy over the conscious Dickensian brand. Fagin, for Thackeray, is 'one of the cleverest actors that ever appeared on the stage', but ultimately he is 'only a clever portrait, with some of the artist's mannerisms - a mask' pictured 'leering and bandying with the galleries, to let you know that he is not what he seems'. Jonathan Wild, by contrast, is 'as earnest as a great man would be with a great purpose'. (p. 408)

Thackeray's dislike of the portrayal of Fagin as a self-conscious actor arises from a mélange of moral and artistic assumptions, some mistaken, some personal, all fascinating. He objects firstly to Fagin's winking and leering, for the artistic reason that it celebrates either his own fictionality as a character or that of the novel as a form - or both. Secondly, there is the moral assumption that the complicity Fagin forges with the 'audience' is dangerous, encouraging us to view events from his warped, villainous perspective, and worse, to enjoy and identify with his criminality. The third motivating factor behind Thackeray's criticisms is perhaps more complex, fusing novelistic and ethical considerations; when he says of Jonathan Wild that 'he is in earnest, as the author was when he described him', the implication is that Fagin is not a convincingly evil

villain because he is self-conscious. It seems ambiguous whether Thackeray is objecting to Fagin's theatrical awareness as an accurate representation of human behaviour - that is, he may be denying that real malefactors, with their hearts in their work, behave like that - or whether he is objecting, as above, to the fact that Fagin announces his fictional nature. Lastly, Thackeray's comment on the earnestness of Wild and his creator suggests that Dickens is an 'insincere', morally dubious writer because he writes with one eye on the gallery.

Ironically, throughout *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), Thackeray's narrator toys with and thus explodes the myth of the novel as a slice of real life. Given the fact that self-conscious, theatrically aware villains so obviously do exist in society, it seems likely that Thackeray dislikes Fagin's winking and leering because it celebrates Fagin's autonomous fictionality as a character rather than that of the novel as a form. After all, in the Preface to *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray draws a comparison between the novelist and the puppeteer<sup>17</sup> - influenced no doubt by Fielding's similar analogy in *Tom Jones*<sup>18</sup> - which suggests his personal desire to keep firm control over his characters. The narrator then can play fast and loose with the boundaries between life and fiction, while the characters must get on with the paradoxical business of *acting real*.

After disentangling the skein of Thackeray's thought, however, I must emphasise that I disagree with his basic premise that Fagin is portrayed by Dickens as 'leering and bandying with the galleries, to let you know that he is not what he seems'. Fagin perhaps lives in the popular imagination as such a character - for example, in the twentieth century, even Dickens scholars find it hard to see Fagin in terms of Dickens's novel alone after numerous musicals and films have reinvented the character. But there is no evidence for such a reading in the texts themselves. Fagin's

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<sup>17</sup> *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero*, ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983; repr. 1991), pp. 1-2. Thackeray's Preface is significantly entitled 'Before the Curtain'; he likens the author to 'the Manager of the Performance' and talks about characters as 'puppets'.

<sup>18</sup> Ed. by R. P. C. Mutter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; repr. 1982), pp. 299-302 (Book 7, Chapter 1). Although this chapter, entitled 'A Comparison between the World and the Stage' discusses more the relationship between world and stage than novel and stage, the suggestion that the novelist is a powerful, behind-the-scenes figure is clear. Again, in *Jonathan Wild*, Fielding's narrator compares the ironically entitled 'great man' or 'hero' to the master of a puppet show (Book 3, Chapter 11, p. 146).

extreme self-consciousness, theatrical awareness and overt complicity with his audience *within the novel* - usually his boys - cannot be denied, but there is not one example of Fagin acknowledging the presence of that other audience, his readership, through direct comments or even winking and joking. It is easy to imagine - especially remembering the creative power of the actor in the nineteenth-century popular theatre, which often exceeded that of the playwright - that an actor in the minor theatres would have played him in such a way, gaining laughs and popularity by bantering with his audience, as well as with the Dodger. Indeed, it is more than probable that Thackeray imbibed this popular image of Fagin, either by witnessing theatrical productions first-hand or by reading reviews in the papers, and that it influenced his remarks. However, the image of Fagin as a character who steps out of the text, playing with his fictionality like a figure in a modern novel, is another Dickensian 'conjuring trick'.

It is easy to see how Thackeray could have been deceived. Though based on real life prototype, Ikey Solomons, the character of Fagin obviously borrows heavily from the stereotype of the stage Jew<sup>19</sup> and the reader's response to Fagin relies on his/her recognition of, and openness to, well worn theatrical and literary conventions. Thus, to reapply Roland Barthes's term, the 'reality effect'<sup>20</sup> created by the character of Fagin is highly dependent on the reader's knowledge of the medium of fiction from the beginning. This chapter will argue that the 'realism' of Fagin (in the sense of his photographic truth-to-life) is irrelevant to Dickens's moral scheme in *Oliver Twist*. My argument is that the most sophisticated layer of moral commentary in *Oliver Twist* depends, not on its exact representation of life, but on its self-referential, textual investigation of the moral complexity of the relationship between life and fiction. Fagin is important to the novel, from this perspective, in so far as he possesses an acute understanding of this complexity and of the way fiction can be manipulated to achieve one's (im)moral purposes - i.e. to achieve real power.

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<sup>19</sup> See for example M. J. Landa, *The Jew in Drama* (London: King, 1926), Lauriat Lane Jr., 'Dickens's Archetypal Jew', *PMLA*, 73 (1958), 94-100.

<sup>20</sup> Barthes's essay, 'The Reality Effect' is reprinted in *Realism*, ed. by Lilian F. Hurst (pp. 135-41) from *French Literary Theory Today*, ed. by Tzvetan Todorov, trans. by R. Carter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 11-17.

To be more specific, *Oliver Twist* contains a reflexive dramatisation of the dangers of Newgate fiction and romantic notions of crime. In this drama, Fagin's is the only adult voice which extols the glamour and worthiness of crime in a manner reminiscent of Ainsworth. Newgate commentators seem to have mistaken Fagin's romantic sentiments for those of Dickens; in fact, Dickens is one step ahead, embedding the contemporary morality drama in a textual 'mouse trap' to catch the critics.

It is through Fagin's relationship with the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates, above all, that Dickens answers the accusations that were to be levelled at him in the Newgate debate. The Artful Dodger and Charley Bates can be seen as fictional representations of the kind of boys investigated in the 1852 House of Commons inquiry into 'the situation of Criminal and Destitute Juveniles'; these juvenile delinquents, neglected by society, blamed their corruption on stage adaptations of Newgate novels. The Commons report is riddled with statements like, 'I am certain that the theatre has been my ruin'.<sup>21</sup> But this is not the only reason why this chapter will pay a great deal of attention to these apparently minor characters. Bates and the Dodger are the only characters in *Oliver Twist* who appear to be overtly attractive criminals in the same way as Robin Hood or the protagonists of the contemporary Newgate novels; they could be seen as fair game for the Newgate critics. Though Fagin and Sikes possess what Dickens would call 'the attraction of repulsion',<sup>22</sup> we could never see them as glamorous, like Dick Turpin or Paul Clifford.

Bates and the Dodger, on the other hand, appear to have many features in common with the protagonists of popular romance; they are social outcasts and criminals, yet attractive, open-hearted, daring, intelligent and they possess a certain innocence. Like Robin Hood and his

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel*, pp. 221-22.

<sup>22</sup> On 28 February 1846, Dickens uses this phrase in the first of his letters to the *Daily News* on capital punishment, in relation to the 'horrible fascination' which the hanging exerts on 'good and virtuous and well-conducted people'. He concludes that 'the attraction of repulsion being as much a law of our moral nature, as gravitation is in the structure of the visible world, operates in no case [...] so powerfully, as in this punishment of death'. This letter also points out that the spectators see the hanging spectacle as a stage play. See Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, pp. 225-33.

Dickens also uses a similar phrase in *ED*, when he describes the relationship between Rosa and Jasper thus: 'The fascination of repulsion had been upon her so long, and now culminated so darkly, that she felt as if he had the power to bind her by a spell' - Chapter 20, p. 175.

successors, the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates seem to be morally harmless - if not quite virtuous - despite their actions. Yet the Dodger and Master Bates, as cheese for the critics in Dickens's Newgate mouse trap, are no ordinary romance rogues. They are crucial to Dickens in his textualised critique of Newgate fiction on two basic levels: firstly, they are representative of the type of youngsters who claimed to be corrupted by Newgate fiction and their relationship with Fagin shows the combined effect of social neglect and 'fictional brainwashing'; secondly, in several respects, they resemble the protagonists of popular romance and I shall be examining whether or not Dickens exploits their attractiveness in the amoral manner of Ainsworth.

But to return to Fagin. Fagin is conscious from the outset that fiction, drama, and comic entertainment have the power to corrupt. This awareness is demonstrated most obviously in his attempts to corrupt Oliver. The first instance of Fagin's directing an inverted morality play occurs in Chapter 9, when Oliver is shown 'a very curious and uncommon game' (p. 54), the game of pickpocketing. After the Dodger and Bates have gone out thieving, Fagin directs Oliver's response, saying:

'There, my dear,' [...] 'That's a pleasant life, isn't it? [...]'  
 [...]  
 '[...] Make 'em your models, my dear, [...]do everything they bid you, and take their advice in all matters: especially the Dodger's, my dear. He'll be a great man himself, and will make you one too, if you take pattern by him'. (Chapter 9, p. 55)

Fagin is attempting to indoctrinate Oliver with the idea that there is something 'great' about the life of crime, a myth exploded by Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*, but upheld by Ainsworth and some of the minor theatres. Fagin has obviously been successful in convincing the Dodger and Bates of the truth of this creed, because they expound its tenets from the beginning of the novel. In turn, they also try to convince Oliver, in an obtrusive set-piece scene. Before the interchange of dialogue between Oliver and the boys, moreover, it is significant that the language of the narrative contrasts the reality of the life of young criminals unfavourably with the romantic fiction, while maintaining a façade of approval of their actions and ideals. The narrator cannot work out whether it is the 'sense of freedom and independence' that smoking gives the Dodger, 'or the mildness of the beer that

mollified his thoughts', for 'he was evidently tinctured [...] with a spice of romance and enthusiasm' (Chapter 18, p. 116). The Dodger, at this point, beer and tobacco in juvenile hand, either acts, or believes himself to be, the incarnation of 'romance and enthusiasm'. A wonderfully comic passage follows, in which the Dodger tells Oliver that it's a pity 'he [Oliver] isn't a prig', and that he [the Dodger] would 'scorn to be anythink else' (Chapter 18, p. 116).

As Oliver seems to be particularly slow in grasping the greatness of the life of the prig, the Dodger and Bates elaborate on its attractions, using the language and arguments of romance. Sounding like Macraisy's mother in Fitzball's stage play of *Jonathan Bradford*,<sup>23</sup> Charley tells him that he'll be 'able to retire on his [your] property and do the gen-teel' if he 'puts himself under' Fagin. Then the Dodger appeals to Oliver's entrepreneurial spirit, his pride in himself and his taste for freedom - 'Why, where's your spirit? Don't you take any pride out of yourself? Would you go and be dependent on your friends?'. Then the boys enact two 'pantomimic representation[s]', one of 'a handful of shillings and halfpence', signifying 'a jolly life' and the other of the gibbet, Master Bates's party piece (Chapter 18, p. 118). Money is made to seem something attractive and immediate, while death by hanging is presented comically, thereby anaesthetising its force as a real threat to life. The Dodger finally attempts to invert Oliver's moral values by telling him that he's 'been brought up bad' and if he doesn't steal handkerchiefs and watches 'some other cove will' (Chapter 18, p. 118). At this climactic moment, probably after waiting in the wings, Fagin as director enters, crying delightedly: 'It all lies in a nutshell, my dear; in a nutshell, take the Dodger's word for it. Ha! ha! He understands the catechism of his trade' (Chapter 18, p. 118). Oliver again proves incorruptible, so Fagin tells comic tales about crime that make Oliver laugh 'heartily [...] in spite of all his better feelings'. They are the sugar to make the poison to go down. The text makes explicit Fagin's consciousness of what we can call, literally, the arts of corruption:

In short, the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils; and, having prepared his mind, by solitude and gloom, to prefer any society to the companionship of his sad thoughts in

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<sup>23</sup> Her advice is 'to beg, borrow and stale [i.e. steal], if you wish to be respectable' (p. 5; I. 2). See Chapter 2, p. 74 above.

such a dreary place, was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue for ever. (Chapter 18, p.120)

Fagin's intended master-stroke is to leave Oliver a volume which bears no accidental similarity to *The Newgate Calendar*. Fortunately and perhaps improbably, the book does not have the desired effect:

It was a history of the lives and trials of great criminals; and the pages were soiled and thumbed with use. Here he read of dreadful crimes that made the blood run cold [...]. The terrible descriptions were so real and vivid, that the sallow pages seemed to turn red with gore [...].

In a paroxysm of fear, the boy closed the book, and thrust it from him. Then, falling upon his knees, he prayed Heaven to spare him from such deeds. (Chapter 20, pp. 129-30)

The lack of success that Fagin has in moulding Oliver's remarkably tough moral fibre makes such scenes less disturbing, in some ways, than those displaying the psychological control he has over the more representative youngsters, the Dodger and Charley Bates. The well-thumbed pages of the 'history of the lives and trials of great criminals', and the moral guidance of Fagin, have successfully brainwashed the two into believing in the romance of crime. This corrupting fiction has seeped so deeply into the imagination of the Dodger that it inspires him artistically, as well as affecting his language and behaviour: 'he proceeded to amuse himself by sketching a ground-plan of Newgate on the table with the piece of chalk' (Chapter 25, p. 158). The most subtle and striking example of Fagin's manipulation of the myth of romantic criminality comes, however, when the Dodger is suddenly in danger of experiencing, rather than imagining, the real inside of Newgate. The shock that Charley Bates experiences when his friend and 'hero', the Artful Dodger, is captured by the police, brings him very close to questioning 'the catechism of his trade' that he has accepted as truth for so long. He is genuinely upset when he tells Fagin of the ignominious capture of his friend:

'To think of Jack Dawkins - lummy Jack - the Dodger - the Artful Dodger - going abroad for a common twopenny-halfpenny sneeze box! I never thought he'd a done it under a gold watch, chain and seals, at the lowest. Oh, why didn't he rob some rich old gentleman of his walables, and go out *as* a gentleman, and not like a common prig, without no honour nor glory!'. (Chapter 43, p. 295)

It is highly significant that what upsets Charley most is that the Dodger won't feature in *The Newgate Calendar*. In answer to Fagin's angry questions -

'What do you talk about his having neither honour nor glory for!' [...] 'Wasn't he always top-sawyer among you all! [...]'  
 [...]  
 '[...] What are you blubbering for?'

- Charley answers:

' 'Cause it isn't on the rec-ord, is it?' [...], chafed into perfect defiance of his venerable friend by the current of his regrets; ' 'cause it won't come out in the 'dictment; 'cause nobody will ever know half of what he was. How will he stand in the *Newgate Calendar*? P'raps not be there at all. Oh, my eye, wot a blow it is!' (Chapter 43, p. 295)

As Thackeray suggests in some of his more perceptive comments on the *Newgate* novel,<sup>24</sup> young boys were inspired to lead a life of crime because of the chance it offered them of fame, notoriety and immortality in print, more attractive by far than a life of honest industry. Charley Bates is here on the point of realising that fame is rarely the lot of juvenile delinquents, but Fagin carefully steers his observations away from the rocks of enlightenment, in a sequence of dialogue of acute psychological perception. Fagin persuades Charley that it's 'a distinction [...] to be lagged' at the Dodger's 'time of life', that he [the Dodger] will be kept in prison 'like a gentleman', that a 'big-wig' lawyer will defend him, and that they will read in the papers of the Dodger's own court performance. Fagin evokes the Dodger's court performance and the ensuing newspaper reports so successfully that ultimately Charley is able to visualise the scene. He cries, 'What a game! what a regular game!' (Chapter 43, p. 296). This passage brilliantly dramatises Fagin's ability to infect Charley Bates's understanding through his imagination, using the current obsession with *The Newgate Calendar* and its criminals, as well as the popular contemporary newspapers accounts of the trials of villains, to convince Charley that the Dodger's career will be notorious. His success is captured by the narrator in terms essential to my thesis:

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<sup>24</sup> In 'William Ainsworth and *Jack Sheppard*', Thackeray blames the rich and powerful, who paid a great deal of attention to criminals like Jack Sheppard - visiting him in prison etc. - for encouraging young men to achieve notoriety through criminality (p. 243). He had expressed the same opinion in the earlier article in *Fraser's*, 'Hints for a History of Highwaymen' (p. 287).

In fact, the Jew had so well humoured his friend's eccentric disposition, that Master Bates, who had at first been disposed to consider the imprisoned Dodger rather in the light of a victim, now looked upon him as the chief actor in a scene of most uncommon and exquisite humour. (Chapter 43, p. 296)

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The intriguing aspect of the Dodger's trial - incidentally juxtaposed with the manipulation of Charley Bates by Fagin in Chapter 43 - is that he does indeed behave like 'the chief actor in a scene of most exquisite humour'. The deliberately warped image of Jack Dawkins's end, presented to Charley Bates by Fagin, appears to be mirrored by the trial itself. His responses to the magistrates 'so tickled the spectators, that they laughed almost as heartily as Master Bates could have done if he had heard the request' (Chapter 43, p. 299). When he is eventually taken away, he turns his defeat into a victory, showing the spirit of defiant villainy usually exhibited by Gothic stage monsters:

'Ah! (to the Bench) it's no use your looking frightened; I won't show you no mercy, not a ha'porth of it. *You'll* pay for this, my fine fellers. I wouldn't be you for something! I wouldn't go free, now, if you was to fall down on your knees and ask me. Here, carry me off to prison! Take me away!'. (Chapter 43, p. 300)

Noah Claypole - incidentally disguised as a countryman to attend the trial, by Fagin in the role of wardrobe keeper - and Charley Bates rush back to their mentor, 'to bear [...] the animating news that the Dodger was doing full justice to his bringing-up, and establishing for himself a glorious reputation' (Chapter 43, p. 301).

There are several points to be made and questions to be asked about the trial scene. Firstly, it is important to remember that the episode is seen through the eyes of Noah Claypole and Dickens's narrator simultaneously. This means that there are two narrative voices in play, that of Claypole already indoctrinated to believe in the myth of the romance of crime, and that of the narrator, using terms like 'glorious reputation' ironically. Claypole sees the Dodger as Fagin would like him to be seen, as an heroic actor-villain, whereas it is possible to see him as a young boy who has just lost his freedom. There is a problem here, however, because there is no disputing the fact that Fagin's projected vision of the Dodger as a hero is the stronger in this scene. It is especially

difficult to see through the façade of the Dodger as hero, as he seems to believe the fiction himself. Even when he lets slip his mask, there is no unhappy victim beneath, rather a mocking jester. After threatening in court 'to make a parliamentary business of it', once outside, he gives the officer a grin of 'great glee and self-approval' (Chapter 43, p. 300). The main questions to be asked here are: is Dickens's vision at this point at one with that of Fagin? is he after all unconsciously presenting the villain as hero? The fact that we never see the Dodger's 'insides',<sup>25</sup> to adapt the phrase of John Carey, that we see his surface attractions, but never his repulsive or remorseful depths, seems to support the argument that Dickens, good intentions aside, romanticises villainy in *Oliver Twist*.

The key to these questions lies at the heart of this thesis, in the relationship between role-playing, (im)morality and emotion. We have already seen how Fagin uses self-conscious theatricality for immoral purposes. Fagin is a simpler character to comprehend than his protégés, Dawkins and Bates, in one respect; it is evident from the outset that he possesses no humane passions - avarice and hatred are his only passions - and is constantly playing a role or wearing a mask. In the case of his boys, the interaction between performance, emotion and indeed morality, is perhaps surprisingly, more difficult to understand. It is necessary to emphasise immediately, moreover, that though the Dodger and Charley Bates are often thought of as variations on the same theme, Dickens is careful to present them as very different characters. The Dodger's behaviour at his trial, for example, is totally in keeping with his behaviour elsewhere in the novel. He is Fagin's creature to the core. He revels in surfaces, but conceals depths.

At all times in *Oliver Twist*, the Dodger is completely in control of the image of self he projects. At all times, moreover, he projects the image that Fagin has created for him, that of the 'great' criminal prodigy, the precociously talented child-adult, destined for notoriety. It is striking that there is not one moment in the novel when this mask slips. From our first meeting with the Dodger, who possesses 'all the airs and manners of a man' and is 'as roystering and swaggering a gentleman as ever stood four feet six, or something less, in his bluchers' (Chapter 8, pp. 46-47), we

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<sup>25</sup> *The Violent Effigy*, p. 64.

never glimpse his inner emotions. His intelligence is the only part of his 'insides' that we are allowed to see. In Chapter 25, for example, when the boys are playing cards, we are told that the Dodger's countenance is 'peculiarly intelligent at all times'. But significantly, he bestows 'a variety of earnest glances' on the other players (Chapter 25, p. 157). This scene is highly revealing in so far as the Dodger is as ever carefully controlling his persona, yet at the same time, he is earnestly engrossed in the game. It is my belief that this strange combination of self-conscious role-playing and earnestness is the essence of the Dodger's personality.

It is necessary to qualify this statement, however. The idea of earnestness or sincerity is often applied to someone who is true to his/her feelings. As the Dodger shows little evidence of possessing any emotions during the novel, how is it possible to describe him as sincere? The answer is that Jack Dawkins sincerely believes in his own role as great man and heroic criminal. His relationship with Fagin is important here, for though he never shows any feelings as such for the man, his unquestioning conformity to and understanding of Fagin's 'ideals', suggests that Fagin, as the creator of his persona, is important to his self-esteem and hence his existence. He is always desirous to please Fagin - his 'playing to the gallery', for example, is often aimed at Fagin, in particular, and it always reinforces his role as the fence's protégé - and, as importantly, is invariably accurate at predicting his likes and dislikes. His initial seduction of Oliver, for instance, shows him enacting Fagin's wishes before he expresses them, and his anticipation of Fagin's anger when Oliver is captured by the authorities, shows his deep psychological entanglement with the Jew (Chapter 13, p. 74). Fagin and the Dodger, in fact, make up something of a mutual admiration society. Admiration in most people, of course, is a humane emotion, but the rules of their creed and hence their relationship, keeps their admiration precariously placed on the border between thought and emotion; their feeling for each other emerges as a deeply and instinctively realised intellectual respect.

Thus, the Dodger's surface charms in the novel are organically involved with, and hence metamorphosed by, the overall moral scheme of the novel. It is not difficult to see, nevertheless,

how easy and how tempting it would have been for actors and stage adapters to celebrate the Dodger's theatricality, severing his performances from the darker moral implications of the novel. Indeed, it is not too far-fetched to surmise that the anger Dickens vents at the adapters in *Nicholas Nickleby* might well have stemmed from his awareness of the part they played in tarnishing his reputation in the Newgate controversy, especially when we take into account the fact that Nicholas opens his harangue by comparing the plagiarists to romantic criminals. Nicholas asks the 'literary gentleman [...] who had dramatised in his time two hundred and forty-seven novels as fast as they had come out', and who, moreover, argues that adapters make the original author famous:

'So Richard Turpin, Tom King, and Jerry Abershaw have handed down to fame the names of those on whom they committed their most impudent robberies?'. (Chapter 48, pp. 632-33)

The immorality of the romance criminal is interconnected in Nicholas's - and probably in Dickens's - mind with the immorality of theatrical hacks.

In fairness to the adapters, however, it must be stated that not all the 'darker moral implications' of the Dodger's character are made clear in *Oliver Twist*. That he is Fagin's creature, indoctrinated to believe in his great role in the romance of crime, is indisputable. Again, the fact that he is a mere boy reared in poverty, who has never known any existence but a life of crime, is clear. But the relationship between nature and environment in *Oliver Twist* is so confused by the moral rectitude of Oliver that it is always unclear whether or not the blame for the Dodger's immorality can be laid solely on Fagin. There is always the possibility, of course, that the Dodger was born as immoral as Oliver was moral. Again, the Dodger's consummate abilities as an actor prevent us from discovering whether he possesses emotions which he firmly represses, or whether he is a passionless being - and perhaps has always been so.

Importantly, there is some evidence that the conception of Oliver's unbelievably incorruptible character resulted as much from pressure from the Newgate critics as from Dickens's personal belief in innate goodness. Years later, on 15 August 1856, Dickens wrote angrily to Forster from France about the attacks of continental critics on the dullness of the English novelistic

hero. Ironically, Dickens was mainly defending Scott's heroes from accusations of unnaturalness, but the relevance of his comments to criticism of his own work is evident. It is worth noting that these continental critics are objecting not to the breed known to English critics as the romance hero, but to the 'hero of an English book', by which they mean the well-behaved young man lacking in charisma like Oliver Twist; moreover, they are complaining about the moral rather than immoral presentation of the protagonist. Dickens's comments forcefully express his resentment against the constraints which critics place on novelists, making characters like his earlier creation Oliver Twist, inevitable:

I have always a fine feeling of the honest state into which we have got, when some smooth gentleman says to me or to some one else when I am by, how odd it is that the hero of an English book is always uninteresting - too good - not natural, &c. I am continually hearing this of Scott from English people here, who pass their lives with Balzac and Sand. But O my smooth friend, what a shining impostor you must think yourself and what an ass you must think me, when you suppose that by putting a brazen face upon it you can blot out of my knowledge the fact that this same unnatural young gentleman (if to be decent is to be necessarily unnatural), whom you meet in those other books and in mine, *must be* presented to you in that unnatural aspect by reason of your morality, and is not to have, I will not say any of the indecencies you like, but not even any of the experience, trials, perplexities, and confusions inseparable from the making or unmaking of all men!<sup>26</sup>

Despite the ambiguities which surround the 'essential' character of the Dodger, there is no denying that life with Fagin has not given him the best start on the road to moral goodness. Charley Bates, however, undergoes a reformation which is not inconsistent with his characterisation in the body of the novel. Charley is as theatrical a creation as the Dodger, but his performances are of the opposite kind; Charley's histrionicism is emotive rather than repressive; it reveals rather than conceals; it is honest - in that it directly reflects his inner nature - rather than deceitful. He does not possess the intelligence, self-consciousness or control of his projected persona that belong to the Dodger. Performance gives Charley pleasure; it is a way of spontaneously revealing and releasing inner emotion. His most characteristic emotion is, of course, happiness. The dark side of *Oliver Twist* is lightened by Bates's animal laughter. From the outset, he shows none of the Dodger's concern to control the presentation of self. When Oliver first enters the thieves' den, his naive

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<sup>26</sup> *Letters* (Nonesuch), II, 797.

answers to Fagin's loaded questions are to Charley 'so exquisitely ludicrous' that he splutters his coffee (Chapter 9, p. 54). Such undignified, unheroic fits of giggles are his hallmark. After Oliver is deserted on the pick-pocketing expedition, Master Bates again experiences 'an uncontrollable fit of laughter, [...] a transport of mirth' (Chapter 13, p. 74).

'Uncontrollable' is the key word here. Charley's laughter lacks the malicious edge it might otherwise have because it is the hearty laughter of a lover of life with 'a lively sense of the ludicrous' (Chapter 16, p. 101). Unfortunately for Oliver, his misfortunes often appeal to Bates's sense of the ludicrous, but there is no cynical aggression behind his enjoyment. Indeed, he even laughs at his own misfortunes. His carefree, perhaps even thoughtless, immersion in life's comedy is perhaps best illustrated in the scene where he loses to the more artful Dodger at cards. We are told that Master Bates is 'of a more excitable natures than his accomplished friend' and he frequently drinks gin and cracks jokes. He invariably loses, but 'so far from angering' him, this circumstance is to him a 'jolly game' (Chapter 25, p. 157).

For most of the time, life is 'a jolly game' to Master Bates. His ability to take life seriously, however, is startlingly revealed in the incident already discussed, when he fearlessly grills Fagin after the Dodger's capture, and even more dramatically, at the end of the novel, when he rashly but courageously challenges the murderer, Bill Sikes:

the wretched man was willing to propitiate even this lad. Accordingly he nodded, and made as though he would shake hands with him.

'Let me go into some other room,' said the boy, retreating still farther.

'Why, Charley!' said Sikes, stepping forward, 'don't you - don't you know me?'

'Don't come nearer me,' answered the boy, retreating, and looking, with horror in his eyes, upon the murderer's face. 'You monster!'

The man stopped half-way, and they looked at each other; but Sikes's eyes sunk gradually to the ground.

'Witness you three,' cried the boy shaking his clenched fist, and becoming more and more excited as he spoke. 'Witness you three - I'm not afraid of him - if they come here after him, I'll give him up; I will. I tell you out at once. He may kill me for it if he likes, or if he dares, but if I'm here I'll give him up. I'd give him up if he was to be boiled alive. Murder! Help! If there's the pluck of a man among you three, you'll help me. Murder! Help! Down with him!'

Pouring out these cries, and accompanying them with violent gesticulations, the boy actually threw himself, single-handed, upon the strong man, and in the intensity of his energy, and the suddenness of his surprise, brought him heavily to the ground. (Chapter 50, p. 343)

The intensity of energy behind Bates's language and gestures here raises him to heroic stature, as Hugh's final speech does in *Barnaby Rudge*.<sup>27</sup> Character 'transformation', in both cases, is fuelled by the unusual intensity of situation; Hugh and Charley, in different ways, are both facing the reality of death. Moreover, the daring recklessness of the emotive histrionicism of both characters is in keeping with the careless spontaneity of behaviour they exhibit beforehand. It is difficult to imagine the self-preserving intellect of the Dodger allowing him to risk all in such an act of instinctive daring. In his confrontation of Sikes, Charley exhibits more of the qualities of a man, and indeed of a hero, than the Dodger ever does.

But it is important to realise that while Charley and Hugh both have moments of heroism, neither is a hero. In both cases, Dickens emphasises the immoral reality of their lives as victims of their respective social environments before their heroic outbursts. Moreover, their heroism is not meant to delete the remembrance of the lives that have gone before, but to co-exist with it.

Furthermore, it is interesting that Dickens is exploding popular myths of romantic heroism through the characters of Hugh and Charley. Hugh, for example, superficially resembles Rousseau's 'Noble Savage', man in his natural state without education or moral instruction. Dickens saw the danger and falsity of the idea popular with the Romantics that such a man would prove innately virtuous.

His article entitled 'The Noble Savage' announces, 'I HAVE not the least belief in the Noble Savage. I consider him a prodigious nuisance, and an enormous superstition',<sup>28</sup> and the character of Hugh dramatises the immorality and waste of leaving man in his 'natural state'. In a civilised age, it is irresponsible and dangerous to pretend otherwise. Hugh therefore lives not in a natural state, but in a highly unnatural state, as the victim of society. Bates is in some ways used similarly, but in his case Dickens is, as we have seen, exploding the myth of the romance hero. He is similar to the romance hero in so far as he is a reckless, charming, carefree outcast, but in other ways, he is entirely dissimilar; he is poor, shabby and a child; he is more a puppet than a leader of others; he is

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<sup>27</sup> Chapter 77, p. 596. See Chapter 4 for a more detailed analysis of the significance of this speech.

<sup>28</sup> In *Reprinted Pieces, The Uncommercial Traveller, and Other Stories*, ed. by Arthur Waugh, Hugh Walpole, Walter Dexter, and Thomas Hatton (Bloomsbury: Nonesuch Press, 1938), pp. 133-38 (p. 133).

certainly not innately genteel; he is not fashionable, not always generous and only rarely has an instinctive ability to distinguish between right and wrong.

In the characters of Charley Bates and the Artful Dodger, Dickens deliberately mixes some qualities belonging to the mythical romance hero with other qualities typical of criminal juveniles. These youngsters thus function crucially in a two-pronged textual critique of Newgate fiction and its consequences; they resemble both the protagonists of popular romance and its victims - those youngsters that society has made vulnerable to the attractions of crime. The characters of Bates and the Dodger resemble the attractive 'heroes' of some Newgate novels only when taken out of context; in context, they are integral to a level of textual discourse which reveals the corrupting influence of Newgate fiction on the vulnerable.

But although the Dodger and Bates are presented as victims of social circumstances, they are given no protective halos; Dickens explores the seeds of corruption which society has made an undeniable aspect of their personalities. The ethical flexibility or amorality that has become part of the make-up of society - not to mention the creed of the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates - is summarised thus by Dickens's narrator:

Thus, to do a great right, you may do a little wrong; and you may take any means which the end to be attained will justify; the amount of the right, or the amount of the wrong, or indeed the distinction between the two, being left entirely to the philosopher concerned: to be settled and determined by his clear, comprehensive, and impartial view of his own particular case. (Chapter 13, p. 74)

### **5. 3 - Conclusion**

The amorality expressed in the above philosophy could be an accurate description of the moral scheme of an Ainsworth novel or a stage production of romance melodrama. But this chapter has demonstrated that *Oliver Twist* contains a sophisticated, self-reflexive critique of such amoral fiction. It seems typical of a Dickens novel that such a subtly self-conscious investigation of moral cause and effect in life, in fiction and between life and fiction, can coexist with the fairy tale moral ending so often employed in stage melodrama - whereby the good guys triumph and the bad guys

suffer either severe punishment or death. In the light of this study, however, it is possible to understand why the two moral discourses coexist; the belief in the real (im)moral power of fiction expressed through Dickens's texts makes his fantastical moralistic ending explicable on grounds other than artistic and moral crudity.

The moral slant of *Oliver Twist* does not then rely on a photographic 'realism', as Thackeray implies it should; on the contrary, Dickens's moral code relies on a far more complex vision of the relationship between life and fiction. The moral scheme of *Oliver Twist* is self-contained in the sense that it depends on its fictional context. Having said this, Dickens's internal textual investigation of Newgate novels shows the contingency of life and fiction, whilst he also demonstrates characteristically how people fictionalise their own lives. Dickens's text is thus self-referential and extra-referential but is not realistic in the sense that Thackeray may have wished, or in the sense that the Preface may have led us to expect.

My reading of *Oliver Twist* could thus seem to follow the same line as J. Hillis Miller's essay 'The Fiction of Realism'. Indeed, I agree with Miller on his two main points that Dickens fully utilises his awareness that a fully mimetic 'realism' is a fiction, and that he dramatises the way in which people fictionalise life. However, the emphasis of my interpretation is radically different from that of Miller. Miller uses his findings to support his epigraph, taken from *Sketches by Boz*, 'the illusion was reality itself'.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the essay he takes the word 'illusion' to mean emptiness or hollowness, whereas in Dickens's fiction, theatrical and fictional 'illusions' are often intensely meaningful and 'real' to those engaged with them.<sup>30</sup> Miller's vision of Dickens's universe is nihilistic; it 'creates illusion out of illusion and the appearance of reality out of illusion, in a play

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<sup>29</sup> From 'The Drunkard's Death', *SB*, p. 493.

<sup>30</sup> To take just one striking example, in *DC*, after David has just seen *Julius Caesar* and the pantomime at Covent Garden, he digresses: 'But the mingled reality and mystery of the whole show, the influence upon me of the poetry, the lights, the music, the company, the smooth stupendous changes of glittering and brilliant scenery, were so dazzling, and opened up such illimitable regions of delight, but when I came out into the rainy street, at twelve o'clock at night, I felt as if I had come from the clouds, where I had been leading a romantic life for ages, to a bawling, splashing, link-lighted, umbrella-struggling, hackney-coach-jostling, patten-clinking, muddy, miserable world. I [...] stood in the street for a little while, as if I really were a stranger upon earth' (Chapter 19, pp. 244-45).

of language without beginning, end, or extra linguistic foundation'.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Dickens's novels consistently rely on his awareness and manipulation of the paradoxical proximity and distance between life and fiction; he sees *both* the fictionality, or illusory quality of life, and the reality of fiction and illusions. He exploits both possible meanings of the epigraph of *Sketches by Boz*, 'the illusion was reality itself'.

And perhaps more importantly, Dickens's novels present not an anarchic free play of illusions, but a world in which fictions, both textual and 'real', inevitably exert moral influence and are always part of the moral chain of cause and effect of Dickens's own fiction.<sup>32</sup> But let me clarify: Dickens's moral vision is neither simply fictional nor textual; in Dickens's novels, there is a moral reality. If characters misread fictions or create dangerous fictions, there are very real social or emotional consequences. This is the reality of morality.

Charley Bates and the Dodger, for example, represent variations on a theme which was to intrigue Dickens throughout his career: the theme of vulnerable youth. In the Manichaeian world of *Oliver Twist*, they are 'grey' characters, neither heroes nor villains in themselves, but morally malleable. It is perhaps strange, moreover, that while Dickens is often criticised for the improbable moral perfection of his heroes, a character of the perhaps miscalculated incorruptibility of Oliver is untypical of his (male) novelistic youths. Most are morally imperfect and distinctly vulnerable to a variety of outside influences. Dick Swiveller, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, is both as theatrical and as easily influenced as Charley Bates. Joe Willet, in *Barnaby Rudge*, could easily have become embittered by his father's strictness, his rejection by Dolly and the loss of his arm. Again, Barnaby Rudge himself is an excellent, if slightly special, example of the vulnerability of youth; his mother's concern for his welfare is occasioned by her knowledge that, due to his idiocy and the conditions of his birth, he is virtually a morally neutral human being, swayed this way and that by

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<sup>31</sup> 'The Fiction of Realism', p. 315.

<sup>32</sup> Even *Oliver Twist* himself, though famously immune to corruption is nonetheless morally affected by Fagin's attempts to corrupt him. When he reads the volume resembling *The Newgate Calendar*, for example, he falls to his knees and prays. Oliver thus, perhaps improbably, defines himself against the corrupting influences of his environment.

external forces as easily as a feather. Most famously of all, perhaps, there is Walter Gay, who Dickens planned to show on the familiar road to moral ruin. He explained his idea graphically in a letter to Forster of [25-26] July 1846:

I think it would be a good thing to disappoint all the expectations that chapter seems to raise of his happy connection with the story and the heroine, and to show him gradually and naturally trailing away, from that love of adventure and boyish light-heartedness into negligence, idleness, dissipation, dishonesty, and ruin. To show, in short, that common, every-day, miserable declension of which we know so much in our ordinary life, to exhibit something of the philosophy of it, in great temptations and an easy nature; and to show how the good turns into bad, by degrees.

His explanation is followed by the significant question: 'Do you think it may be done without making people angry?'.<sup>33</sup> The wording of this letter shows the deep moral and psychological interest that Dickens had in exhibiting 'something of the philosophy' of the vulnerability of youth. Moreover, the Thackerayan concern for public popularity which deterred him from dramatising Walter's downfall throws a great deal of light on the reasons behind the conception of Oliver Twist's character.

Lastly, we must not forget the protagonists of the 'mature' Dickens, David Copperfield and Pip, who are case studies of the vulnerability of youth. Pip, the young snob with his 'wretched hankerings after money and gentility' (*GE*, Volume II, Chapter 10, p. 236), is vulnerable to women, the idea of the gentleman and his own fancies; all are manipulated by Miss Havisham through Estella. David, famously pictured as a young boy 'reading as if for life' (*DC*, Chapter 4, p. 48), is especially susceptible to literature and romance. His childhood reading material is his world; his visit to the theatre is more real to him than reality; Steerforth is his personal romantic hero, compounded of David's life and his imagination.

In conclusion, all these young characters are presented as morally vulnerable to many influences - to the influence of novelistic and theatrical romance, to the idea of Newgate, to social neglect, to personal vanity, to self-delusion. The influence may vary but Dickens's object does not; he aims to show 'something of the philosophy of the vulnerability of youth. It is thus unlikely that,

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Forster's *Life*, p. 473; *Letters* (Pilgrim), IV, 593.

Fagin-like, he would consciously exploit those in his care, his readers. Adaptations aside, in the novels at least, the novelist does not get caught in his own mouse trap.

## Chapter 6 - Dickens and Dandyism: Dehumanising the Human in Society and the Novel

### 6. 1 - Problems of Definition

In the words of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, 'FIRST, touching Dandies, let us consider, with some scientific strictness, what a Dandy specially is'.<sup>1</sup> Carlyle's text declared the dandy to be

a Clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse, and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of Clothes wisely and well: so that as others dress to live, he lives to dress.<sup>2</sup>

Edward Bulwer described the hero of his fashionable novel *Pelham; or, The Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828) - for many Victorians, including Carlyle, closely associated with the idea of dandyism - as:

a personal combination of antitheses - a fop and a philosopher, a voluptuary and a moralist - a trifler in appearance, but rather one to whom trifles are instructive, than one to whom trifles are natural.<sup>3</sup>

The dandy became synonymous, for readers of *Fraser's Magazine* - which conducted a crusade against the novels of Bulwer Lytton - with the pathetic fop, the 'tailor-made' as opposed to the 'natural' gentleman.<sup>4</sup>

On the continent, by contrast, French writers and socialites appreciated the potential inherent in the theatricality of the dandy pose. The curious combination of power and flexibility in the pose was appropriated variously as a symbol of aristocratic, bourgeois or intellectual defiance.

Baudelaire's lines -

Eternelle supériorité du Dandy.  
Qu'est-ce que le Dandy?  
- Mon Cœur mis à nu.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Preface to *Pelham*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Colburn, 1828), I, 5.

<sup>4</sup> William Maginn, 'Mr. Edward Lytton Bulwer's Novels; and Remarks on Novel-Writing', *Fraser's Magazine*, 1 (June 1830), 509-32 (p. 516).

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Ellen Moers as the epigraph for Chapter 12 of *The Dandy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), p. 271. According to Moers, Baudelaire jotted these words down at the head of an otherwise blank sheet of paper. But Moers's source, Charles Asselineau's *Charles Baudelaire: sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris: Lemerre, 1869), cites Baudelaire's words as 'Supériorité du dandy. Qu'est-ce que le Dandy?' (pp. 45-46). According to Asselineau, Baudelaire leaves a blank page instead of an answer.

- portray the dandy as an elevated spiritual being, whilst his writings as a whole explore the complexity of the relationship between dandyism, aestheticism and morality. In Britain, fearful respect for the dandy was implied rather than admitted - until Oscar Wilde fully explored the consequences of presenting the self as a work of art - implied, that is, by the constant critical contempt poured on the apparently laughable fashion-victim. Even in the Regency period, when dandyism emerged and was celebrated well before the emergence of the spectre of moral earnestness which haunted the Victorians, the dandy was mocked. For example, in Pierce Egan's *Life in London*, Jerry says of Dick Trifle, 'He is the completest *Dandy* I ever saw, [...] no use [...] except as a mark for RIDICULE to *shoot* at!' (Book 2, Chapter 5, p. 309).

Twentieth-century critics have rightly recognised that the Victorians, on the whole, protested too much about the irrelevance and triviality of the dandy. No investigation of the subject can be complete without including reference to Ellen Moers's seminal work, *The Dandy*. Her book has been invaluable to my own research, and her definition of the dandy, born of detailed research into the social, literary and philosophical history of the type, cannot be ignored. The dandy, she writes, was

a creature perfect in externals and careless of anything below the surface, a man dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste. The epitome of selfish irresponsibility, he was ideally free of all human commitments that conflict with taste: passions, moralities, ambitions, politics or occupations.<sup>6</sup>

Steven Marcus, on the other hand, suggests that the dandy is 'a parody of the self as a work of art - displaying the outward form which covers an inward nullity', 'a man gone dead inside, a man wholly externalised, [...] a man who has split himself in two and then cut himself off from his inner being by a denial that he is anything but pure surface'.<sup>7</sup> For William R. Harvey, Dickens's dandies are grouped with his fops, but even so are 'characterized by ennui, restlessness, unrealized potential, and uncertainty of purpose'<sup>8</sup>. More recently, Robin Gilmour, in an article entitled

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<sup>6</sup> p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey*, pp. 229, 230.

<sup>8</sup> 'Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 24 (1969), 305-16 (p. 307).

'Between Two Worlds: Aristocracy and Gentility in *Nicholas Nickleby*', argued that 'the contemporary phenomenon of the dandy' was 'a manifestation of the continuing prestige of "exclusive" style in an age of burgeoning democracy'.<sup>9</sup>

The variety of definitions of the dandy paradoxically suggests the impossibility of definition. What interests me in the figure of the dandy is those qualities which he has in common with the genteel villain of domestic melodrama: the dandy does his best to be passionless by repressing his emotions; he attempts to deny the human by recreating himself as a work of art. In the clichéd terms of domestic melodrama, he symbolises 'art' rather than 'heart'. Of course, as Chapter 2 has made clear, not all villains in domestic melodrama were dandies; though many genteel melodramatic villains dress well, it is the later West End villain who pays excessive attention to his appearance. But what is striking is that those characteristics which domestic melodrama associates with the gentleman - superficiality, selfishness, lack of humane feeling towards others - are those qualities which Dickens associates with the dandy.

For Dickens, the dandy is *the* symbol of human passionlessness. Dickens's dandies often focus his investigation of the relationship between true and false gentility, and between gentility and villainy. They centre his exploration of the dehumanising forces at work in Victorian society and the self. These issues are also dramatised in domestic melodrama but, as we have seen, on the minor stage subtle differences between the Byronic character, the dandy, the aristocrat and the self-made gentleman are often erased. For example, John Brougham's adaptation of *David Copperfield* is typical in so far as it ignores any traces of Byronism in the character of Dickens's Steerforth and recreates him as a stereotypical dandified aristocratic seducer. Although Dickens often explores the class conflicts of domestic melodrama, far from simplistically associating gentility with villainy, Dickens's novels, along with Thackeray's, make perhaps the most important fictional contribution to the redefinition of the gentleman. Dickens looks at the question from all angles, investigating the grey area between the middle-classes and the aristocracy, the relationship

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<sup>9</sup> *Dickens Quarterly*, 5 (1988), 110-18 (p. 114).

between 'rank' and class, the importance of money and the work ethic in the changing industrialised society, the relationship between manners and morals in a socially mobile society, and the link stressed by *Fraser's Magazine* between the criminality of the rich and the poor (discussed later in this chapter); again, on a more abstract level, he perceived that an appearance of gentility often demanded repression of the emotional life, and, like Carlyle, he understood the potential power of clothes in a world of social role-playing.

It is not, however, the principal aim of this chapter to examine Victorian ideas about the gentleman - a task which has been admirably carried out by Robin Gilmour in his comprehensive work, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*.<sup>10</sup> I am interested in gentlemen, first and foremost, when they are villains, and this in itself is problematic, for in Dickens's writing, a villain cannot be a true gentleman. A gentleman stops being a gentleman, for Dickens, when the appearance of gentility is more important than the inner moral elevation that should ideally characterise the gentleman; that is, a gentleman becomes a villain when gentility ceases to be an end in itself and becomes the means to attain power, status and money - in other words, the means to gratify the self. In Dickens's novels, the figure of the dandy often sits uneasily on the cusp between villainy and gentility. Dickens's dandies are haunted by the ghost of Lord Chesterfield. They suggest that manners and morals are not always synonymous, and that a gentleman on the outside may not be a gentleman on the inside. Or, to echo the words of Lord Chesterfield himself, many of Dickens's dandies hold the opinion that:

A man of the world must, like the Chameleon, be able to take every different hue; which is by no means a criminal or abject, but a necessary complaisance; for it relates only to manners, and not to morals.<sup>11</sup>

The dandy is ideally a passionless person, an actor to the core, a living role. The recurrence of such figures in Dickens's fiction - where the presented forms of life imitate the stage as often as the stage

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<sup>10</sup> (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> *Lord Chesterfield's Letters (1774)*, ed. by David Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 106 (19 October 1748).

mimics life - suggests both his fascination with the possibility of such a self-less human being, and his deep concern about the larger causes and effects of dandyism.

## 6. 2 - Society as Stage: Victorian Self-Fashioning

In 'London Recreations', one of the early *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens's narrator offers the following piece of social analysis:

THE wish of persons in the humbler classes of life, to ape the manners and customs of those whom fortune has placed above them, is often the subject of remark, and not unfrequently of complaint. The inclination may, and no doubt does, exist to a great extent, among the small gentility - the would-be aristocrats - of the middle-classes. Tradesmen and clerks, with fashionable novel-reading families, and circulating-library-subscribing daughters, get up small assemblies in imitation of Almack's, and promenade the dingy 'large room' of some second-rate hotel with as much complacency as the enviable few who are privileged to exhibit their magnificence in that exclusive haunt of fashion and foolery. Aspiring young ladies, who read flaming accounts of some 'fancy fair in high life', suddenly grow desperately charitable [...] With the exception of these classes of society, however, and a few weak and insignificant persons, we do not think the attempt at imitation to which we have alluded, prevails in any great degree. (p. 92)

In this description, the narrator consciously attempts to put 'the small gentility [...] of the middle classes' in their place, by emphasising that they represent just one section of society (and, of course, by using such adjectives as 'small', 'would-be', 'dingy', 'aspiring' and 'weak' to describe them). But his analysis involves a subtle sleight of hand, because the point he is making about the upwardly mobile Victorian 'small gentility' is precisely their mobility. The imitation which they practised for the sake of achieving a degree of social mobility, was to change the whole fabric of society, so that as a class they had no fixed place to which the narrator of the sketch - the creature of a young, aspiring and middle-class journalist - could conveniently marginalise them.<sup>12</sup> Their importance was not, therefore, strictly in proportion with their numbers; for instance, the Reform Bill (1832), the reorganisation of the public schools and the Civil Service<sup>13</sup> were all designed to loosen the stranglehold of aristocratic patronage and to empower the middle-classes.

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<sup>12</sup> There is also another sleight of hand in this passage which is of great significance in relation to my later analysis of *NN*. The narrator mocks the 'small gentility' for imitating their betters, and then promptly implies that their so-called betters are in an important - moral - sense no better than those imitating them anyway; their world is one of 'fashion and foolery'.

<sup>13</sup> See Robin Gilmour's *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*, pp. 84-104.

In Dickens's novels, the middle-classes are not relegated to the wings but usually take centre stage. The theatrical metaphor is not gratuitous here, for Dickens's fictions consistently demonstrate that an individual's powers of imitation are the most effective means of social advancement available to him/her. His writing is thus, to an extent, in tune with Victorian 'self-help' literature - epitomised by Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859)<sup>14</sup> - and the 'self-culture' which generated and was generated by the literature. But there is one important difference (amongst many) between Dickens's novels and self-help literature, in that Dickens is conscious of the dangers of a society founded on imitation and regard for self. Dickens's sense of the corruption which must be inherent in a society that thinks it's a theatre is nowhere more acute than in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

It is astonishing to me that the defects of this immature work - of which there are plenty, including the sometimes clumsy melodrama - have blinded many critics to fact that, for the most part, the much abused 'theatricality' of the novel is used consciously as a sophisticated tool of social and moral investigation. Even Paul Schlicke - whose book *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* is highly sensitive to the complexity of the influence of popular entertainment on Dickens's work - argues that in *Nicholas Nickleby*, 'The actors [theatrical entertainers] have no contact whatever with either the book's villains or its good characters, and thus stand outside the central moral framework'.<sup>15</sup> The logic of Schlicke's argument is false because Crummles's theatre is integral to the moral framework of the novel; Dickens presents the Crummleses as a mirror to the theatrum mundi; throughout the novel, the behaviour of the professional actors is used to parallel, parody and echo that of the social role-players, usually to the discredit of the latter.

Just as Dickens's famous 'streaky bacon' passage in *Oliver Twist* (Chapter 17, pp. 105-6) argues that melodrama is no more exaggerated than life, in *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens observes that the appearance of those on the stage of society is as absurdly 'artificial' as that of the actors in Crummles's illegitimate theatre. Here the analogy is implied through the parallel experiences of Nicholas and Kate, rather than stated by the narrator. When Nicholas sees the Crummleses in full

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> p. 68.

make-up and costume, he is shocked because he has already seen how they look off-stage: 'Here all the people were so much changed, that he scarcely knew them. False hair, false colour, false calves, false muscles - they had become different beings' (Chapter 24, p. 302). Meanwhile, as a dress-maker, Kate is working behind the stage of society, but she still gets a rude awakening when she makes her own debut. At Ralph's party, she discovers to her consternation that the aristocrats there do not understand real feeling or sincerity, but assume that all behaviour is feigned. When Sir Mulberry Hawk finds her reading a book, for example, he exclaims, 'What a delightful studiousness! [...] Was it real, now, or only to display the eyelashes?' (Chapter 19, p. 240). This is just a taste of things to come, for when Kate appeals, 'If you have one spark of gentlemanly feeling remaining, you will leave me instantly', Sir Mulberry (reminding us of Mrs Skewton) ironically replies: 'why will you keep up this appearance of excessive rigour, my sweet creature? Now, be more natural - my dear Miss Nickleby, be more natural - do' (Chapter 19, p. 241). The aristocrat thus assumes that Kate's show of emotion is as artificial as the Crummles's histrionic shows of feeling. Their exaggerated words and gestures are mocked by Dickens and Phiz's accompanying illustration - entitled 'Theatrical emotion of Mr. Crummles' (Chapter 30) - when Nicholas leaves the company. The Crummleses express emotion similarly on and off-stage, but this does not necessarily mean that they are insincere. Throughout the novel, Dickens implies that it is not possible to assume that histrionic displays of emotion are less genuine than quieter expressions of feeling.

But Kate's appeal to Hawk's 'gentlemanly feeling' is obviously misplaced in a novel which is, on the surface, as absolutely anti-aristocratic as any domestic melodrama. The overall attitude which seems to emerge towards the aristocracy can be summed up amusingly by quoting the conversational exchange between Miss Petowker and Mr Lillyvick:

'What do you call it, when Lords break off door-knockers and beat policemen, and play at coaches with other people's money, and all that sort of thing?'

'Aristocratic?' suggested the collector. (Chapter 15, p. 184)

As a professional actress, Miss Petowker's notions are moulded by the stage, but the novel as a whole suggests that there is no clear cut distinction between society and the stage. Sir Mulberry Hawk thus apes the behaviour of the aristocratic villain of domestic melodrama. It is therefore doubly ironic that Kate appeals to Sir Mulberry Hawk's 'gentlemanly feeling' when she - like the heroine from melodrama - is at the mercy of a villain she would recognise as heartless if she was more familiar with the Victorian theatre's stereotypes. In case the reader is likewise ignorant, Sir Mulberry's character is later described by the narrator as that of 'the systematic and calculating man of dissipation, whose joys, regrets, pains, and pleasures, are all of self' (Chapter 28, p. 357). The narrator then explains the motivation behind Hawk's pursuit of Kate, in terms relevant to this thesis as a whole:

the pursuit was one which could not fail to redound to his credit, and greatly to enhance his reputation with the world. And lest this consideration - no mean or secondary one with Sir Mulberry - should sound strangely in the ears of some, let it be remembered that most men live in a world of their own, and that in that limited circle alone are they ambitious for distinction and applause. Sir Mulberry's world was peopled with profligates and he acted accordingly. (Chapter 28, p. 357)

The narrator does not use the word 'acted' loosely, for he continues by elaborating on his vision of the world as a theatre involving a complicit pact between actor and audience:

Thus, cases of injustice, and oppression, and tyranny, and the most extravagant bigotry, are in constant occurrence among us every day. It is the custom to trumpet forth much wonder and astonishment at the chief actors therein setting at defiance so completely the opinion of the world; but there is no greater fallacy; it is precisely because they do consult the opinion of their own little world that such things take place at all, and strike the great world dumb with amazement. (Chapter 28, p. 357)

Of course, the phrase 'chief actors', in the above quotation, inevitably reminds the reader of a cast-list, whereas the term 'actor' can simply mean 'one who conducts an action' (*OED*). The narrator's phrasing at this point thus strengthens the parallelism in the novel between the theatre of the world and the world of the theatre.

However, the main point to be made about this passage is not that Sir Mulberry Hawk is a passionless dandy or an inhuman role-player. Although Hawk has obvious affinities with the dandy

and this passage directly announces that he is an actor, he never achieves the absolute denial of the human which characterises dandyism in its purest form. The name Hawk tells us why: Hawk never loses the violence and aggression of the animal, and indeed, from his fight with Nicholas onwards, the brutality and sensuality of his nature gradually cracks his social mask of lassitude and indifference. Thus, the main point to be made about this passage is that made by *Nicholas Nickleby* as a whole: that a society which offers such rewards to those who deny, distort or transform the inner self, is itself as corrupt as any individual villain - be it Sir Mulberry Hawk or Ralph Nickleby. As such, it is not so important that the novel is anti-aristocratic as that it is anti-an entire society which exalts image over essence. The ultimate elevation of image over essence is, of course, the dandy, but *Nicholas Nickleby* is not significant in this context for its individual dandies; but for its fictional evocation of the social conditions which encourage the separation of role from self.

Society is comprised of individuals; so all those figures in *Nicholas Nickleby* who worship the god of gentility or fashion are implicated in the moral corruption personified by Sir Mulberry Hawk. Thus Mr Mantalini, the Hawk-imitator with his 'agreeable weaknesses [...] such as gaming, wasting, idling, and a tendency to horse-flesh' (Chapter 21, p. 259) is not the only, or the most prominent, member of Sir Mulberry's audience. The comic value of the Kenwigses should not blind us to the fact that they are desperate - and unsuccessful - social climbers; the hilarious antics of Mrs Nickleby and her vegetable-throwing suitor should not obscure the fact that Mrs Nickleby's false notions of gentility lace the novel like a leitmotif. Literally in the middle of this drama of social mobility is Mrs Witterterly, of Cadogan Place, a street which is

the one slight bond that joins two great extremes; it is the connecting link between the aristocratic pavements of Belgrave Square, and the barbarism of Chelsea. [...] Wearing as much as they can of the airs and semblances of loftiest rank, the people of Cadogan Place have the realities of middle station. It is the conductor which communicates to the inhabitants of regions beyond its limit, the shock of pride of birth and rank, which it has not within itself, but derives from a fountain-head beyond; or, like the ligament which unites the Siamese twins, it contains something of the life and essence of two distinct bodies, and yet belongs to neither. (Chapter 21, pp. 264-65)

Mrs Witterly, like Mrs Nickleby, demonstrates one of the most pernicious effects of a society obsessed with self-fashioning in that she is unable, or unwilling, to distinguish between true and false gentility; she does not, in other words, make moral distinctions. She is thus, not only, like Mrs Nickleby, taken in by Hawk and his cronies; she also partakes of his amorality.

But the significance of Mrs Witterly is more complex than that. Like other aspiring members of the middle-classes, Mrs Witterly is always playing a role - for example, when Kate first meets her,

She was reclining on a sofa in such a very unstudied attitude, that she might have been taken for an actress all ready for the first scene in a ballet, and only waiting for the drop curtain to go up. (Chapter 21, pp. 265-66)

What distinguishes Mrs Witterly is that her ideas about gentility and fashion are taken more from books than life. For instance, when Dickens's narrator first introduces her to the reader, the satire is biting:

Now, in the ordinary course of things, and according to all authentic descriptions of high life, as set forth in books, Mrs. Witterly ought to have been in her *boudoir*, but whether it was that Mr. Witterly was at that moment shaving himself in the *boudoir* or what not, certain it was that Mrs. Witterly gave audience in the drawing-room. (Chapter 21, p. 265)

Again, in the same chapter (28) in which the narrator explains that Sir Mulberry Hawk is an actor who could not exist without an eagerly complicit audience, Mrs Witterly is actually the audience for Kate's reading of the spoof 'silver fork' novel, *The Lady Flabella*. This scene is an hilarious parody of fashionable novels which invariably included the figure of the dandy. But Dickens is not just engaging in literary gamesmanship here. He is making a point about self-fashioning crucial to my later investigation of dandyism. In the passage I quoted at the beginning of this section from *Sketches by Boz*, the emphasis is on imitation as the key to social mobility. The word imitation in this context suggests imitation of others, of other human beings, the adoption of a different self. But throughout Dickens's writing, he demonstrates an awareness of the fact that different forms of imitation and social role-playing are possible. If the middle-classes imitate the aristocracy, for

example, what do they do when they become accepted as aristocrats? Or, perhaps more to the point, if one is born an aristocrat and has no room or need for social mobility, whom does one imitate? From one perspective, it could be said that Sir Mulberry Hawk does not imitate at all, that his type of acting involves *negation* (of self) rather than *imitation* (of others). But I would argue that although Dickens plays with the relationship between imitation of others and self-negation, he perceives that the two kinds of role-playing cannot be simplistically separated.

What I have in mind by imitation and self-negation can be illustrated as follows. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, the middle-classes imitate their social superiors to climb the class ladder, but Sir Mulberry Hawk, at the top of the pile, does his best to repress any inner life he possesses. Thus, what the imitation of the non-aristocrats seeks to achieve is ultimately a denial of the human, a state of abstraction or nothingness which Dickens finally and paradoxically dramatises in human form in the Veneering scenes in *Our Mutual Friend*. The middle-classes imitate the upper-classes, while an upper-class villain like Sir Mulberry Hawk tries to negate his own feelings and self-hood. It is not relevant that he fails in his attempt; what is important is that society's obsession with genteel appearances works towards that denial of the human which is the essence (or non-essence) of dandyism. It is ironic that the professional actors and the professional artist - Miss La Creevy - in the novel are not implicated in society's obsession with gentility and the negation of the emotional life which is the upshot of this obsession. A direct, professional concern with art is thus shown to be human, whereas genteel society encourages the metamorphosis of the human being into an ideally non-human art work.

### **6.3 - Acting the Self: Dangerous Dandies**

While Sir Mulberry Hawk can never rid himself of the violent animal beneath his dandified veneer, Montague Tigg in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is, in the eyes of most of the other characters in the novel, consummately successful at transforming himself into Tigg Montague. The narrator, however, is more circumspect:

He had a world of jet black shining hair upon his head, upon his cheeks, upon his chin, upon his upper lip. His clothes, symmetrically made, were of the newest fashion and the costliest kind. Flowers of gold and blue, and green and blushing red, were on his waistcoat; precious chains and jewels sparkled on his breast; his fingers, clogged with brilliant rings, were as unwieldy as summer flies but newly rescued from a honey-pot. The daylight mantled in his gleaming hat and boots as in a polished glass. And yet, though changed his name, and changed his outward surface, it was Tigg. Though turned and twisted upside down, and inside out, as great men have been sometimes known to be; though no longer Montague Tigg, but Tigg Montague; still it was Tigg: the same Satanic, gallant, military Tigg. The brass was burnished, lacquered, newly stamped; yet it was true Tigg metal notwithstanding. (Chapter 27, p. 427)

The character of Tigg presents different problems to that of Sir Mulberry as the reversal of his names suggests. Before Tigg becomes Montague, he typifies 'the gent', a breed described by Ellen Moers as made up of 'young men at the very bottom of the respectable class'; 'the Gent', she maintains, 'was a second-hand, shop-worn imitation of the dandy'.<sup>16</sup> The dandyism of the gent is of a kind Moers recognised in Dickens himself as a 'bastard theatrical dandyism';<sup>17</sup> Montague Tigg, like Dick Swiveller and the young Dickens, dresses for effect, to draw attention to himself, not because the dandy pose has any symbolic significance for him. This 'bastard theatrical dandyism' is essentially different to the 'pure' form of dandyism, that passionless elegance personified by Beau Brummell; where Brummellian dandyism is repressive, the gent's dandyism is histrionic. The gent's passion for flamboyant dress is thus motivated more by 'a naïve, almost childlike pleasure in dressing up'<sup>18</sup> than by a serious belief that he can appear and thus become a gentleman. It is significant that Moers describes the gent as a 'shop-worn imitation of the *dandy*' (Italics mine), rather than a second-hand imitation of the gentleman, for the gent's dandyism is more about adorning and celebrating the self than it is about disguising oneself as a gentleman; the dandy's clothes would thus be more impressive to the gent than his social status. The gent as dandy is what James Kincaid would call a 'playful' rather than an 'earnest' performer.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *The Dandy*, p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> 'Performance, Roles, and the Nature of the Self in Dickens', in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. by Carol Hanbery MacKay, pp. 11-26 (p.12).

In the context of a Dickens novel, however, 'playful' performers are as seriously significant as their earnest neighbours. And the supposedly playful gent Montague Tigg emphasises the difficulty of dividing characters in such a way, by transforming himself into the 'earnest' - or more sinister - Tigg Montague. Tigg also foregrounds an ambiguity inherent in Victorian attitudes to dandyism, an ambiguity pinpointed by Bulwer, who distinguishes in *England and the English* between 'the Dandy Harmless' and 'the Dandy Venomous' or 'the drone dandy' and 'the wasp dandy'.<sup>20</sup> The same divided attitude to dandyism - in this case of the gent - is apparent in Albert Smith's *The Natural History of the Gent* (1847). On the one hand, the breed seems comparatively harmless. As Ellen Moers puts it:

They have a passion for all things theatrical, and their style of dress has much of the 'light comedian' about it. They are very young, very gullible, very fresh and very vulgar, and they dream of falling into money.<sup>21</sup>

But on the other, they are the product of 'our present condition of society - that constant wearing struggle to appear something more than we in reality are, which now characterizes every body, both in their public and private phases'.<sup>22</sup> The gent cannot thus be regarded as an innocent and irrelevant extra in society's drama of social mobility. He is symbolically significant and suffers from the same diseased desire for an appearance of gentility as the rest of society. His imitation of the dandy's appearance cannot be clearly separated from his imitation of the dandy's gentlemanliness, immorality and emotional emptiness - or can it? The metamorphosis of Dickens's Montague Tigg into Tigg Montague seems to suggest that we can draw no distinct barriers between 'playful' and 'earnest' forms of dandyism or gentility. As Mark Tapley so succinctly puts it, 'there's ever so many Tiggs a passing this here Temple Gate any hour in the day, that only want a chance to turn out full-blown Montagues ev'ry one!' (Chapter 52, p. 803). Mark's remark is more than an observation on social climbing. It suggests the possibility that, given the right conditions, apparently harmless

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<sup>20</sup> I, vi and 118. Interestingly, Bulwer seems to regard 'the drone dandy', Lord Mute, as less dangerous than 'the wasp dandy', Sir Paul Snarl. His imagery is of course echoed by Harold Skimpole and Eugene Wrayburn.

<sup>21</sup> *The Dandy*, p. 217.

<sup>22</sup> *The Natural History of the Gent* (London: Bogue, 1847), p. 3.

dandy gents may emerge from the cocoon of self as powerful and as morally problematic as the butterfly dandy, Alfred D'Orsay.<sup>23</sup>

But if Dickens demonstrates, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, that a Tigg can become a Montague, he does not solve the problem of whether a Montague can successfully destroy a Tigg. The problem of whether Tigg's transformation is just of the surface or includes the inner man is highlighted in Jonas's analysis of Tigg's change:

you were another figure when I saw you first. Ha, ha, ha! I see the rents and patches now! No false hair then, no black dye! You were another sort of joker in those days, you were! You even spoke different, then. You've acted the gentleman so seriously since, that you've taken in yourself. If he [Pecksniff] should know you, what does it matter? Such a change is proof of your success. (Chapter 41, pp. 636-37)

The crucial ambiguity in Tigg's characterisation lies in Jonas's phrase, 'You were another sort of joker in those days', for if we compare Jonas's description of Tigg with the narrator's earlier description - quoted above (*MC*, Chapter 27, p. 427) - we will see a fundamental inconsistency between the two passages: whereas the narrator recognises 'the same Satanic, gallant, military Tigg' and 'true Tigg metal' below the surface of Montague, Jonas suggests that Tigg's transformation is internal as well as external. Having said this, there are further ambiguities within each passage: in the narrator's analysis, although Tigg is a person turned 'inside out', he is still somehow supposed to retain an inner self made of 'Tigg metal' - yet as Steven Marcus suggests in his description of the dandy as 'a man wholly externalised', it is surely impossible to turn oneself inside out, without creating an 'inward nullity'.<sup>24</sup> Then again, in Jonas's account of Tigg's metamorphosis, though he ostensibly maintains that Tigg is an entirely different 'sort of joker' now, he also makes it clear that he can see through Tigg's 'rents and patches', 'false hair' and 'black dye', which implies that there is an inner self beneath the social costume, a person at odds with the outward persona. Perhaps the central moment in Jonas's analysis is the claim, 'You've acted the gentleman so seriously since, that you've taken yourself in'. The idea of 'taking oneself in' obviously suggests that Tigg is a

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<sup>23</sup> See *The Dandy*, pp. 147-63 for Moers's discussion of Victorian ambivalence towards the parasitic yet charismatic Count D'Orsay.

<sup>24</sup> *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey*, pp. 229-30.

self-deceiver, but self-deception is not a simple concept. A self-deceiver has either taken him/herself in so completely that no trace of the original self exists; or he/she believes in one image of self, while the reality is quite different (and often less flattering). This central statement in Jonas's analysis thus highlights but does not solve the problem of whether it is possible to either erase, or totally transform, the inner self.

The representation of Tigg is characterised by an ambivalence typical of Victorian attitudes to the dandy. Montague Tigg celebrates the apparently harmless 'bastard theatrical dandyism' of the gent; Tigg Montague appears to personify a more dangerous form of dandyism; he is possibly a 'perfect' dandy, 'a man gone dead inside, a man wholly externalised'. However, the fact that Tigg does become Montague suggests that it is not possible to accurately regard the dandy as either entirely harmful or harmless. Ultimately, Tigg succeeds in at least appearing to be Montague because he exists in the same Victorian society which is depicted in *Nicholas Nickleby*, a society which accepts surface for substance, the appearance of gentility for the reality.

But if Dickens's texts clearly portray the superficiality or moral myopia of Victorian society, they are less straightforward in their investigation of the mystery of the 'pure' dandy - or the question I have already raised, of whether it is possible to rid oneself of an inner self or emotional life. Steven Marcus argues that Tigg's dream (Chapter 42) suggests the final impossibility of negating the inner life,<sup>25</sup> but I would argue that the issue remains deliberately ambiguous in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. What is certain, however, is that in a novel which contains a character (Pecksniff) labelled a 'Great Abstraction' (Chapter 31, p. 498), Dickens is consciously exploring the possibility of human hollowness. The analysis is in its early stages and Dickens ultimately sits Tigg precariously on a fence between theatrical dandyism and dandyism of the inner self, between selfishness and a literal, pernicious self-lessness.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

In *Bleak House*, Dickens's omniscient narrator returns to the issues raised by Montague Tigg, in the most important, sophisticated and direct analysis of dandyism I have found in Dickens's works:

The brilliant and distinguished circle comprehends within it, no contracted amount of education, sense, courage, honour, beauty, and virtue. Yet there is something a little wrong about it, in despite of its immense advantages. What can it be?

Dandyism? There is no King George the Fourth now (more's the pity!) to set the dandy fashion; there are no clear-starched jack-towel neckcloths, no short-waisted coats, no false calves, no stays. There are no caricatures, now, of effeminate Exquisites so arrayed [...]. There is no beau [...]. But is there Dandyism in the brilliant and distinguished circle notwithstanding, Dandyism of a more mischievous sort, that has got below the surface and is doing less harmless things than jack-towelling itself and stopping its own digestion, to which no rational person need particularly object?

Why, yes. It cannot be disguised. There *are*, at Chesney Wold this January week, some ladies and gentlemen of the newest fashion, who have set up a Dandyism - in Religion, for instance. Who, in mere lackadaisical want of an emotion, have agreed upon a little dandy talk about the Vulgar wanting faith in things in general [...].

There are also ladies and gentlemen of another fashion, not so new, but very elegant, who have agreed to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities. For whom everything must be languid and pretty. [...] Who are to rejoice at nothing, and be sorry for nothing. Who are not to be disturbed by ideas. On whom even the Fine Arts, attending in powder and walking backward like the Lord Chamberlain, must array themselves in the milliners' and tailors' patterns of past generations, and be particularly careful not to be in earnest, or to receive any impress from the moving age. (Chapter 12, pp. 159-60)

The obvious point to be made about this passage is that the narrator makes a distinction between Regency dandyism, which he equates with a harmlessly vain preoccupation with dress and 'dandyism of a more mischievous sort, that has got below the surface'. In a novel like *Bleak House*, which emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals of all types and social classes,<sup>26</sup> the absoluteness of this distinction must be questioned. There again, we have seen how, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, an entire society creates conditions bound to produce a pernicious form of dandyism. And in the character of Montague Tigg, we have seen that it is almost impossible to divorce 'the bastard theatrical dandyism' of the gent from the more disturbing form of dandyism which negates the inner self.

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<sup>26</sup> The text draws attention to this interconnection overtly when the omniscient narrator asks pointedly: 'What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!' (Chapter 16, p. 219).

There is no real answer to this contradiction - on the one hand, dandyism is seen as an innocent piece of fun, and on the other, as a serious moral and social danger - which frequently recurs in Dickens's work. His novels consistently emphasise that an obsession with gentility and fashion is a malaise which affects the middle- and upper-classes; a fascination with surface appearance, innocent or risible enough in itself, is shown to be part of an unhealthy chain of cause and effect. Textually or thematically, that is, this concern with fashion or gentility is condemned as harshly in Dickens's works as it is in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. But there are several dandified individuals in Dickens's works who are shielded from guilt by a certain aura of innocence - Dick Swiveller, for example, or Mr Guppy. The energy of these characters belies their textual or thematic function and betrays an affection for the dandy which Dickens, like other prominent Victorians, never succeeded in erasing or explaining. Thus, we have the nostalgic attitude set forth to Regency dandyism in this passage, cleared of any part in the current 'dandyism of a more mischievous kind'. A similar instance of wilfully impaired moral vision is evident in the posthumous tribute to the Count D'Orsay in Dickens's *Household Words*;<sup>27</sup> again, dramatically symbolic of the Victorians' embarrassing soft spot for the dandy was D'Orsay's inclusion - with his back to the sketcher, in shadow - in Maclise's engraving of the Fraserians.<sup>28</sup>

The ambivalence of Victorian attitudes to the dandy was at its most acute in contemporary attitudes to D'Orsay, who was beautiful and charming, but he was also sexually ambivalent and, more worryingly, parasitic, living off the Blessingtons. It should be clear from this description of D'Orsay that, although famously modelled on Leigh Hunt, Dickens's Harold Skimpole has much in common with him too. I am not suggesting that Dickens consciously used D'Orsay as a prototype - a question not particularly relevant here - but what interests me is the way that Skimpole

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<sup>27</sup> The posthumous tribute to D'Orsay in *HW* reads: 'Count D'Orsay, whose name is publicly synonymous with elegant and graceful accomplishment, and who, by those who knew him well, is affectionately remembered and regretted, as a man whose great abilities might have raised him to any distinction, and whose gentle heart even a world of fashion left unspoiled' - [Leigh Hunt], 'Lounging through Kensington', *HW*, 7 (6 August 1853), 533-38 (p. 536).

<sup>28</sup> *Fraser's Magazine*, 11 (January 1835); this double-page engraving was included to mark the beginning of *Fraser's* sixth year.

personifies the moral issues surrounding dandyism in *Bleak House* rather as D'Orsay symbolised some of the moral paradoxes and problems of his time. In many respects, of course, Skimpole appears to have nothing in common with the 'ideal' dandy; most importantly, he is shabby, and does not care about his appearance; he is possibly mercenary (like D'Orsay) and he professes to be a man of intense feeling. But Skimpole is crucial to my discussion because he personifies a 'deeper', more dangerous level of dandyism; with disturbing social and human implications, he elevates art over life. He views life aesthetically and is always able to justify his amorality with recourse to a philosophy which maintains that human life is at its most precious when it is artistic or picturesque. Moreover, Skimpole is so successful at justifying his attitude to life that many characters in the novel are unable to condemn his amorality, regarding him as a unique enigma. Skimpole's intellect thus has a similar effect to D'Orsay's beauty: it anaesthetises moral sensibilities.

Throughout the novel, for example, Skimpole is perceived by some as a harmless innocent and by others as a mercenary manipulator. At one extreme, Jarndyce's first description of Skimpole labels him 'the finest creature upon earth - a child' (Chapter 6, p. 67); at the other, Bucket's verdict is,

Whenever a person says to you that they are as innocent as can be in all concerning money, look well after your own money [...]. Whenever a person proclaims to you 'In worldly matters I'm a child,' you consider that that person is only a-crying off from being held accountable, and that you have got that person's number, and it's Number One. (Chapter 57, p. 775)

Esther's narrative fuses the two attitudes at once and is impressively effective at conveying her deep ambivalence towards Skimpole. For example, when Skimpole is first arrested for debt, Esther observes:

It was a most singular thing that the arrest was our [hers and Richard's] embarrassment, and not Mr Skimpole's. 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. (Chapter 6, p. 74)

Then again, the horrified amazement Esther feels when Skimpole recommends that the sick Jo should be turned out of doors, is conveyed by her bald description: 'The amiable face with which he

said it, I think I shall never forget' (Chapter 31, p. 435). Esther's habit of reporting Skimpole's speech is also telling, for the words without the engaging manner of the speaker do not fail to sound hollow.

A crucial passage on Skimpole in *Bleak House* is the following analysis by Esther in Chapter 43:

The helpless kind of candour [...], the light-hearted manner in which he was amused by his innocence, the fantastic way in which he took himself under his own protection and argued about that curious person, combined with the delightful ease of everything he said exactly to make out my guardian's case [for his innocence]. The more I saw of him, the more unlikely it seemed to me, *when he was present*, that he could design, conceal, or influence anything; and yet the less likely that appeared *when he was not present*, and the less agreeable it was to think of his having anything to do with any one for whom I cared. (pp. 596-97) (Italics mine)

It is Skimpole's manner which is captivating. The key to his character is the fact that, like Steerforth (whom I will discuss in the next chapter), he has the actor's ability to charm and captivate an audience. When Skimpole is not present, however, the spell is broken and his words seem empty or inconsistent with any moral code. Skimpole's 'presence' as an actor, however, is so powerful that the reaction he stimulates in the audience is best described as an unwilling, rather than a willing, suspension of disbelief. Esther, unlike David Copperfield, is not infatuated with her subject; she wants to judge him sternly, but is ineffectual when confrontation occurs.

The mystery surrounding Skimpole is more similar to that surrounding Tigg Montague than that associated with Steerforth. While we are given glimpses of Steerforth's inner self in *David Copperfield* - a tormented self at odds with his calm exterior - in *Bleak House*, we are left ignorant about Skimpole's an inner life. To return to the novel's key passage on dandyism, Skimpole is thus linked with 'dandyism of a more mischievous sort, that has got below the surface', and those 'ladies and gentleman of another fashion, [...] who have agreed to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities'. For Skimpole, as for these high society actors, 'everything must be languid and pretty. [...They] are to rejoice at nothing, and be sorry for nothing'. For these people, 'even the Fine Arts [...] must] be particularly careful not to be in earnest'. Whereas society prima

donnas like Lady Dedlock are shown to be distorted by the effort of repressing inner passion - a theme at the heart of Dickens's writing from *Dombey and Son* onwards - Harold Skimpole is portrayed as free from such struggles.

If Skimpole is an actor to his very core, so too is Mr Turveydrop, a character who perhaps satirises Lord Chesterfield's obsession with dancing and decorum. In fact, Esther's initial description of Mr Turveydrop - 'He was a fat old gentleman with a false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig' (Chapter 14, p. 190) - bears a marked resemblance to Dickens's narrator's description of the Crummleses in stage make-up in *Nicholas Nickleby* (Chapter 24, p. 302). However, if Turveydrop's act does not deceive Esther, it deceives Turveydrop himself. As the old lady at deportment classes tells Esther, 'The airs the fellow gives himself! [...] He fully believes he is one of the aristocracy!' (Chapter 14, p. 192). But if self-deceiving 'Gentleman Turveydrop', and his obsession with the Prince Regent, highlight the unpleasant face of Regency dandyism, Skimpole is ultimately a far more disturbing character. The reason for this is suggested by Rowland McMaster in his perceptive description of the difference between Skimpole and Turveydrop: 'While Turveydrop is a social phenomenon in the form of an art work, Skimpole is an aesthete whose views have social implications'.<sup>29</sup> Thus although Skimpole is not obsessed with his own appearance - which is actually distinctly shabby - his elevation of art over life, of aesthetic considerations over moral realities, emphasises the disturbing implications of dandyism, implications fully explored in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

Skimpole embodies the worrying possibility that, in the words of Wilde's Lord Henry Wotton, 'If a man treats life artistically, his brain is his heart'.<sup>30</sup> Although his aestheticism results in a philosophy which disregards the importance of human life, rather than the inhuman aberrations committed by Dorian Gray, the theories which Skimpole's sophisticated intelligence can justify

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<sup>29</sup> 'Dickens, the Dandy, and the Savage: A Victorian View of the Romantic', in Juliet and Rowland McMaster, *The Novel from Sterne to James: Essays on the Relation of Literature to Life* (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 54-70 (p. 61).

<sup>30</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Peter Ackroyd, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949; repr. 1986), p. 253 (Chapter 19).

intellectually are nonetheless repellent. His desire to inhabit a world which includes 'no brambles of sordid realities' (Chapter 6, p. 72), for example, results in the apparently harmless social theory:

I take it that my business in the social system is to be agreeable; I take it that everybody's business in the social system is to be agreeable. It's a system of harmony, in short.  
(Chapter 18, p. 252)

His dislike of work, he sees as a preference for the 'Drone philosophy' over the Bee philosophy (Chapter 8, p. 93), rather than an irresponsible neglect of his family and a parasitic reliance on his friends. When Esther confronts him about the issue of responsibility, he answers, 'Responsibility is a thing that has always been above me - or below me' (Chapter 61, p. 829). He says of slaves on American plantations:

I dare say theirs is an unpleasant experience on the whole; but, they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence. (Chapter 18, p. 253)

He explains that he would be more interested in Jo as an 'illustration' of the 'misdirected energy, which has a certain amount of reason in it, and a certain amount of romance', rather than 'merely as a poor vagabond' (Chapter 31, pp. 434-35). He even perceives his own daughters aesthetically, labelling them his 'Beauty daughter', his 'Sentiment daughter' and his 'Comedy daughter' (Chapter 43, p. 595). And last but certainly not least, he consistently talks about himself as if he were another person. Esther observes on the first occasion she meets him his habit of 'speaking of himself as if he were not at all his own affair, as if Skimpole were a third person' (Chapter 6, p. 70). From one perspective, we could see his habit of self-objectification as similar to the actor's separation from his role; from another, we could see it as the aesthete's view of himself as a work of art.

Despite his supposed inability to see them, the 'brambles of sordid realities' do, however, rear their ugly heads - in his parasitic scrounging, his eviction of Jo, his neglect of his family, his corruption of Richard, the bribe he takes from Vholes, and his final distortion of Jarndyce's supposed selfishness. Yet Skimpole betrays no sign of recognising them - or himself; his mask does

not reveal the slightest crack. Having said that, it remains true that if Skimpole is a human actor, a living role, his objective is not, like that of many dandies, to con people into believing that he is genteel or fashionable; in fact, neither his words or his deeds betray any concern at all for social respectability. But there is a greater distance between his words and another area central to our discussion here: that of emotion, feeling or passion. Where Skimpole in practice shows no emotion towards other human beings, he continuously talks about it. His protestations of sensitivity are so convincing initially, that Esther remarks:

He was so full of feeling too, and had such a delicate sentiment for what was beautiful or tender, that he would have won a heart by that alone. (Chapter 6, pp. 71-72)

The problem with Skimpole is that all his fine feeling seems to be reserved for art, not human life - though the fact that we usually see him in company with human beings rather than works of art makes even his feeling for art questionable. In his professed sensitivity to art, so at odds with the insensitivity he practises towards other human beings, he resembles Wilkie Collins's Count Fosco, and the historical murderer, Lacenaire, discussed in Chapter 3; there are also similarities with Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray - who is interestingly, markedly affected by a poem about the hand of Lacenaire.<sup>31</sup> And if the 'sordid realities' of Skimpole's life are not as shocking as the sensational lives of Lacenaire and Dorian Gray, this is not the point; nor is it the point that Skimpole is not as perfect in externals as the 'pure' dandy. Skimpole represents dandyism pushed to its extreme consequences. He is significant because of his aesthetic ethos, an ethos which Baudelaire, Wilde and, before them, Dickens, realised was dangerous.

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If Skimpole is an aesthete, he is not, to re-use Steven Marcus's definition of Tigg's dandyism, a 'parody of the self as a work of art'.<sup>32</sup> He embodies a different phenomenon - he is a parody of the self as a human being. In this again, he resembles the stage-struck murderer, Lacenaire, and the

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<sup>31</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 197-98 (Chapter 14). The poem is Théophile Gautier's *Émaux et Camées* (1852).

<sup>32</sup> *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey*, p. 229.

character Dickens possibly modelled on Lacenaire, Rigaud Blandois. All three, to echo Harvey Peter Sucksmith's description, discussed in Chapter 3, triumphantly assert their paradoxically 'true and vital hollowness', their 'theatrical yet authentic performance'. All three are not actors of the surface, but actors of the self. In the case of Rigaud Blandois, this literal self-lessness means that he emphasises, as Hillis Miller has pointed out, the link between gentility and criminality or diabolism.<sup>33</sup> In the case of Skimpole, the conclusions reached by his aesthetic theorising emphasise the evil that could result from high society's dandyism of the self, its negation of emotion and social reality; but Skimpole differs from Rigaud in that his character is instrumental in demonstrating the link between aestheticism and evil rather than that between gentility and evil.

One further dandified villain whom I would like to consider here is John Chester in *Barnaby Rudge*. No character in Dickens's works demonstrates the links between dandyism, gentility and villainy better than he does. A parody of the arch-villain of the Victorians, Lord Chesterfield, as well as a 'parody of the self as a work of art', he is obsessed with the appearance of fashion and gentility in a way that Skimpole is not; the narrator makes it clear throughout the novel that he is an actor by nature; Chester even understands the implications behind his dandyism; he is the ultimate heartless aristocratic villain. When his son Edward claims to speak from his heart, Chester actually upbraids him:

the heart is an ingenious part of our formation - the centre of the blood-vessels and all that sort of thing [...].

[...]

[...] Men are sometimes stabbed to the heart, shot to the heart; but as to speaking from the heart, or to the heart, or being warm-hearted, or cold-hearted, or broken-hearted, or being all heart, or having no heart - pah! these things are nonsense, Ned. (Chapter 32, p. 243)

To Haredale, he explains his vision of the world itself as hollow:

The world is a lively place enough, in which we must accommodate ourselves to circumstances, sail with the stream as glibly as we can, be content to take froth for substance, the surface for the depth, the counterfeit for the real coin. I wonder no philosopher has ever established that our globe itself is hollow. It should be, if Nature is consistent in her works. (Chapter 12, p. 91)

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<sup>33</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958; repr. 1965), p.229 n.

The nearest Chester comes to philosophical corroboration of his view of the world as one of surface is in his reading of Lord Chesterfield's *Letters*. Chester waxes lyrical on his prototype:

in every page of this enlightened writer, I find some captivating hypocrisy which has never occurred to me before, or some superlative piece of selfishness to which I was utterly a stranger. [...] Any King or Queen may make a Lord, but only the Devil himself - and the Graces - can make a Chesterfield. (Chapter 33, p. 174)

Dickens's narrator elaborates on Chester's paradoxically 'honest' admiration of immorality in terms similar to those used to explain Ralph Nickleby's mentality in *Nicholas Nickleby*:<sup>34</sup>

Men who are thoroughly false and hollow, seldom try to hide those vices from themselves; and yet in the very act of avowing them, they lay claim to the virtues they feign most to despise. 'For,' say they, 'this is honesty, this is truth. All mankind are like us, but they have not the candour to avow it.' The more they affect to deny the existence of any sincerity in the world, the more they would be thought to possess it in its boldest shape. (Chapter 23, p. 174)

Dickens's narrator, like Chester, distorts the content of Chesterfield's *Letters* - the *Letters* regularly justify the worldly advice given in moral terms and, by redefining sincerity, deny that worldliness means insincerity.<sup>35</sup> But the narrator is accurate in his assessment of Chester's mentality, just as Chester is accurate in discerning the hypocrisy and selfishness beneath Chesterfield's genteel words.

But if Chester is an 'honest' villain, he is still, like Chesterfield, an actor. Neither is an histrionic actor; they are both chameleonic, negating any sense of self, changing hue if the occasion requires, and always maintaining a polished yet unostentatious veneer. Sir John's appearance may be characterised by 'perfect calmness' (Chapter 10, p. 76) and he may speak 'in the bland, even tone, from which he never varied; and with the same soft, courteous, never-changing smile upon his

<sup>34</sup> *NN*, Chapter 44, pp 567-68: 'Affecting to consider himself but a type of all humanity, he [Ralph Nickleby] was at little pains to conceal his true character from the world in general, and in his own heart he exulted over and cherished every bad design as it had birth. The only scriptural admonition that Ralph Nickleby heeded, in the letter, was "know thyself." He knew himself well, and choosing to imagine that all mankind were cast in the same mould, hated them; for, though no man hates himself, the coldest among us having too much self-love for that, yet most men unconsciously judge the world from themselves, and it will be very generally found that those who sneer habitually at human nature, and affect to despise it, are among its worst and least pleasant samples'.

<sup>35</sup> For example, in a letter to his son dated 8 January 1750, Chesterfield argues concerning the vice of lying: 'It is the only art of mean capacities, and the only refuge of mean spirits. Whereas, concealing the truth, upon proper occasions, is as prudent, and as innocent, as telling a lie, upon any occasion, is infamous and foolish' (*Lord Chesterfield's Letters*, p. 194).

face' (Chapter 10, p. 79), but he is an actor. His acting involves the presentation of the self as a work of art. In this, he is remarkably successful, his countenance usually bearing 'no mark of age or passion, envy, hate or discontent: all unruffled and serene, and quite delightful to behold' (Chapter 40, p. 302). His perfection of the dandy pose and his view of the world as a globe with no substance, means that he, like Shakespeare's Iago and the actor-villains discussed in Chapter 1, cannot apprehend that other human beings are themselves anything but role-players, devoid of emotional lives. He thus ironically perceives his own son, the savage, animalistic Hugh, as a mythical figure, a centaur that 'would make a very handsome preparation in Surgeons' Hall, and would benefit science extremely' (Chapter 75, p. 574).

It is fascinating, however, that at key moments when Chester is unambiguously labelled an actor by the narrator, we glimpse an inner self that this 'perfect' dandy has affected to deny. The face behind the mask first appears clearly after Gabriel Varden has told him that Hugh is his son:

As he quitted the room, Sir John's face changed; and the smile gave place to a haggard and anxious expression, like that of a weary actor jaded by the performance of a difficult part. (Chapter 75, p. 582)

The second occasion occurs during his final confrontation with Haredale - 'now he dropped his mask, and showed his hatred in his face' (Chapter 81, p. 626) - and finally, at the moment just before his death, he has 'scorn and hatred in his look'. Though 'seeming to remember, even then, that this expression would distort his features after death, he tried to smile' (Chapter 81, p. 627), it is too late to fool the reader; Chester is not after all the 'perfect' dandy, devoid of inner passions, nor is he an actor to the core.

#### **6.4 - Lifeless Humanity and Artistic Life**

Though it could be argued that the vision of the person behind the persona reveals some inconsistency in the conception behind the characterisation of Chester, what is important here is Dickens's - perhaps last-minute - decision to portray Chester as ultimately a social role-player, rather than a human actor or 'perfect' dandy. For shadowing this study of people presenting

themselves as works of art is not just the question of whether it is possible in life totally to negate the inner being and present oneself as a work of art; of crucial importance is the artistic problem of whether it is possible for a writer paradoxically to endow a human art work, a self-less actor, with the appearance of human life within the art form that is the novel. This problem is so complex and so integral to the portrayal of Dickens's dandies that it is worth rephrasing: if Dickens believes that hollow people do exist, how can he recreate them artistically without readers mistaking the superficiality of the human being for that of the character he is presenting? How can Dickens present John Chester as a human being who exists purely on the surface without seeming to adopt, or partake of, the dandy vision of the world he is criticising? And thinking back to Chapter 4, how can the reader distinguish between a character like Monks, who is lifeless because of Dickens's artistic immaturity, and the 'perfect' dandy, who is actually devoid of humane life? Then again, urgent questions in the context of this thesis are: if perfectly passionless aristocratic villains do exist, how do they differ from the simplistic, stereotypical villains of nineteenth-century melodrama? and can Dickens as novelist validly endow them with complexity without destroying the conception of the character as pure villain?

Whereas in Chapter 4, I analysed the novelistic means by which Dickens animates the stereotypical passionate villains of Victorian melodrama, here the problem is slightly more involved: can, and should, a novelist endow a supposedly inhuman character with the appearance of human life necessary to engage the - probably - human reader? This is not a problem of animating an artistic stereotype, but one of animating a human stereotype. In *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens's decision to reveal a face behind the mask probably resulted from his concern to make his character humanly and artistically credible. Whether his artistic judgement was justified in so doing - or whether he should have left the issue of selfhood open-ended, as he does in the case of Skimpole, who never drops his act - is debatable. But what is certain, in the case of both characters, is that neither is presented, to echo a phrase Dickens uses elsewhere, as 'a horrible wonder apart' (*ED*, Chapter 20, p. 175). In the case of Dickens's passionless - or virtually passionless - dandy villains,

none are shown to be freaks of nature; all are inextricably connected with their society. If the essential humanity of Dickens's dandies seems uncertain or ambiguously presented when we look at each character either in isolation, or in relation to our experience of real life, the case is altered when we interpret them textually - or in relation to certain lines of narrative discourse. Then we see a slightly different picture. That is, the 'textual life of Dickens's characters', to borrow the title of James A. Davies's recent book on Dickens,<sup>36</sup> in itself often explains or dramatises the dandy's lack of life.

Dickens's manipulation of the relationship between 'text' - which has a semiotic thrust - and 'story' - which has a mimetic thrust - is the principal means by which he can credibly signal that a character is that paradox, an inhuman human, rather than a lifeless fictional creation. In more direct terms, this means, as we saw in the case of Sir Mulberry Hawk, that a character can appear to be a straightforward aristocratic villain in relation to the story, or chain of narrated events, while his textual function is far more complex - he is no more a villain than the society which produced him, a society of role-players who elevate surface over substance. In the case of Chester and Skimpole, Dickens's textual investigation of the dandy is far more intricate, for embedded in both novels is something more than an exploration of the relationship between role-playing and the self, or the concept of society as theatre.

In each text, Dickens embodies his own response to certain contemporary debates about the relationship between the dandy and his society. In *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens dramatises several of the tenets of the anti-dandiacal *Fraser's Magazine* on the dandy's significance, not least of which is William Maginn's perception of a relationship between the criminality of high life and that of low life:

it is a favourite notion with our fashionable novelists, to sacrifice the middle-classes equally to the lowest and the highest. [...] There is a sort of instinct in this. The one class esteem themselves above the law, and the other are too frequently below it. They are attracted, then, by a sympathy with their mutual lawlessness. They recognise a likeness in their libertinism.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> 'Mr. Edward Lytton Bulwer's Novels', p. 515.

It is ironic that Dickens was so regularly attacked by *Fraser's Magazine*, as we saw in Chapter 5, for his unrealistic representation of crime in *Oliver Twist* and indeed *Barnaby Rudge*. *Barnaby Rudge* in particular cleverly analyses the inextricable links between the criminality of the aristocracy and those 'below' the law. And this analysis is not accidental, or instinctive. It takes the form of a carefully patterned dramatisation of Maginn's argument, a dramatisation later refined in *Great Expectations* - a novel which contains, according to Robin Gilmour, 'the most complex and satisfying fictional examination of the idea of the gentleman in the Victorian period'.<sup>38</sup> Thus we have, most obviously of all, Chester's regular meetings with his illegitimate son Hugh, as well as Lord George Gordon's weakly egotistical agitation of the masses. Chester too is an agitator, recognising Hugh, during the riots, 'with the air of a patron' (Chapter 53, p. 409). The violence of those underlings, the scum of society who meet at the Boot - Ned the Hangman, Hugh, Barnaby, and Sim Tappertit - is thus stirred by the supposed cream of society, men like Chester who perfume their quarters after visits from fellow human beings. Of course, the most cutting point that Dickens makes on the mutual lawlessness of the genteel and the very poor is made through the revelation that Chester is Hugh's son (just as he makes the same point through the revelation that Magwitch is Pip's benefactor in *Great Expectations*). This relationship is one of which *Fraser's* - with its famous distinctions between the 'natural' and the 'tailor-made' gentleman<sup>39</sup> - should have approved. The tendency of the dandy was to regard the self not as an animal, but as a gentleman; Hugh is a telling reminder to Chester of the animalism that he cannot ultimately deny.

In *Bleak House*, Dickens explores the relationship between the groups labelled in *Sartor Resartus*, the 'dandiacal sect' and the 'drudge sect'. The drudges are not the criminal poor, but the poor who have been criminally neglected by society. The central ethos in the chapter of *Sartor Resartus* entitled 'The Dandiacal Body' is that the complete gulf between the dandies and the drudges will eventually destroy the country:

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<sup>38</sup> *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*, p. 143.

<sup>39</sup> 'Mr. Edward Lytton Bulwer's Novels', p. 516.

To the eye of the political Seer, their mutual relation, pregnant with the elements of discord and hostility, is far from consoling. These two principles of Dandiacal Self-Worship or Demon-Worship, and Poor-Slavish or Drudgical Earth-worship, or whatever that same Drudgism may be, do as yet indeed manifest themselves under distant and nowise considerable shapes: nevertheless, in their roots and subterranean ramifications, they extend through the entire structure of Society, and work unweariedly in the secret depths of English national Existence; striving to separate and isolate in into two contradictory, uncommunicating masses. [...]

To me it seems probable that the two Sects will one day part England between them.<sup>40</sup>

Skimpole's eviction of Jo in *Bleak House* is symbolic of the division of England into the privileged and the neglected, or the dandies and the drudges. The eviction is doubly ironic as Skimpole has no more pennies to rub together than Jo, and certainly has more debts, but Skimpole's education, faded gentility and literacy - not to mention Self-Worship - give him access to élite circles. Throughout the novel, moreover, scenes of dire poverty (in Tom-All-Alone's, for example) are juxtaposed with those depicting the lassitude of the wealthy. Although *Bleak House* emphasises 'connection' between classes - Nemo dying a seedy death at Krook's, Lady Dedlock dying on the steps of the pauper's graveyard - connection is tellingly undercut by lack of communication. Even when the poor are visited by outsiders, there is rarely communication; in the case of Mrs Pardiggle, for example, self-worship replaces genuine charity or understanding. But perhaps one of the best examples of social double standards in *Bleak House* is the fact that law-abiding Coavins the bailiff and his family are treated as lepers by society, whilst those 'gentlemen' who create a demand for bailiffs are regarded as blameless - as fashionable indeed.

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Thus, by textually 'placing' Skimpole and Chester in contemporary social contexts, by dramatising, through each of the novels in which they appear, contemporary attitudes to the dandy, Dickens makes it manifest that such characters are not mysterious, anomalous monsters; rather, they are monstrous products of their time. And just as Victorian dandies were products of their social environment, Dickens's dandies can never be divorced from their novelistic environment - one which creates human interest around the seemingly inhuman and demystifies the dandy. By the time

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<sup>40</sup> *Sartor Resartus*, p. 216.

he wrote *Our Mutual Friend*, he had discovered how to represent human beings devoid of inner selves. In *Our Mutual Friend*, insubstantial people appear as they are, as human abstractions. For this reason, by a curious logic, the novel does not contain a pure, passionless dandy; for the only substantial thing about the typical dandy is his fashionable appearance, and abstractions cannot, by definition, have a distinct appearance - an abstraction is an idea, or an airy nothing. The Veneerings, therefore, have no more substance than their name suggests, and in one way, indeed, they have less. For although the Veneerings' name implies that they are superficial people, the physical appearance of the Veneerings is not foregrounded in the novel. They exist principally as an idea in the mind of their novelistic creator; they are thus more abstract than physical representations of surface human beings. They have no reality, for themselves or others, except when it is confirmed by the mirror that dominates their dinner party; the mirror, that is, literally and symbolically looms larger than life. The Veneerings have purely social lives and the society to which they belong also requires a mirror and a superficial audience for its existence. Where the social climbers in *Nicholas Nickleby* pretend to be something that they're not, the Veneerings pretend to be something, to be human, to be real.

Of course, throughout his novels, Dickens is given to dehumanising the human. In *Oliver Twist*, for example, as I discussed in Chapter 4, Fagin's trial turns him into an art object - 'a marble figure' - for the artist in the gallery; and vice versa, the onlookers, to Fagin, might as well have been made of stone (Chapter 52, pp. 359-60). Dickens includes in his novels a 'whole race' of people that Harold Skimpole might have called

'stuffed people,' - a large collection, glassy eyed, set up in the most approved manner on their various twigs and perches, very correct, perfectly free from animation, and always in glass cases. (*BH*, Chapter 37, p. 532)

Dickens's race of 'stuffed people' includes not only aristocratic fossils, but also more pernicious varieties of the species, characters like Vholes with his 'lifeless manner' and 'inward manner of speaking' (Chapter 37, p. 533). In *Little Dorrit*, it is not only Rigaud Blandois who is described in mechanistic terms (Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 5); the word 'unfeeling' is the keynote of the introductory

description of Mrs Merdle, who thereafter becomes virtually synonymous with her 'broad unfeeling handsome bosom' (Book 1, Chapter 20, p. 233); her husband Mr Merdle, 'the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows' (Book 2, Chapter 25, p. 691) is a nonentity or human vacuum at the centre of the text; and Mrs General, 'having long ago formed her own surface to such perfection that it hid whatever was below it (if anything)' (Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 492), exists in a world of 'papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism' (Book 2, Chapter 5, p. 462).

There is, however, a slight but significant difference between the dehumanisation of the human in *Our Mutual Friend*, compared with Dickens's previous novels. Before *Our Mutual Friend*, the inhumanity of human beings is implied through the use of appropriate imagery, through metaphor and simile; in *Our Mutual Friend*, the Veneerings are no longer humans, but images of humans or metaphorical people. Ironically, the dehumanisation of the human is a device also used in Lord Chesterfield's *Letters*. People are not only referred to actors; they are described as machines, or mechanisms, throughout the *Letters*. For example, in a letter to his son dated 19 December 1749, Chesterfield writes:

we are complicated machines: and though we have one mainspring, that gives motion to the whole, we have an infinity of little wheels, which, in their turns, retard, precipitate, and sometimes stop that motion. (p. 186)

Again, Chesterfield firmly believes that the accomplishments he is trying to teach his son are 'mechanical, and to be acquired by care and observation, as easily as turning, or any human trade' (p. 228; 16 May 1851). The use of the word 'perfect' is not unusual in the *Letters* and reflects Chesterfield's belief that human beings can be programmed or moulded to perfection, like mechanisms or works of art. His vision of humanity as raw material which can be shaped to perfection is perhaps best reflected when he describes his friend Lady Hervey as 'so good a sculptor, that I am sure she can give you whatever form she pleases' (p. 221; 28 February 1751).

It may seem a bizarre twist that Dickens's dandies, 'stuffed people' and human abstractions betray an authorial vision of humanity which has much in common with that of Lord Chesterfield.

Both Dickens and Chesterfield employ, through recurring strands of imagery, the idea of the human as actor, mechanism or work of art. Thus can we finally conclude that Dickens, whilst affecting to despise those who view the globe as hollow, in fact endorses the pernicious cynicism of Lord Chesterfield and his own John Chester? This extreme dehumanisation of the human, the ability to see human beings as abstractions, seems to surpass in its misanthropy anything that Lord Chesterfield writes in his *Letters*. The vision of humanity Dickens stretches to its horrible consequence in *Our Mutual Friend* is more disturbing by far than that denial of the human characteristic of the 'pure' dandy or the aristocratic villain of Victorian domestic melodrama.

Although there is no doubt that Dickens's view of humanity did become bleaker as his career went on, this is not the key issue at this juncture. The first point to be made is one of genre; Dickens's Veneerings are not necessarily more disturbing than Lord Chesterfield's human mechanisms or the passionless aristocratic villains of stage melodrama because Dickens has a more misanthropic view of humanity. They are more disturbing because the resources of the novel allow them to be presented directly to our imagination; it would be impossible for any Victorian stage melodramatist or director/manager physically to represent human abstractions; this would be a contradiction in terms. On the printed page, they take their place as a necessary part of the imagery and machinery of a novel investigating, on a literal and metaphorical plane, the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, real people and fictional stereotypes, passion and lack of passion, etc..

The second point is directly related to what has just been said. Dickens's dandies, 'stuffed people' and human abstractions are not the only inhabitants in the Dickens universe. The crucial difference between Dickens's world picture and the dandiacal or Chesterfield version is that where Chesterfield and Dickens's dandies perceive the entire human species as actors or empty vessels, Dickens regards only a certain group of villains in this way. Thus, in Dickens, where there are passionless creatures of the surface, there are passionate people of the heart. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the Veneerings are counterbalanced by the Boffins, Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren,

amongst others. Though, as this thesis has shown, it would be simplifying matters to argue that passion is always associated with goodness and lack of passion with evil (which is often the case with Victorian melodrama in most forms except the Gothic). In *A Tale of Two Cities*, for example, it is not just the character of Carton who confuses the 'passional' patterning of melodrama; the archetypal passionless aristocrat, the Marquis de St Evrémonde, is at war not with the 'honest' working-classes, but with a proletariat whose passion has turned sour. And in the characters of Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 7, the melodramatic stereotypes of the heartless aristocratic seducer and the passionate, earnest working-class hero are complicated and refined almost beyond recognition.

But it is significant, finally, that even when Dickens seems most to relinquish the methods of the popular theatre - in the abstract characterisation of the Veneerings - he is in fact reliant on the fundamental emotional and artistic patterning of melodrama for his raw material. So in the theatre of the Dickens novel, where there is negation of passion, there is excess of passion; where there is art, there is life; where there is theatre, there is the world; and vice versa.

**Chapter 7 - Byronic Baddies in the Novels of Dickens: Sincerity, Society and the Self**

At first glance, the Byronic hero appears to represent, and even elevate, an attitude to life which is antithetical to the beliefs and values of Dickens the man and writer. The Byronic hero seems socially and often emotionally disengaged; he is frequently aristocratically disdainful of other human beings and acutely conscious of an individuality indistinguishable from superiority. He is a cynic and a role-player, whose pale, beautiful features mask an inner life of secrets and mystery. His energy is largely internalised, as the external world - excepting, perhaps, the female sex - seems to offer little for which he cares, little in fact which interests him as much as the theatre of his own ego. It is not surprising, therefore, that the few direct comments made by Dickens on Byron and his poetry were negative or disapproving in tone. On 25 November 1840, Dickens wrote to S. Horrell:

It is not the province of a Poet to harp upon his own discontents, or to teach other people that they ought to be discontented. Leave Byron to his gloomy greatness, and do you  
Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.<sup>1</sup>

On 28 February 1843, Dickens confessed in significant terms to Miss Coutts, that he was 'in danger of turning misanthropical, Byronic, and devilish'.<sup>2</sup> To be 'devilish', for Romantic admirers of Milton's Satan, like Blake, Shelley and Byron, was to be heroic. But Byron's heroes, like Scott's outlaws, were products of a Romantic amorality and individualism not condoned by the outwardly moral and socially responsible Victorians. Both types survived and exerted a strong influence on Victorian literature, but survival involved a sea-change.

In the case of the Byronic hero, however, the Romantic hero did not automatically become the Victorian villain - at least, not in the novels of Charles Dickens. Edgar Johnson echoes the familiar assumption that Dickens upheld, 'impassioned purposefulness and the conviction of the meaningfulness of effort'.<sup>3</sup> Although there is much truth in such a claim, it is also true that Dickens's responses to 'impassioned purposefulness' and 'the meaningfulness of effort' were not always unambiguous, and certainly were not consistent throughout his career. Though belief in the

<sup>1</sup> *Letters (Pilgrim)*, II, 155.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 447.

<sup>3</sup> *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and His Triumph* (London: Gollancz, 1953), II, 697.

work ethic, the concept of duty and the idea of social responsibility for the moral good of all obviously permeates Dickens's fiction, he is in no way unquestioningly dismissive of the individual who rejects these Victorian values - in this case, the Byronic hero. The egotism, pride, destructiveness and questionable passion of the Byronic hero elicited from Dickens more ambivalent and sophisticated responses than are often recognised.

Dickens was not, however, drawing on just one Byronic model in his novels. As Peter L. Thorslev points out in his work, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*,<sup>4</sup> 'the Byronic Hero', as he appears in Byron's poetry, is not one type with a static definable set of characteristics, but a metamorphic amalgam of heroic types with pre-Romantic origins: 'the Child of Nature', 'the Hero of Sensibility' ('the Man of Feeling' or 'the Gloomy Egoist'), 'the Gothic Villain', 'the Noble Outlaw', Faust, Cain, Ahasuerus, Satan and Prometheus. Again, in his own age, the familiar 'Byronic' figure for a regular playgoer like Dickens would have been the Gothic villain of stage melodrama. As we saw in Chapter 2, the Victorian Gothic stage villain differs from his Romantic parent in so far as his passions are uncontrollable. He cannot therefore exercise as much control over his self-presentation as the heroes of Byron's poetry; where Byron's heroes wear their scorn like a mask, the villains of Gothic melodrama let passion disfigure them. The genteel villains of domestic melodrama, of course, are in almost total control of the image of self they project; Dickens undoubtedly takes something from these too when creating the Byronic individuals of his novels, who are always genteel, to varying degrees.

Through the Byronic individual, Dickens questions the sincerity of all human emotions and social roles in a way that melodrama never does. However, he never abandons the stock types, the passional patterning or the values of melodrama: in the later novels, he plays on them. His Byronic characters confuse, for example, melodrama's (usual) division of characters into the passionate and the passionless, but their artistic effectiveness depends on an invocation or echoing of the original melodramatic opposition; Eugene Wrayburn, for example, at first appears to be a heartless

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<sup>4</sup> (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962; repr. 1965).

aristocrat in comparison with the fiery Headstone, and only gradually do we realise that things are not as they appear. Dickens also manipulates the fundamental melodramatic tension between emotional expression and repression; where stage melodrama, and Dickens's novels, tend to derive dramatic force from the contrast between characters who repress their emotions and characters who express them, in the Byronic character, the conflict between emotional repression and expression is internalised. On the surface, however, the emotional make-up of Dickens's Byronic characters appears to conform to one familiar pattern or the other; Sydney Carton, for instance, at first appears to wear his angst on his sleeve, but his real anxiety is hidden from all but Lucie. In the same vein, Dickens appears to dress his characters as either villains or heroes whilst questioning the appropriateness of such moral and fictional roles.

This chapter will explore Dickens's investigation of the relationship between passion and self-presentation, an investigation centred, in the late novels, on his Byronic characters. The Byronic individuals of Dickens's novels reflect his increased awareness that one's chosen method of self-presentation is not necessarily an index of moral character. Melodrama, for example, often assumes that those who repress their feelings are deceitful, insincere and villainous; Dickens came to appreciate that this was not always the case. And most importantly, his Byronic characters reflect his mature awareness that achieving a state of sincerity is not a simple matter of externalising or expressing one's inner thoughts and feelings; nor is it always just a question of believing in the image of self one projects, as Erving Goffman maintains.<sup>5</sup> To express oneself honestly or sincerely, it is first necessary to know oneself. And it is not easy to know oneself, to be directly in touch with one's thoughts and feelings. In the words of Matthew Arnold:

Below the surface-stream, shallow and light,  
Of what we *say* we feel - below the stream,  
As light, of what we *think* we feel - there flows  
With noiseless current strong, obscure and deep,  
The central stream of what we feel indeed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> From an essay entitled 'St. Paul and Protestantism', *Cornhill Magazine* (November 1869); repr. in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, 1953), p. 543.

To express oneself sincerely, then, it is first necessary to know oneself. And a major reason that self-knowledge is so difficult to attain is that the self does not exist in isolation; it responds to the demands of a society and consequently shifts and changes. The state of sincerity for the individual is thus in some ways paradoxical, impossible to achieve; one is required to reflect one's inner self honestly, or innocently, without catering to an audience, but this audience did much to mould the self in the first place. From this perspective then, people are always performers and those who are conscious of the impossibility of a theatrically innocent sincerity, are themselves paradoxically the most sincere individuals. But such self-consciousness does not always best serve society, and such social performers, as we have seen, are not necessarily morally 'good' in the eyes of the society that produced them. Those who believe in their own sincerity, who express what they think are their thoughts and feelings, may be socially responsible and morally 'good'. On the other hand, such unchecked externalisation is characteristic of the psychopathically violent criminal.

Sincerity, in other words, is not a simple concept. Nor is it necessarily synonymous with moral goodness. The individual must sometimes decide whether loyalty to the individual self or loyalty to 'the self' of mankind in general is preferable - the typical Romantic individual was more likely to prioritise the self and the typical Victorian his/her society. Dickens's exploration of the Byronic individual allowed him to recognise the problematic nature of Polonius's neat platitude:

This above all - to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (*Hamlet* (c. 1601); I. 3. 78-80) <sup>7</sup>

My analysis of Dickens's Byronic individuals will demonstrate that, in the late novels, sincerity and moral goodness were concepts difficult to define and achieve, for they depended on the shifting relationship between the self and society. Where the traditional critical debate focuses on the matter of whether Dickens's Byronic individuals are heroes or villains, this chapter will argue that this is the wrong question to ask. Dickens's Byronic characters demonstrate his mature awareness of the

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<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Trilling (p. 3) for reminding me of the relevance of Polonius's words to the discussion in hand.

difficulty of knowing and believing in both oneself and one's society. And a consequence of the difficulty of knowing and believing in oneself and one's society, is that it becomes even more difficult to believe in heroes and villains.

### 7.1 - Steerforth

Apart from Horatio Sparkins in *Sketches by Boz*, a comic impostor who adopts the pose of the Byronic hero to infiltrate the ranks of the bourgeoisie ('Horatio Sparkins', pp. 355-70), James Steerforth in *David Copperfield* is the first of Dickens's novelistic characters to be significantly influenced by the Byronic hero. Indeed, according to many commentators, Steerforth is the most Byronic of all Dickens's creations. In *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*, Mario Praz writes:

James Steerforth, the fascinating, untrammelled aristocrat, capricious, arrogant, seducer of women, is as it were the symbol of the Romantic poet in the guise in which he appeared in England, in Byron particularly, and with a few allusions to Shelley as well (his death in a shipwreck during a storm).<sup>8</sup>

Again, Edgar Johnson refers to Steerforth's 'Byronic corruption',<sup>9</sup> Arnold Kettle labels him a 'Byronic superman',<sup>10</sup> and William R. Harvey, in his article, 'Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero', maintains 'that Steerforth, like the traditional Byronic hero, is beyond the rules and regulations of more ordinary men'.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Angus Wilson, in 'The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens', observes the following Byronic characteristics in Steerforth's character:

Steerforth despises the world, he puts other values above work, he sometimes wishes that he was not wasting his life, he has the vestige of a power to love or at any rate to want to be loved.<sup>12</sup>

What interests me in Dickens's presentation of Steerforth is that throughout *David Copperfield*, he is compared - by himself and others - to an actor. David's attitude to Steerforth is throughout the infatuation that one has for an actor or screen-idol. And perhaps more importantly,

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<sup>8</sup> Trans. by Angus Davidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and His Triumph*, II, 696.

<sup>10</sup> 'Thoughts on *David Copperfield*', *Review of English Literature*, 2 (1961), 64-74 (p. 73)

<sup>11</sup> p. 309.

<sup>12</sup> *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. by John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 9.

there is considerable textual evidence to support the view that Steerforth himself is conscious of his stage 'presence', that he has a highly sophisticated sense of himself as actor. Moreover, Steerforth realises that he can exploit his theatrical awareness to gain power over others. But significantly, his consciousness of his acting talent is responsible for both his triumph and his tragedy. As Robert Heilman writes in *Tragedy and Melodrama*, 'the enlarged sense of oneself as a good actor, like an enlarged sense of oneself as an evildoer, may become a disabling illness'.<sup>13</sup>

Steerforth's sense of himself as an actor means that he is unable to become 'genuinely' emotionally involved with other human beings. This is not because he is, like Iago, disturbingly self-less. It is because he is too conscious, and conscious of too much. His self-consciousness is not, however, like the corruption of Gothic stage villains, presented as innate. Nor is Steerforth presented simply as a motiveless manipulator, but as a complex creature moulded as much by his environment as by his own impulses. The key to Steerforth's character as actor, for example, and the formidable 'presence' he creates, lies in Mrs Steerforth's explanation of his upbringing.

Significantly, from the first, Mrs Steerforth, with her 'stateliness' of manner and 'lofty' air, has brought her son up to play an heroic role. She explains to David when she first meets him that

Salem House

was not a fit school generally for my son, [...] but [...] my son's high spirit made it desirable that he should be placed with some man who felt its superiority, and would be content to bow himself before it; and we found such a man there. (Chapter 20, p. 253)

She adds, referring to the incident when Steerforth caused the sacking of Mr Mell:

He would have risen against all constraint; but he found himself the monarch of the place, and he haughtily determined to be worthy of his station. It was like himself. (Chapter 20, p. 253)

Mrs Steerforth has brought her son up to believe that he is omnipotent and superior to others. Her choice of Salem House as a school could genuinely have been made in order to allow Steerforth to rehearse his heroic role without the competition of his peers at a school like Eton, for example; but it could also reflect interestingly a disjunction between her stately manner and her financial means.

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<sup>13</sup> p. 111.

In any case, her language is frighteningly disproportionate to the incident she is describing - the sacking of a school-teacher. And most importantly, her emphasis on her son's 'high spirit', 'superiority', rebelliousness, and individualism - all qualities admired by the Romantics and Byron, particularly - demonstrate the role she has moulded for her son in life, that of Romantic hero.

But the most perturbing implications of Mrs Steerforth's influence on her son are highlighted when she plainly states, 'It was like himself'. Her words portray her son almost as two beings - Steerforth as Steerforth and Steerforth as his role in life. 'It' (his behaviour) was like 'himself' (the heroic, Romantic and ideal Steerforth that Mrs Steerforth has created as the chosen role for her son). Mrs Steerforth's moulding of her son demonstrates Lionel Trilling's point that, 'The hero is one who looks like a hero; the hero is an actor - he acts out his own high sense of himself'.<sup>14</sup> It is Mrs Steerforth, however, who first instils in Steerforth a high sense of himself. She succeeds so well that, for much of the novel, it is difficult to differentiate between Steerforth the person and Steerforth the role. Even as a child, he has a mature understanding of the role his mother has designed for him and he acts it to perfection.

David, of course, sees Steerforth's name - carved in an old door in the playground - before he sees Steerforth: 'There was one boy - a certain J. Steerforth - who cut his name very deep and very often, who, I conceived, would read it in a rather strong voice, and afterwards pull my hair' (Chapter 5, p. 68). The fictional Steerforth imagined by David is more than matched by the boy himself; Steerforth is in fact fictionalised, treated as a hero, even in his schooldays. David is not 'considered as being formally received into the school, however, until J. Steerforth arrived. [...] I was carried [to him] as before a magistrate' (Chapter 6, p. 72). Steerforth, then, is considered by all to be a major power or presence in the school. Far from acting magisterially, however, he uses this fact for his own gain, taking money from David, 'encouraging' him to read to him, walking to church with Miss Creakle, and eventually provoking the dismissal of Mr Mell. As Mrs Steerforth

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<sup>14</sup> *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 85; Trilling's idea is based on that put forward by Robert Warshaw's essay on Western films 'The Westerner', in *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), p. 153.

trained her son to be a socially powerful presence, it is ironic that he has no concept of social responsibility, and no concern for the individuals who make up his society, or his audience.

Interestingly, even in his schooldays, Steerforth is never portrayed as a 'boy' in the sense that naive, young 'Daisy' Copperfield is one. He is always treated as an adult by both the boys and the masters. He has a sophisticated adult's understanding of power and manipulation and consequently a strange standing amongst the boys. When Ham and Mr Peggotty visit Salem House, they are not struck by him simply because he is their social superior. David's description of Steerforth on this occasion captures the essence of his charm:

There was an ease in his manner - a gay and light manner it was, but not swaggering - which I still believe to have borne a kind of enchantment with it. I still believe him, in virtue of this carriage, his animal spirits, his delightful voice, his handsome face and figure, and, for aught I know, of some inborn power of attraction besides [...], to have carried a spell with him to which it was a natural weakness to yield, and which not many persons could withstand. I could not but see how pleased they were with him, and how they seemed to open their hearts to him in a moment. (Chapter 7, pp. 89-90)

The mature narrator David's emphasis on the fact that he still believes now what he believed then, gives extra weight to his words. The language in which David describes Steerforth is exactly that which a theatrical critic would use. 'This carriage', 'his delightful voice, his handsome face and figure' and 'some inborn power of attraction' (like the presence or charisma which star actors possess), are all terms reminiscent of the art of acting. Moreover, the same passage could be a prose paraphrase of one of Byron's poetic pictures of his heroes; his heroes are always handsome and have an almost supernatural aura about them. In Coleridgean terms, both Steerforth and the Byronic hero have an almost magical effect on their audience, compelling them, paradoxically, willingly to suspend their disbelief.

Steerforth differs from Byron's heroes, however, in one main respect: he wants to be popular and admired. David realises this, though the narrator/author division in *David Copperfield* is such that we, as readers, appreciate that Steerforth is an 'actor by nature' just before this revelation bursts through into David's consciousness. In Chapter 21, David talks about Steerforth's 'natural gift of adapting himself to whomsoever he pleased' (p. 264). We are told that 'there was no

noise, no effort, no consciousness, in anything he did; but in everything an indescribable lightness' (p. 264). Most importantly, David observes:

the consciousness of success in his determination to please, inspired him with a new delicacy of perception, and made it, subtle as it was, more easy to him. (Chapter 21, p. 265)

Steerforth has the actor's desire to be loved, to 'conquer' an audience. He desires to gratify himself rather than give pleasure to others. He enacts this desire that very night at the Peggotty household, where he takes 'centre stage' with his stories, even on the evening when Ham and Emily announce their engagement, when he should properly have been a passive observer. No-one objects, however; on the contrary, Mrs Gummidge is 'bewitched' (Chapter 21, p.270) by Steerforth.

But as David soon perceives, Steerforth's desire to please is motivated by the wrong reasons. David passionately exclaims:

If any one had told me, then, that all this was a brilliant game, played for the excitement of the moment, for the employment of high spirits, in the thoughtless love of superiority, in a mere wasteful careless course of winning what was worthless to him, and next minute thrown away - I say, if anyone had told me such a lie that night, I wonder in what manner of receiving it my indignation would have found a vent! (Chapter 21, p. 265)

David's description of Steerforth in this passage is strikingly similar to Erving Goffman's analysis of the cynic.<sup>15</sup> Steerforth himself verbalises his relish for the change and temporary excitement which role-playing can bring to life when he describes David's prospective job in the Doctor's Commons in terms of acting:

They [the proctors] are like actors: now a man's a judge, and now he is not a judge; now he's one thing, now he's another; now he's something else, change and change about; but it's always a very pleasant, profitable little affair of private theatricals, presented to an uncommonly select audience. (Chapter 23, p. 293)

This passage could be seen as reflecting either cynicism, or mature understanding, of the importance of acting and role-playing in life. His description of the proctors, for example, reminds us of Jacques's 'All the world's a stage' speech (*As You Like It* (c. 1599); II. 7. 139-66), and presents us with the same dilemma. Jacques's speech could either be interpreted as a cynical

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<sup>15</sup> *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, pp. 28-29.

description of a hollow world, or as a sophisticated statement about the impossibility of living 'sincerely' where the self exists in society, or must present itself before an audience; Jacques's speech could of course fuse both these meanings.

Steerforth's understanding of the world as theatre does not, for me, mean that he understands no reality other than that of roles and surfaces. Though cynical, Steerforth is not hollow to the core. Admittedly, his upbringing means that he has a complex understanding of the way in which man is a social being, who is always performing for an audience. His engrained understanding of the actor's art, likewise, makes him unable to immerse himself whole-heartedly or 'sincerely' in the single heroic part he is expected to play, or to believe in the performances of others. When he meets David after the performance of *Julius Caesar* (c. 1599) and the pantomime, for instance, Steerforth is incapable of the childlike enthusiasm for, and belief in, nineteenth century theatricals.<sup>16</sup> His contempt for the productions is that of a theatrical insider, of someone who understands the art of role-playing.

But if Steerforth is characteristically unable to 'suspend his disbelief' in the theatre or in life, because of his intense consciousness of the artifice and theatrical deception integral to his self and his society, he does not totally lose faith in the ideal of sincerity. Dickens's presentation of Steerforth is complicated by the fact that the novel is riddled with reminders of Steerforth's own desire to achieve a state of sincerity; paradoxically, he sincerely wishes to find something or someone in whom he can believe unselfconsciously. More fascinating still, is the fact that Steerforth's pained longings for a state of genuineness often betray his belief that if he could believe in something, he could be morally good. Perhaps his most important statement in this respect comes again in Chapter 21: 'Daisy, I believe you are in earnest, and are good. I wish we all were!' (p. 271).

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<sup>16</sup> David calls the performance 'a delightful and magnificent entertainment', while Steerforth claims contemptuously that 'there never was a more miserable business' (Chapter 19, p. 246). See also Chapter 5 for remarks on David's reaction to the play and his attitude towards Steerforth.

His memorable parting comment to David - 'Think of me at my best, if circumstances should ever part us!' (Chapter 29, p. 373) - suggests that he sees that his heroic role may be a mask for his sordid self. His 'best', according to this interpretation, would be his performed self, the self which is publicly admired. Steerforth appreciates that, in the words of Schiller:

Every individual human being [...] carries with him, potentially and prescriptively, an ideal man, the archetype of a human being, and it is his life's task to be [...] in harmony with the unchanging unity of this ideal.<sup>17</sup>

Steerforth's problem, however, is that he does not always believe in the heroic or ideal self he presents to the outside world. Furthermore, while some of Steerforth's statements on what David calls his ability to 'become anything he liked at any moment' (Chapter 23, p. 291) - for example, 'I'll produce myself in any state you please, sentimental or comical' (Chapter 21, p. 258) - appear free of any moral implications, other expressions of his theatricality betray an agonised consciousness of the link between 'insincerity' and moral corruption. In Chapter 22, Steerforth tells David angrily, in the language of a Gothic stage villain, 'You come upon me, [...] like a reproachful ghost!' (p. 273). He snaps out of his 'dark kind of earnestness' by quoting directly from *Macbeth* (1606), 'Why, being gone, I am a man again' (Chapter 22, p. 275).<sup>18</sup> This 'dark kind of earnestness' is significantly only possible for Steerforth when he is alone.

Miss Mowcher is one of the few characters who perceives the artifice and potential for evil in Steerforth's character, before his seduction of Emily. In order to do Steerforth's hair, the diminutive woman 'mounted up [...] to the top [of the table], as if it were a stage' (Chapter 22, p. 281). She understands the secrets of role-playing, being, in effect, society's make-up artist; 'we keep up the trick so, to one another, and make believe with such a face' (Chapter 22, p. 283), she

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<sup>17</sup> F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, ed. and trans. by E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 17; quoted by Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> The quotation is from *Macbeth* (1606), III. 4. 106-8:

Hence, horrible shadow!  
Unreal mock'ry, hence!           [*Exit Ghost.*  
Why, so; being gone,  
I am a man again.

explains. She is so perceptive in matters of role-playing that Steerforth's magic or 'spell', to her, is a trick. It is fascinating, however, that Miss Mowcher's voice is virtually inaudible beneath what could be called the final, ambivalent, verdict on Steerforth's character, pronounced by David:

In the keen distress of the discovery of his unworthiness, I thought more of all that was brilliant in him, I softened more towards all that was good in him, I did more justice to the qualities that might have made him a man of a noble nature and a great name, than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him. [...] What his remembrances of me were, I have never known - they were light enough, perhaps, and easily dismissed - but mine of him were as the remembrances of a cherished friend, who was dead. (Chapter 32, p. 388)

Perhaps even more intriguing is the fact, reported by Forster, that Dickens told a girl that he himself cried when he read about Steerforth.<sup>19</sup> Both David and Dickens appreciate that Steerforth does have 'qualities that might have made him a man of noble nature', but that his 'light' and 'easily dismissed' view of humanity, his inability to become genuinely emotionally involved with others, cannot be ignored. The sheer lack of 'impassioned purposefulness' in Dickens's condemnation of Steerforth suggests his understanding of the complex moral, social and emotional problems posed by Byronism.

*David Copperfield* demonstrates a deep and thoughtful understanding of Steerforth's -  
Byronic - attitude to life. Dickens clearly shows that Steerforth is in some senses a victim of a state of mind referred to by the Romantics as 'weltschmerz', a label which literally means 'world-weariness', but is explained by Thorslev in fuller, more illuminating terms:

Those afflicted with this Romantic disease appear to suffer from an almost irreconcilable conflict between two opposing forces in their personalities [...]. The one force or drive is to lose oneself in some vision of the Absolute; a longing for some intellectual and moral certainty, ranging from positive commitment to an orthodox creed, to a mystic conception of oneself as a part of a living organic universe. The twin and opposing force in the personality is toward a positive and passionate assertion of oneself as an individual, a self-assertion which makes impossible any wholehearted commitment to dogmas or absolutes outside oneself.<sup>20</sup>

Paradoxically, Steerforth's assertion of his individuality is achieved through role-playing, through becoming self-less. He is unable to commit himself to anything or anyone in his society, yet this

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<sup>19</sup> See J. B. van Amerongen, *The Actor in Dickens*, p. 43, John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, p. 172. Carey cites Dickens as saying, 'Yes, I cry when I read about Steerforth'.

<sup>20</sup> *The Byronic Hero*, pp. 88-89.

society planted and encouraged his chameleonic individualism. Relief from 'weltschmerz' was frequently seen, in Keats's poetry in particular, to lie in death, the only attainable absolute. It is thus in keeping with the characterisation of Steerforth elsewhere in the novel, that he, like the Romantic poet Percy Shelley, meets an early, watery death. But what is interesting is that the reader's response to his death is not simply the pleasure and sense of justice that he/she experiences at the death of a more straightforward 'damned villain', to use Ham's description of Steerforth (Chapter 31, p. 387).<sup>21</sup> We undoubtedly feel some sympathy with Steerforth. On one level, this is because of the obvious waste of human talent and potential for good. But on a deeper level, our sympathy grows from an intricate understanding of his compulsion to perform which has become a 'disabling' illness, and the central paradox of his nature - his earnest longing to achieve a state of sincerity.

Steerforth is a character who confuses conventional categories. To recall, for example, E.

M. Forster's pioneering comments on Dickens:

Part of the genius of Dickens is that he does use types and caricatures, people whom we recognise the instant they re-enter, and yet achieves effects that are not mechanical and a vision of humanity that is not shallow.<sup>22</sup>

The vitality of Dickens's characters, to Forster, is:

a conjuring trick; at any moment we may look at Mr. Pickwick edgeways and find him no thicker than a gramophone record. But we never get the sideways view.<sup>23</sup>

Dickens, of course, understood his own 'conjuring-trick' better than Forster. He understood, moreover, the dangers of a shallow vision of humanity, of seeing and portraying human beings as types. Steerforth is a complex rebuff to critics, who, like Henry James, see Dickens as 'the greatest of superficial novelists'.<sup>24</sup> For Steerforth, though intellectually and emotionally complex and aware of his complexity, is nevertheless, paradoxically, a deeply shallow person.<sup>25</sup> He never lets others

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<sup>21</sup> Note Dickens's echo here of Hamlet's soliloquy - 'O villain, villain, smiling damned villain/[...] meet it is I set it down./That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain' (I. 5. 106-8) - which has a direct bearing on Steerforth's pose, poise, charm, etc.

<sup>22</sup> *Aspects of the Novel*, Pelican (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 79.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> "Our Mutual Friend", *Nation*, 1 (21 December 1865), 786-88 (p. 787).

have 'a sideways view' of his character. But let me clarify: Steerforth is a deeply shallow person, not a shallow 'character' in the novel, and there is an important distinction here. Dickens's portrayal of Steerforth is anything but superficial.

Despite the elusive complexity of Steerforth's character, critics insist on attempting to categorise him. While Arnold Kettle can still see Steerforth as a superman, John Carey classifies him as the most menacing of all Dickens's villains, to modern eyes.<sup>26</sup> Angus Wilson is less extreme, describing him as a 'somewhat stagy villain',<sup>27</sup> while William R. Harvey treads the middle way, arguing:

Steerforth is an extraordinarily successful blend of villain and hero. The reader admires him, as does David, in spite of the flaws in his character and the crime in which they result.<sup>28</sup>

A curious process occurs when we attempt to 'categorise' Steerforth in this way; we become, like the man himself, unable to commit ourselves to a sincere belief in one absolute interpretation of his personality or another. This is not because we are suffering from 'weltschmerz', but because a 'theatrical' reading of Steerforth's character, such as this, illustrates that Steerforth's dilemma is the very fact that he feels unable to believe in any single role, but is a role-player nonetheless.

To see Steerforth as a hero would be to fall for his social masquerade. To condemn Steerforth as a villain would be to ignore the social and cultural factors which encourage Byronic Steerforth's malaise. To see Steerforth as a mixture of the two sustains a belief in the validity of categories the appropriateness of which, in his case, the text undermines.

## **7.2 - Harthouse and Gowan**

James Harthouse and Henry Gowan have justly been compared with the sadist, the dandy and Satan, as well as the Byronic hero. William R. Harvey calls Harthouse, 'an example of the cynical,

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<sup>25</sup> Compare my discussion of Dickens's comments on Hamlet in Chapter 3.

<sup>26</sup> *The Violent Effigy*, p. 171.

<sup>27</sup> 'The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens', p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> 'Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero', p. 308.

sensual indifference and the scorn of the dandy as well as the Byronic character'.<sup>29</sup> He describes Gowan as

polished, urbane, sardonic, and faintly satanic. Had he a larger part in *Little Dorrit*, it seems likely that he would develop along Byronic lines; [...] however, [...] we are left only with an impression of his wasted abilities, his cynicism, and his feeling that everything is 'hocus-pocus'.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Harthouse and Gowan, more than Dickens's other Byronic types, enact Cedric Hentschel's definition of the Byronic hero as 'a tripartite individual', 'the type of the satanic, sadistic dandy'.<sup>31</sup>

On first appearance, both Harthouse and Gowan seem closer copies of the heroes of Byron's poetry than Steerforth, in so far as they openly flaunt their scepticism and disillusionment. They do not have a compulsive desire to be generally popular and admired, and unashamedly demonstrate their contempt for those who believe in concepts like sincerity and morality - usually their listeners. Paradoxically, both could be seen as *honest or sincere cynics*. Richard Dunn phrases his comment carefully, when he says of Harthouse:

Both publicly and privately he adopts cynicism. He lacks that peculiar earnestness and dedication that characterized the Victorians, because personal disillusionment has provided him with a cynical distrust of enthusiasts of all persuasions.<sup>32</sup>

Harthouse's consistent scorn, social disengagement and cynicism is made clear in the text. He demonstrates, for example, a 'genteel listlessness for the general society' (*HT*, Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 166) of Coketown. He is equally unable to believe in himself, telling Sissy:

I am not a moral sort of fellow, [...] and I never make any pretensions to the character of a moral sort of fellow. I am as immoral as need be. [...] I have had no particular evil intentions, but have glided on from one step to another with a smoothness so perfectly diabolical, that I had not the slightest idea the catalogue was half so long until I began to turn it over [...].

[...]  
[...] I am solely to blame for the thing having come to this - and - and, I cannot say, [...] that I have any sanguine expectation of ever becoming a moral sort of fellow, or that I have any belief in any moral sort of fellow whatever. (Book 3, Chapter 2, p. 232-33)

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 309-10.

<sup>31</sup> *The Byronic Teuton: Aspects of German Pessimism, 1800-1933* (London: Methuen, 1940), p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> 'Skimpole and Harthouse: The Dickens Character in Transition', *Dickens Studies*, 1 (1965), 121-28 (p. 126).

On the one occasion when he does perform a good action by leaving Coketown, not believing 'in any moral sort of fellow whatever', he is ashamed of himself: 'what was about the very best passage in his life was the one of all others he would not have owned to on any account, and the only one that made him ashamed of himself' (Book 3, Chapter 2, p. 236). Henry Gowan's scepticism, likewise, is pushed so far that it results in an amoral perspective on the world at best. The narrator of *Little Dorrit* surmises that Gowan's process of moral judgement might be summarised thus:

'I claim to be always book-keeping, with a peculiar nicety, in every man's case, and posting up a careful little account of Good and Evil with him. I do this so conscientiously, that I am happy to tell you I find the most worthless of men to be the dearest old fellow too: and am in a condition to make the gratifying report, that there is much less difference than you are inclined to suppose between an honest man and a scoundrel'. (Book 1, Chapter 17, p. 200)

The problem with any description of Harthouse and Gowan as honest or sincere cynics, however, is that they are not honest or sincere with themselves. Harthouse, for example, had 'not the slightest idea' of the damage he had caused, because he avoids introspection. Gowan appears to be thoughtful, but his thoughts are warped by his own egotism; he cannot see either himself or others clearly, because of his unremitting selfishness. The sinister pattern of Gowan's reasoning is clarified by the narrator:

while he seemed to be scrupulously finding good in most men, he did in reality lower it where it was, and set it up where it was not; but that was its only disagreeable or dangerous feature. (Book 1, Chapter 17, p. 200)

As the reader discovers, Gowan's warped views and behaviour generally bear many 'disagreeable or dangerous' features. His 'Byronic' inability to commit himself, like Eugene Wrayburn, to the work ethic, does not result from a search for self-knowledge, or from deep thought about the value of his society, but from personal resentment that he is not accepted as a member of the aristocracy:

The prejudiced public [...] had determined to believe that in every service, except their own, a man must qualify himself, by striving early and late, and by working heart and soul, might and main. So now Mr. Gowan, like that worn-out old coffin which never was Mahomet's nor anybody else's, hung midway between two points: jaundiced and jealous as to the one he had left: jaundiced and jealous as to the other he couldn't reach. (Book 1, Chapter 17, p. 202)

The narrator later points out that:

TO be in the halting state of Mr. Henry Gowan; [...] to be loitering moodily about on neutral ground, cursing both; is to be in a situation unwholesome for the mind, which time is not likely to improve. (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 472)

Thus Gowan constantly pities himself, wallowing in the role of 'a disappointed man' (Book 1, Chapter 34, p. 391), when it is in fact his neglected wife who should be disappointed. She has married a man - significantly, an artist - who believes that he perceives 'the truth' in life: all life means to Gowan is 'to keep up the pretence as to labour, and study, and patience, and being devoted' to an art he believes is 'hocus-pocus' (Book 1, Chapter 34, pp. 392-93). Interestingly, like John Chester in *Barnaby Rudge*, Gowan is constantly laying claim to values he says he despises - like honesty, 'truth' and sincerity - by professing that his cynicism is 'honest' or 'truthful'.

The cynicism of Harthouse and Gowan is not then the result of a soul-searching so intense that it is almost 'sincere'. Both are openly amoral not because of any noble hankering after truthfulness, but because, unlike Steerforth, Carton or Wrayburn, they do not experience even the faintest struggle between their consciousness of their corruption and their desire to be good, or between their awareness of their own insincerity and their longing to be sincere. Their Byronism is thus only skin-deep. Gowan's repeated description of himself as 'a disappointed man', for example, does not stem from any deep melancholy he experiences, but from petty social resentment and jealousy. He thus *plays the role* of the gloomy egoist; his Byronism is an act, whereas Steerforth is an actor genuinely tortured by a Byronic longing to achieve a state of sincerity.

The superficial pettiness of Gowan's 'passions' and the fact that he constantly plays a role, mean that he is totally unable to identify with the emotional depths or suffering of others. This limitation characterises Gowan and Harthouse more than Steerforth, whose partial ability to feel emotion means that he can empathise, if only faintly or temporarily with others. In *Hard Times*, for example, we are told that Harthouse is unable to fully comprehend Louisa:

To be sure, the better and profounder part of her character was not within his scope of perception; for in nature, as in seas, depth answers unto depth; but he soon began to read the rest with a student's eye. (Book 2, Chapter 7, p. 167)

In *Little Dorrit*, moreover, there is a similar passage, which employs the same language and imagery to describe Gowan's relationship with his wife:

Little Dorrit fancied [...] that Mr. Gowan treated his wife, even in his very fondness, too much like a beautiful child. He seemed so unsuspecting of the depths of feeling which she knew must lie below that surface, that she doubted if there could be any such depths in himself. She wondered whether his want of earnestness might be the natural result of his want of such qualities, and whether it was with people as with ships, that, in too shallow and rocky waters, their anchors had no hold, and they drifted anywhere. (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 480)

Harthouse and Gowan, like Iago, possess what I earlier described as the intellectual mechanism of a sympathetic imagination without the emotional content that the word sympathy implies.<sup>33</sup> Though Harthouse and Gowan do not commit crimes as heinous as those of Rigaud or Iago, Dickens perceives that their hollowness and inability to believe that surfaces conceal depths are characteristic of the psychopathic criminal's personality. It is not surprising, therefore, that both Gowan and Harthouse betray elements of dandyism and sadism, as well as satanic characteristics; all three conditions demand a negation of the emotional lives of others and an inability to truly empathise with the suffering of another human being.

It is not perhaps surprising, therefore, that Gowan chooses the repulsive murderer, Rigaud Blandois, as his shadowy companion for a time. As we saw in Chapter 3, Rigaud revels in his own self-conscious yet exaggerated theatricality. His relationship with Gowan further confutes any critic who blindly sees the assassin as simply 'stagey' or 'melodramatic'. Rigaud is used by Dickens and also by Gowan, in *Little Dorrit*, to parody the heroes of romance and the heroes of the Romantic poets. The thoroughgoing villain outrageously lays claim to virtues integrally related to this study. Mocking Byron's famous description, in 'The Corsair; A Tale' (1814), of Conrad's 'one virtue' amidst 'a thousand crimes'<sup>34</sup> - his chivalry and fidelity towards the opposite sex - Rigaud tells Jeremiah concerning Mrs Clennam: 'chivalry towards the sex is a part of my character!' (Book 1, Chapter 30, p. 346). Again the Romantic character is satirised, when Rigaud Blandois declares that

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<sup>33</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 29-30 above.

<sup>34</sup> *The Complete Poetical Works*, III (1981), 148-214 (III. 24. 696).

he is not only pious, but 'sensitive, ardent, conscientious, and imaginative' (Book 1, Chapter 30, p. 351). In the same interview with Mrs Clennam, Rigaud claims, 'I love and study the picturesque, in all its varieties. I have been called picturesque myself' (Book 1, Chapter 30, p. 352). The deliberate parody employed by Dickens through Rigaud is unmistakable when the narrator makes the crucial aside:

(it was characteristic of this man, as it is of all men similarly marked, that whatever he did, he overdid, though it were sometimes by only a hair's-breadth). (Book 1, Chapter 30, pp. 351-52)

Rigaud's parodic potential is seized upon by Henry Gowan who uses him to mock those who perceive themselves to be sincere, genteel or both. Rigaud could never be seen as an unsophisticated, 'straight' Dickensian creation after we have read the following, fascinating narrative analysis of his relationship with Gowan:

He [Gowan] found a pleasure in setting up Blandois as the type of elegance, and making him a satire upon others who piqued themselves on personal graces. [...] That exaggeration in the manner of the man [...] was acceptable to Gowan as a caricature, which he found it a humorous resource to have at hand for the ridiculing of numbers of people who necessarily did more or less of what Blandois over-did. (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 473)

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Rigaud's character, however, is the fact that he persists in emphasising his own genuineness. He tells Mrs Clennam, for example, 'I have a partiality for everything genuine. Such as I am, I am genuine myself' (Book 1, Chapter 30, p. 349). Ridiculous as the claim may sound, the significant thing is that it is in a sense true. Peter Harvey Sucksmith's assessment of Rigaud, discussed in Chapter 3, captures the surprising complexity of the idea of 'genuineness' in the case of Rigaud. Sucksmith perceptively describes the 'theatrical yet authentic performance' and the 'true yet vital hollowness' which characterise the psychopathic criminal.<sup>35</sup> In Gowan's warped view, Rigaud's 'true yet vital hollowness' simply exaggerates that of the genteel classes.

It is because of Gowan's superficial vision of life that Dickens is so scathing about his artistic profession. To return to the Wagnerian terms adopted in Chapter 4, Gowan's art - as

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<sup>35</sup> See Chapter 3, p 98 above.

opposed to Doyce's invention - represents 'effect'; it can only be an art of the surface, empty of the passion of its creator, devoid of human substance and meaning. It is consequently, like Gowan himself, both morally and socially irresponsible and frivolous. It is for these reasons, therefore, that Gowan the artist is so detested, not, as George Bernard Shaw argues, because Dickens is a philistine who does not understand art.<sup>36</sup> The idea of the artist as an empty impostor, an intellectually astute parasite who respects neither human life nor society is one which deeply disturbed Dickens, as it was later to disturb Tolstoy in his compelling work, *What Is Art?*.<sup>37</sup> As we saw in Chapter 4, Dickens's consciousness of the dangers of superficiality in both art and life was acute even in earlier works like *Oliver Twist* and *Barnaby Rudge*. Despite this, in these early novels, characters like Monks and, to a certain degree, Rudge are themselves two-dimensional or superficial *characters* who, in this respect, blot Dickens's overall achievement. In the later novels, by contrast, Dickens makes no such mistake, characters like Rigaud and Gowan dramatising the complexity of the relationship between human shallowness and immorality. In the all-important context of *Little Dorrit*, we can appreciate that Gowan is a study of a thoroughly shallow human being, not a limited character creation (or even a deeply shallow person like Steerforth).

But if Gowan's Byronism is largely a pose, his character is crucial to the exploration of Byronism conducted in *Little Dorrit* as a whole. When William R. Harvey says that Gowan 'is involved in little action of importance', so that 'we are left only with an impression'<sup>38</sup> of his Byronic

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<sup>36</sup> See Humphry House, 'George Bernard Shaw on *Great Expectations*' in *All in Due Time*, pp. 201-20 (p. 202); Shaw argued that many of Dickens's comments on the visual arts were 'those of a complete Philistine' and that 'the cultural side of art was as little known to Dickens as it is possible for a thing so public to remain to a man so apprehensive'. House quotes from the Introduction to *GE* written by Shaw in 1937 for the edition of Limited Editions Club of New York.

<sup>37</sup> Trans. by Aylmer Maude (Chicheley: Minet, 1971). Among Tolstoy's relevant statements, in the context of this discussion, is his definition of the 'activity of art' as follows: 'To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art' (p. 50). Ironically, Tolstoy accuses Wagner of what Wagner terms 'effect' and what Tolstoy calls 'counterfeit art' (p. 139). Tolstoy believes that society at large considers counterfeit art to be 'real and good art' (p. 143). He maintains that one reason for, and consequence of, this corruption of taste, is the fact that 'the ideal of what is beautiful' is supplanting 'the ideal of what is right'. Henry Gowan practises and satirises 'counterfeit art'.

<sup>38</sup> 'Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero', p. 310.

characteristics, he underestimates Gowan's symbolic/textual significance in the novel. For Gowan intensifies, in nucleus, all the human, artistic and social neuroses which pervade the mood of the novel. In the words of Lionel Trilling, *Little Dorrit* is 'Dickens's great portrayal of what he regards as the total inauthenticity of England'.<sup>39</sup> Gowan's relationship with Clennam is a key factor in this respect. If we recall Little Dorrit's earlier impression of Gowan discussed earlier - (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 480) - we can see certain undeniable similarities between Gowan's existence and Clennam's own. It is not often observed that, for much of the novel, Clennam is 'unsuspicious of the depths of feeling' that lie beneath Little Dorrit's childish but not quite beautiful exterior. More important, however, is the fact that Clennam, like Gowan, finds it difficult to see a purpose in life both personally and professionally. Clennam, like Gowan, lacks belief in himself<sup>40</sup> and is not 'stedfast and firm'<sup>41</sup> in purpose' (Book 2, Chapter 4, p. 455). Our presiding impression of Clennam is of 'nobody, with all his inconsistencies, anxieties, and contradictions' (Book 1, Chapter 34, p. 393). The fact that Clennam sees his own malaise exaggerated in the character of Gowan, in part intensifies and complicates his understandable hatred of the man. But whether or not Clennam fully understands his own detestation for his one time rival, Dickens undoubtedly comprehends the fact that the 'unwholesome', 'halting' (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 472) spirit of Byronism in part characterises the two men. More disturbing for Dickens perhaps, is the fact that Clennam's is the presiding consciousness of the novel, his mood, language and perspective often mingling with that of the narrator. If this was a biographical thesis, of course, all sorts of familiar surmises could be proffered about Dickens's own state of mind in his maturity. As it is not, however, all that can be

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<sup>39</sup> *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 132.

<sup>40</sup> Gowan's view that 'imposition' (Book 1, Chapter 34, p. 392) is behind the artist's trade betrays a cynicism about others and himself. More pointedly, Little Dorrit's perceptive observation - 'I have sat wondering whether it could be that he has no belief in anybody else, because he has no belief in himself' (Book 2, Chapter 11, p. 535) - captures the reason behind Gowan's cynicism. The inability to conceive the fact that others differ in nature from oneself, the 'honest', 'unhypocritical' admission of one's own immorality - as opposed to the pretence of morality upheld by other impostors - is typical of many of Dickens's villains; Ralph Nickleby and John Chester are two of the best examples of the type. Clennam's lack of self-belief is obviously not as extreme and does not affect his view of others in the same way.

<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, a footnote in the Clarendon edition of *LD* indicates that Dickens used the word 'sincere' instead of 'firm' in MS A.

said at this juncture is that both *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit* betray an intense consciousness of the immorality and destructiveness that can result from an inability to believe that the world is more than a stage, that it offers 'lasting realities' (Book 2, Chapter 3, p. 454) of any value.

### 7.3 - Sydney Carton and Eugene Wrayburn

Dickens is undoubtedly more openly sympathetic to Sydney Carton and Eugene Wrayburn than he is to any of his other 'Byronic' types. This is principally because of what Beth F. Herst calls 'the sense of a better nature, a *true* nature, concealed beneath the careless mask they assume';<sup>42</sup> but Dickens's sympathy is also motivated by his more aggressive questioning, in the later novels, of the play-acting and immorality inherent in the fabric of society at large. Eugene Wrayburn, for instance, is in many ways similar to Steerforth, Harthouse and Harold Skimpole; Sydney Carton belongs to the same family and resembles both those just mentioned and that disappointed, ill-fated young man, Richard Carstone in *Bleak House*. But Dickens is able to show more active understanding of the 'weltschmerz' of Carton and Wrayburn because of his obvious disillusionment, in his last works, with the alternative systems of values offered by Victorian society.

It would, however, be wrong to assume that Carton and Wrayburn act the same role under a different name. Sydney Carton, for example, is controlled by his emotions to a far greater extent than Wrayburn or any of his siblings. He is, in many respects, what Thorslev would call a 'Gloomy Egoist'.<sup>43</sup> He does not act the role; his extreme sensitivity and egotism mean that he is a genuine victim of angst and melancholy. He is closer to the villains of Gothic melodrama than any of Dickens's other Byronic individuals, as his passions are intense. They govern Carton and he makes little effort to hide his inner turmoil beneath a social mask. Nevertheless, the other characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* still misunderstand Carton. They appreciate that he is at the mercy of his passions, but they assume that these passions are those common in admonitory domestic

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<sup>42</sup> *The Dickens Hero: Selfhood and Alienation in the Dickens World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), p. 143.

<sup>43</sup> See *The Byronic Hero*, pp. 35-50 for a full discussion of this type.

melodrama - drink, gambling and a general abandonment to dissipation. They clearly see that he is both gloomy and egotistical, but no-one, except Lucie Manette, realises that his unhappiness stems from his consciousness of his wasted potential, his wish to fulfil himself both morally and emotionally, and to contribute something worthwhile to society. Even if his motivation is misunderstood, he is basically seen for what he is: a melancholy man.

Carton's melancholy differs from that of Gowan in that he feels it deeply. In a more subdued echo of Rudge's earlier speech - 'I, that in the form of a man live the life of a hunted beast! [...] A thing from which all creatures shrink' (Chapter 17, p. 129) - for example, Carton tells Darnay, 'I am a disappointed drudge, sir. I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me' (Book 2, Chapter 4, p. 79). His sense of disappointment and unhappiness, moreover, emerges not only in his words but in his manner; there is 'something especially reckless in his demeanour' (Book 2, Chapter 3, p. 71); his 'manner was so careless as to be almost insolent' (Book 2, Chapter 3, p. 72); it is intriguingly described at one point as his 'fully half-insolent manner' (Book 2, Chapter 4, p. 77); in another place, he is evocatively compared with 'a dissipated cat' and 'an amazingly good jackal' (Book 2, Chapter 5, p. 81). The melancholy mirrored in his speech and manner goads Carton, as some of the above quotations suggest, into a life of dissipation. He is portrayed as 'careless and slovenly if not debauched' (Book 2, Chapter 3, p. 69), and more famously, in relation to Darnay, as 'this Double of coarse deportment' (Book 2, Chapter 4, p. 78). It is significant that Carton, like the protagonists of admonitory domestic melodrama, courts self-destruction during the course of his life through a social vice like alcohol. This fact shows the depth of Carton's despair and ironically the capacity of his potential to commit himself to his feelings and ultimately to others. His dissipation also shows that he cares less about maintaining his veneer and controlling his persona than Steerforth, Harthouse and Gowan. Carton and his predecessors all appreciate that control - of one's role and one's inner life - gives power over others, both socially and emotionally. Carton's wilful rejection of this control is yet more evidence of his intense despair and his self-destructive impulses.

Carton also differs from his relatives in so far as he is pictured as having deteriorated - physically, socially and morally. Richard Carstone is the only other related - and similarly named - character who follows the road to ruin intended for Walter Gay,<sup>44</sup> but in Carstone's case, his disintegration is fully explained. In Carton's story, his deterioration seems to have no specific cause; importantly, his degeneration - like that of the villains of Gothic melodrama - is cloaked by an air of fatality, suggesting that his seemingly innate spiritual angst is the more general and essential cause. His deterioration is poignantly and effectively rendered through the use of the device of his double, Darnay - but also, more specifically, in the mirror scene (Book 2, Chapter 4, p. 79), where Carton betrays a profound awareness of the gulf between himself and Darnay, a gulf symbolic of his own demise. On other occasions, Dickens's descriptions of Carton's appearance perfectly anatomise his complex spiritual state - a fact which demonstrates that Dickens never abandoned melodrama's externalisation of the inner life, even in the later novels. In the court room, Carton's

disreputable look [...] so diminished the strong resemblance he undoubtedly bore to the prisoner (which his momentary earnestness, when they were compared together, had strengthened). (Book 2, Chapter 3, p. 71)

Nearer the end of the novel, Carton's potential is photographed in the very Byronic description:

Carton's face [...] was turned to the fire. A light, or a shade [...] passed from it as swiftly as a change will sweep over a hill-side on a wild bright day [...]. He wore the white riding-coat and top-boots, then in vogue, and the light of the fire [...] made him look very pale, with his long brown hair, all untrimmed, hanging loose about him. (Book 3, Chapter 9, p. 294)

For those who have not read Byron, moreover, and are not acquainted with the expression of prisoners' faces, the narrator expertly analyses Carton's dilemma:

Waste forces within him, and a desert all around, this man stood still on his way across a silent terrace, and saw for a moment, lying in the wilderness before him, a mirage of honourable ambition, self-denial and perseverance. [...] A moment, and it was gone. [...] His] pillow was wet with wasted tears.

Sadly, sadly, the sun rose; it rose upon no sadder sight than the man of good abilities and good emotions, incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own help

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<sup>44</sup> See Forster's *Life*, p. 473; *Letters (Pilgrim)*, IV, 593 (25-26 July 1846).

and his own happiness, sensible of the blight on him, and resigning himself to let it eat him away. (Book 2, Chapter 5, p. 85)

In some senses, the above could also be an accurate description of Eugene Wrayburn's malaise. Edgar Johnson labels Wrayburn a 'rebel and misfit who can find nothing to believe in and nothing worth doing in the world'.<sup>45</sup> J. Hillis Miller elaborates:

In the end, then, boredom becomes anguish, the anguished recognition of the joint nothingness of self and world. A person suffering this anguish sees the insignificance, the emptiness, the nullity, of things within the closed circuit of the humanized world. Everything returns the self to itself, therefore to nothing. Such a character becomes 'like one cast away, for the want of something to trust in, and care for, and think well of'.<sup>46</sup>

Wrayburn's boredom is more apparent than his anguish. Even towards the end of the novel, when Wrayburn begins to appreciate the full extent of his love for Lizzie, his resulting anguish is only thinly sketched. This does not mean that Wrayburn is a weaker character creation than Carton; on the contrary, it is totally in keeping with Wrayburn's complex personality, for Wrayburn, more than Carton, masks his inner unhappiness beneath a tightly controlled persona. Although Wrayburn is, as Johnson maintains, a 'rebel and a misfit', his rebellion never results in a rejection of his polished, aristocratic demeanour. This is again symptomatic of another important difference between Carton and Wrayburn. Wrayburn, unlike his predecessor, always maintains his pride and self-respect; he is never a character we pity. Essentially, he is always a more aggressive character than Carton. Although Wrayburn's goading of Headstone, at a deeper level, betrays self-destructive tendencies, it is significant that he must prompt someone else to attempt to take his life. For Wrayburn never abandons himself to the deep despair of Carton; he usually projects his destructive tendencies externally. The disturbing implication of this is that Wrayburn is always more potentially dangerous than Carton; Carton is harmful to himself, whereas Wrayburn has the clear ability to harm others. Carton contains seeds of the tragic hero within his personality; Wrayburn never entirely erases traits of the stereotypical aristocratic villain or seducer. Wrayburn is a sadist, Carton a masochist.

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<sup>45</sup> *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and His Triumph*, II, 1034.

<sup>46</sup> *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*, p. 301. The quotation Miller uses is from *OMF*, Book 2, Chapter 11, p. 349.

Thus, if we compare two similar passages from *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Our Mutual Friend*, we will perceive several slight but suggestive differences between the two characters. In each episode, Carton and Wrayburn respectively are talking to their old public school friends about the subject of energy. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the appropriately named Stryver recalls 'the old Sydney Carton of old Shrewsbury School, [...] the old seesaw Sydney. Up one minute and down the next; now in spirits and now in despondency!', blaming Carton's attitude for his moodiness: 'your way is, and always was, a lame way. You summon no energy and purpose' (Book 2, Chapter 5, p. 83). Carton's answer, 'don't *you* be moral!', is interesting, for he immediately associates criticism of his lack of energy with criticism of his moral fibre. Moreover, his subsequent comment, 'You were always in the front rank, and I was always behind' (Book 2, Chapter 5, p. 83), is fatalistic and self-pitying. Turning to *Our Mutual Friend*, there is less of a contrast between the two school friends. Eugene opens the discussion by remarking, 'If there is a word in the dictionary under any letter from A to Z that I abominate, it is energy' (Book 1, Chapter 3, p. 20). Rejecting the work ethic that Dickens held in such high esteem in earlier novels, Eugene continues:

It [energy] is such a conventional superstition, such parrot gabble! [...] Am I to rush out into the street, collar the first man of a wealthy appearance that I meet, shake him, and say, 'Go to law upon the spot, you dog, and retain me, or I'll be the death of you'? Yet that would be energy. (Book 1, Chapter 3, p. 20)

Mortimer adds pointedly, to Wrayburn's eager agreement, 'But show me a good opportunity, show me something really worth being energetic about, and I'll show you energy' (Book 1, Chapter 3, p. 20). The latter statement summarises the ethos of both Eugene and Mortimer. Neither blames himself for his lack of energy and purpose; both blame society. Moreover, the fact that the narrator adds -

And it is likely enough that ten thousand other young men, within the limits of the London Post-office town-delivery, made the same hopeful remark in the course of the same evening. (Book 1, Chapter 3, p. 20)

- suggests that the hollowness that Eugene and Mortimer perceive in society is not just the result of their own apathy.

Thus, Eugene's protestations about the purposelessness and worthlessness of life are treated very differently from similar protestations in previous novels. Indeed, Dickens consciously includes echoes from earlier works, as if to emphasise the change in his own position. Perhaps the most significant variation on a theme is Wrayburn's discussion of the function of the bees, in which he virtually reproduces the opinions voiced by Skimpole in *Bleak House* (Chapter 8, p. 93).<sup>47</sup>

Wrayburn rejects Boffin's view that, 'there's nothing like work. Look at the bees', arguing:

Ye-es, [...] they work; but don't you think they overdo it? They work so much more than they need - [...] they are so incessantly boring and buzzing at their one idea till Death comes upon them. [...] And are human labourers to have no holidays, because of the bees? And am I never to have change of air, because the bees don't? [...] Regarded in the light of my conventional schoolmaster and moralist, I protest against the tyrannical humbug of your friend the bee. (Book 1, Chapter 8, p. 93-94)

In previous novels, Dickens had always detested this type of disparagement of the work ethic; he had no sympathy for a man 'so soon bored, so constantly, so fatally' (*OMF*, Book 1, Chapter 12, p. 147). In many ways, the underlying ethos of most of Dickens's novels resembles that of domestic melodrama which, as we saw in Chapter 2, often elevates the will to work, which is usually associated with the working-class, over the lethargy or tyranny of the aristocratic oppressor. Domestic melodrama usually associates passion and earnestness with the working-class and intellect and passionlessness with the ruling-class. This dichotomy is frequently found in Dickens's novels, but in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Our Mutual Friend*, the pattern is, to a degree, inverted (the Marquis de St. Evrémonde is the obvious exception to this rule).

Purposefulness, energy and devotion to work, in past works so important for a character's moral health, are qualities treated with distinct distrust in the two novels in question. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Carton's opposite 'Stryver' is represented as a superficial man, whose 'striving' is motivated by the desire for social status and material gain. Dickens deliberately makes him a simplistic character creation. In one important respect, he fulfils the same function as Rigaud in *Little Dorrit*; he parodies the false values of society. When we turn to *Our Mutual Friend*, Bradley

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<sup>47</sup> See Chapter 6 above.

Headstone, the passionate, 'earnest' schoolmaster - a descendant of the honest workers of domestic melodrama - is emotionally crippled by the pressures of maintaining a facade of respectability. Again, all his energy and hard work is directed towards attaining a respectability parodied by the Veneerings, who appear to do little work. But in *Our Mutual Friend* the most pointed criticism of, or perhaps scepticism towards, the lower-class work ethic, is relayed through the character of Rogue Riderhood. It is no accident that the 'catch-phrase' of Rogue Riderhood, the most transparent villain in the novel is, 'I am a man as gets my living, and as seeks to get my living, by the sweat of my brow' (Book 1, Chapter 12, p. 148).<sup>48</sup> Once more, Dickens is not using a stereotype accidentally or clumsily; on the contrary, with great sophistication, Riderhood, the double of Wrayburn's opposite, Headstone, is used to satirise what Wrayburn significantly calls in his analysis of the bees, the 'tyrannical humbug' of the 'conventional schoolmaster and moralist' (Book 1, Chapter 8, pp. 93-94).

Eugene Wrayburn's pronouncements against the work ethic are not seen simply as a sign of his corruption, but as an indictment of society itself. The individual is less the target of authorial displeasure than his society. Byronic 'weltschmerz' thus pervades *Our Mutual Friend*, as it did *Little Dorrit*. John Harmon strongly resembles Arthur Clennam in his pensive directionlessness, Mortimer Lightwood has much in common with his friend, Wrayburn, and more generally, the use of symbolic doubles and contrasts, supports the systematic yet radical questioning of beliefs and values long taken for granted. This questioning is so extensive, however, that it would be a mistake to assume that Wrayburn himself is held up for our unadulterated veneration, that Dickens wholeheartedly admires his character. It would be just as simplistic to regard Bradley Headstone as the object of Dickens's antipathy. The relationship between Headstone and Wrayburn is far more complex than that. The apparent contrast between the composed, Byronic Wrayburn and the passionate, 'earnest' Headstone, itself a delicate and intricate web of meaning, captures the subtle shifts in Dickens's development as both artist and thinker.

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<sup>48</sup> Note that the title of this chapter is 'The Sweat of an Honest Man's Brow' (p. 144).

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It is crucially important to our understanding of *Our Mutual Friend* that we appreciate that Wrayburn and Headstone represent not a random pairing of opposites, but a refinement of an artistic device that Dickens uses throughout his career. From the outset, Dickens is obsessed with the opposition between the passionate and the passionless human being. At first, the pattern in his work is essentially that of domestic melodrama discussed earlier; 'heart' is associated with the honesty of the man of labour, 'art' with aristocratic immorality. To cite a few 'pure' examples, in *Barnaby Rudge*, the coldness of Chester is always infuriating to the honest man of feeling, Haredale;<sup>49</sup> in *David Copperfield*, the outward poise of the seducer Steerforth emphasises the crude openness of Ham and Mr Peggotty; in *Bleak House*, the aesthete Skimpole is contrasted with the fiery Boythorn;<sup>50</sup> in *Great Expectations*, Magwitch is manipulated by the genuine villain of the novel, Compeyson; in *A Tale of Two Cities*, we have the classic opposition of the French 'melodramas of blood' popular at the turn of the century<sup>51</sup> between the heartless Marquis and the bloodthirsty (though misdirected) revolutionaries. Then there are countless variations on the theme; in *Oliver Twist*, the passionate villain Sikes is in league with the passionless Fagin; in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the earnest impetuosity of Nicholas is offset by the cynicism of Ralph;<sup>52</sup> in *Barnaby Rudge*, Chester is also contrasted with his animalistic son, Hugh; in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the dandified Tigg is murdered by the tortured Jonas; indeed, in the unfinished *Edwin Drood*, the pattern is repeated in the opposition between the careless, civilised Drood, and the wild, reckless Landless.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> At one point, when Haredale has caught Chester deceiving Emma, he exclaims explicitly, 'I am warm. I am maddened by your coldness' (Chapter 29, p. 226).

<sup>50</sup> Talking of legal proceedings taken against him by his butcher, Skimpole says succinctly, 'he was influenced by passion; not by reason. Passion reminds me of Boythorn' (Chapter 15, p. 205).

<sup>51</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 54.

<sup>52</sup> Ralph describes his relationship with his brother - which prefigures that with Nicholas - in the following, revealing terms: 'When my brother was such as he, [...] the first comparisons were drawn between us. Always in my disfavour. *He* was open, liberal, gallant, gay; *I* a crafty hunk of cold and stagnant blood, with no passion but love of saving, and no spirit beyond a thirst for gain. I recollected it well when I first saw this whipster; but I remember it better now' (Chapter 34, p. 441).

<sup>53</sup> Chapter 8, p. 57. In a significant echo of Haredale's words in *BR* (Chapter 29, p. 226), the

There are many more examples and, doubtless, biographical critics could hazard some intriguing conjectures about Dickens's emotional make-up from the incessant repetition of this dichotomy.<sup>54</sup> But my point is that even in as late a novel as *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens plays on the crude contrasts of the minor stage, but refines and complicates them. He uses two brands of melodrama as artistic models. While the class enmity between the two is taken from domestic melodrama (Eugene is a relative of the cold-hearted, aristocratic villain, Headstone of the 'earnest' worker), both have much in common with the Byronic villain of Gothic melodrama. Headstone is not then a thoroughbred product of an 'implausible' convention of theatrical villainy, as Edmund Wilson maintains.<sup>55</sup> Wrayburn is more passionate than his aristocratic ancestors, Headstone more adept at manipulating his self-presentation than the workers of domestic melodrama. Wrayburn, like Steerforth, wants to find something or someone in which/whom he can believe; he wants to be sincere. Headstone's ultimate concern is with his social respectability. Wrayburn questions the sincerity of his feelings and actions; Headstone does not question his own sincerity for a moment, yet there is a vast gulf between his respectable appearance and the reality of his violent, almost animalistic passions throughout the novel.

But though Headstone is no more the clumsy, primitive man of feeling than Wrayburn is the familiar evil aristocrat, a major reason for the intense hatred between the two men is the fact that each perceives the other as a stereotype and uses that stereotype as an instrument of torture. This is particularly true, of course, of Wrayburn's treatment of Headstone. Cuttingly, he tells his rival that he's 'rather too passionate for a good schoolmaster' (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 292); again,

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narrator tells us that Neville 'feels that Edwin Drood's coolness, so far from being infectious, makes him red-hot'.

<sup>54</sup> Consider, for example, Edmund Wilson's famous claim that: 'Scrooge represents a principle fundamental to the dynamics of Dickens's world and derived from his own emotional constitution. It was not merely that his passion for the theater had given him a taste for melodramatic contrasts; it was rather that the lack of balance between the opposite impulses of his nature had stimulated an appetite for melodrama. For emotionally Dickens *was* unstable. Allowing for the English restraint, which masks what the Russian expressiveness indulges and perhaps over-expresses, and for the pretenses of English biographers, he seems almost as unstable as Dostoevsky. He was capable of great hardness and cruelty' - 'Dickens: The Two Scrooges', p. 62.

<sup>55</sup> 'Dickens: the Two Scrooges', p. 82.

reminding us of Robert Heilman's 'monopathic individual',<sup>56</sup> Eugene labels Headstone 'a curious monomaniac' (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 294). Ironically, the more Wrayburn goads the schoolmaster, the more he plays the stereotype of what Carey calls the 'violent villain'.<sup>57</sup> Before he attempts to murder Wrayburn, for example, he is portrayed as

Looking like the hunted, and not the hunter, baffled, worn, with the exhaustion of deferred hope and consuming hate and anger in his face, white-lipped, wild-eyed, draggled-haired, seamed with jealousy and anger, and torturing himself with the conviction that he showed it all and they exulted in it, he went by them in the dark, like a haggard head suspended in the air: so completely did the force of his expression cancel his figure. (Book 3, Chapter 10, p. 544)

Then again, there is a strong sense of what Donohue calls (in melodrama) the 'climactic display of the immanent'<sup>58</sup> in Headstone's dressing in Riderhood's costume, clothes which sit more comfortably on him than his schoolmaster's attire.<sup>59</sup> But for much of the novel, Headstone is able to repress his inner nature beneath his social role of teacher. Unlike Sikes, Rudge and Monks - earlier members of the passionate Gothic family - Headstone is able to conceal his inner feelings beneath his projected persona. He is self-conscious and self-controlled, 'watching and repressing himself daily' (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 291).

It is perhaps paradoxical that the last description of Headstone could be applied with equal justification to his 'opposite', Wrayburn. However Wrayburn, like Headstone, varies considerably from his stereotype of the man characterised by cool, self-conscious repression. When he first sees Lizzie, for example, tellingly associating his own carelessness with immorality, he asks Mortimer, 'Do you feel like a dark combination of traitor and pickpocket when you think of that girl?' (Book 1, Chapter 13, p. 162). Interestingly, this occasion is one of the few in the novels which prompts Eugene, usually as measured as Steerforth in speech, to use absolutes and superlatives. He elaborates:

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<sup>56</sup> *Tragedy and Melodrama*, p. 243.

<sup>57</sup> *The Violent Effigy*, p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 111.

<sup>59</sup> The narrator tells us that: 'whereas, in his own schoolmaster clothes, he usually looked as if they were the clothes of some other man, he now looked, in the clothes of some other man, or men, as if they were his own' (Book 4, Chapter 1, p. 631).

Invisible insects of diabolical activity swarm in this place. I am tickled and twitched all over. Mentally, I have now committed a burglary under the meanest circumstances, and the myrmidons of justice are at my heels. (Book 1, Chapter 13, p. 165)

Eventually, he cannot bear to stay at the scene, later explaining: 'I [...] felt I had committed every crime in the Newgate Calendar' (Book 1, Chapter 14, p. 177). Again, when Lizzie first rejects his offer of educating her, he says, 'I hate to claim to mean well, but I really did mean honestly and simply well, and I want you to know it'. He adds, 'I truly respect you, [...] as I am your friend and a poor devil of a gentleman'. The narrator comments pointedly, 'There was an appearance of openness, trustfulness, unsuspecting generosity, in his words and manner' (Book 2, Chapter 2, p. 237). Then, of course, Wrayburn frequently verbalises his desire to attain a state of sincerity. He refers specifically - with reference to the 'moral influence' (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 284) of the kitchen - to his 'desire for earnestness' (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 285) and assures Mortimer that he's doing 'all I [he] can towards self-improvement' (Book 2, Chapter 6, p. 295). But perhaps the most telling illustration of his potential for sincerity comes, as it does analogously in the case of Sydney Carton, when he actually sheds tears for Lizzie (Book 4, Chapter 6, p. 696).

In Dickens's portrayal of Wrayburn, however, he carefully balances this 'sense of a better nature, a *true* nature, concealed beneath the careless mask'<sup>60</sup> with a sense of a distinctly sadistic nature which cannot be ignored. His treatment of Headstone is not exceptional, as his insulting remarks to Riah the Jew demonstrate. Again, Wrayburn taunts another human being by stereotyping, and indeed caricaturing, his personality. He calls Riah 'Mr. Aaron' (Book 2, Chapter 15, pp. 405-7) and later describes him as 'quite a Shylock, and quite a Patriarch' (Book 3, Chapter 10, p. 535). He explains that the name Mr Aaron 'appears to me [him] Hebraic, expressive, appropriate, and complimentary' (Book 3, Chapter 10, pp. 535-36). Through Eugene's application of these racist clichés to Riah, Dickens demonstrates the danger inherent in Eugene's inability to see beyond 'the unlimited monotony of one's fellow-creatures' (Book 1, Chapter 12, p. 145); that is, Eugene's boredom with life can result in a vision of men as stereotypes and existence as a 'theatrum

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<sup>60</sup> Herst, *The Dickens Hero*, p. 143.

mundi'. Dickens betrays an intense consciousness in *Our Mutual Friend* and earlier, of the inhumanity and immorality that can ensue when a 'pernicious assumption of lassitude and indifference' becomes 'second nature' (Book 2, Chapter 6, pp. 284-85). Thus, in this last finished novel, there are significant echoes of *David Copperfield*, echoes suggesting Wrayburn's essential similarity to Steerforth. For example, Jenny Wren, a relative of Miss Mowcher, repeats almost exactly the same words as her ancestor when she refuses to dress Wrayburn a doll: 'the Court Dressmaker knows your tricks and your manners' (Book 3, Chapter 10, p. 532). Both diminutive women suggest that the potential seducer is a role-player or confidence trickster. Wrayburn, moreover, voices his awareness of the seeds of corruption in his own character, when - referring to his use of the disreputable scout, Mr Dolls - he repeats Steerforth's quotation from *Macbeth*, 'being gone, you are a man again' (Book 3, Chapter 10, p. 541).<sup>61</sup>

But Wrayburn differs from Steerforth in one respect other than the obvious fact that he survives his brush with a watery death and marries Lizzie. He is able, like Carton and indeed Headstone, to abandon himself absolutely and 'sincerely' to passion; intriguingly, I am not referring here to his love for Lizzie, but his hatred of Headstone, which in my view is more strongly rendered by Dickens than the former passion. This is an interesting development in Dickens's work because previously, as in the case of Gowan, sadism was presented as the result of boredom and an inner emotional vacuum. Wrayburn conforms to this pattern to a degree - his taunting of Riah, for example, is not prompted by deep feeling and his tormenting of Headstone sometimes appears to be careless - but, for the most part, his sadistic treatment of Headstone is deeply passionate. Here then, we have another instance of Dickens's blurring of types. Wrayburn the passionate sadist is much in evidence when he explains his nocturnal 'cat and mouse' routine to Mortimer:

I goad the schoolmaster to madness. I make the schoolmaster so ridiculous, and so aware of being made ridiculous, that I see him chafe and fret at every pore when we cross one another. The amiable occupation has been the solace of my life, [...] I tempt him, on all over London. [...] Then we face one another, and I pass him as unaware of his existence, and he undergoes grinding torments. (Book 3, Chapter 10, p. 542)

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<sup>61</sup> *Macbeth*, III. 4. 106-8. See p. 234 and note 18 above.

Wrayburn acts as if unaware of his rival, but the intensity of feeling he experiences beneath his indifferent exterior is as deep as that externalised in the appearance of his rival. Dickens reinforces this impression subsequently, when Wrayburn is accompanied on his midnight meanderings by Mortimer. We read:

At what a rate he went, to breathe the schoolmaster; and how he then lounged and loitered, to put his patience to another kind of wear; what preposterous ways he took, *with no other object on earth than to disappoint and punish him*; and how he wore him out by every piece of ingenuity that his eccentric humour could devise; all this Lightwood noted, *with a feeling of astonishment that so careless a man could be so wary, and that so idle a man could take so much trouble.* (Book 3, Chapter 10, p. 544) (Italics mine)

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My analysis of *Our Mutual Friend* should have established the novel as a work that modifies types, undermines certainties and complicates our intellectual and moral responses. Wrayburn and his so-called 'opposite' Headstone show an ability to both control their projected social roles and experience intense emotion. Any crude contrast between the 'honest', passionate person and the passionless, theatrically sophisticated social performer is refined almost beyond recognition. This merging of opposite types is brought to a final consummation in John Jasper in *Edwin Drood*, the opium addict and probable murderer who leads a double life - church organ player by day and depraved dissolute by night.<sup>62</sup> Dickens's blurring of types does nothing if not reinforce the belief expressed by Gowan in *Little Dorrit* that 'there is much less difference than you are inclined to suppose between an honest man and a scoundrel' (Book 1, Chapter 17, p. 200).

Many critics have tried to convey a sense of the development of Dickens's attitudes to his later Byronic characters.<sup>63</sup> In insisting on the 'redemption' in one form or another of both Eugene

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<sup>62</sup> Note that *Edwin Drood* too, like Steerforth and Wrayburn, strives for individual sincerity though suspecting his own superficiality. He tells John Jasper, whom he ironically believes to be open and 'sincere': 'I am afraid I am but a shallow, surface kind of fellow, Jack [...]. But [...] I hope I have something impressible within me, which feels, which deeply feels - the disinterestedness of your painfully laying your inner self bare, as a warning to me' (Chapter 2, p. 12).

Later in the novel, when he and Rosa decide to separate, he says, 'I mean to be serious and earnest' (Chapter 13, p. 114).

<sup>63</sup> William R. Harvey labels Carton a 'half-hero' whose remorse is a 'pallid substitute for the deeper anguish endured by the conventional Byronic hero' ('Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero', p. 312, p. 310); the same critic calls Wrayburn the 'hero' of his story, a character reminiscent of

Wrayburn and Sydney Carton, however, it seems to me that they have simplified the deeply ambiguous endings of the two novels in which those characters appear. Far from negating his own Byronism, or nobly thwarting the conventions of society, Eugene's decision to marry Lizzie is clouded by his uncertainty and dubious though well-meaning motives. Before Headstone attacks his rival, the text specifically states that Eugene feels trapped between two impossible options: 'Out of the question to marry her, [...] and out of the question to leave her. The crisis!' (Book 4, Chapter 6, p. 698). More importantly, critics invariably tend to ignore the fact, moreover, that Wrayburn is sure that he is going to die, when he communicates to Jenny Wren that he wants to marry Lizzie. After Mortimer pronounces the following familiar judgement on Eugene's decision - 'This is the right course of a true man, Eugene' - the latter answers significantly, 'Amen. I am sure of that. But I shall not come through it, Mortimer'. Although Mortimer adds reassuringly, 'You will not be the less hopeful or less strong for this, Eugene' (Book 4, Chapter 10, p. 742), it is surely the case that Eugene's belief that he will not live to experience married life must alter our response to his course of action.

His widely admired wish to make 'reparation' (Book 4, Chapter 10, p. 741) seems to me far more troubling than critics usually concede, not least because it is Lightwood rather than Eugene who uses the term and suggests the idea. Moreover, the term suggests that Eugene should marry Lizzie as much because of a Byronic feeling of guilt as because of an absolute, pure love - guilt for his treatment of Lizzie, guilt for the goading of Headstone, and most importantly, guilt for his 'weltschmerz', directionlessness and potential insincerity. The phrase, to make 'reparation', moreover, usually suggests a process of punishment or atonement, rather than a rewarding state of

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Steerforth yet richer in 'psychological substance' and finally bereft of much of his Byronism ('Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero', pp. 312-14); Ellen Moers calls Wrayburn, 'the last of the grey men, and the only one to come close to heroic stature' (*The Dandy*, p. 246); Angus Wilson famously maintains that Wrayburn represents the 'redemption' of the type of the 'somewhat stray villain' of the early novels into a 'full-sized hero' ('The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens', p. 8); recently Beth F. Herst has rigorously reversed Wilson's conclusion, arguing that Wrayburn and Carton illustrate a further darkening of the Dickens hero (See Chapter 6, 'The "Dandy" Vindicated: Sydney Carton, Eugene Wrayburn and the Reclaimed Self' (pp. 139-60) and Conclusion, 'The Self Destroyed: The Dickens Hero as Villain' (pp. 161-84), of *The Dickens Hero*).

contentment. A further problem with the idea of Eugene as a man 'redeemed' or even 'self-fulfilled' is the fact that, even after the marriage, Eugene seems to be in what Dickens labels in the case of Gowan a 'halting' state of doubt and uncertainty. Indeed, Lizzie has to persuade him that he wants to live. The following words are hers and not his: 'I shall find out that my husband has a mine of purpose and energy, and will turn it to the best account?' (Book 4, Chapter 11, p. 754). Also troubling is the fact that the above is a question and not an assertion, and that Eugene's response - the last words of the chapter - is far from positive:

I humbly hope it; but I daren't believe it. There is a sharp misgiving in my conscience that if I were to live, I should disappoint your good opinion and my own - and that I ought to die, my dear! (Book 4, Chapter 11, p. 754)

Critics tend to ignore such facts in favour of the more assertive protestations of Eugene, now 'sadly wan and worn' (Book 4, Chapter 16, p. 811). In particular, Eugene - after earlier saying that he distrusts 'protestations' (Book 4, Chapter 16, p. 811) - protests to Mortimer, 'We are shepherds both. In turning to at last, we turn to in earnest' and 'I will fight it out to the last gasp, with her and for her, here in the open field' (Book 4, Chapter 16, pp. 812-13). Such statements are both the attempts of a confused man to reassure himself, and the attempt of an author who never disdained popularity, to give his readership a superficially happy ending. It is no accident, however, that in between the latter so-called 'heroic' protestations, Wrayburn compares himself to Hamlet: 'I can say to you of the healthful music of my pulse what Hamlet said of his. My blood is up, but wholesomely up, when I think of it!' (Book 4, Chapter 16, p. 812-13).<sup>64</sup> Those who have read Dickens's contemptuous remark on Hamlet 'the poser' in his original version of *A Christmas Carol*<sup>65</sup> will appreciate that this is not an altogether innocent reference. But even those who pass over such textual minutiae should recognise not only that Hamlet's decisiveness came too late, but

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Hamlet*, III. 4.140-41:

My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time  
And makes as healthful music.

<sup>65</sup> See Chapter 3, p. 111 above.

that there is something which, far from 'heroic', is not even tasteful, about a marriage enabled (like that between Jane Eyre and Rochester) by the physical mutilation of the socially superior male.

It remains a possibility that in my attempt to redress a critical imbalance, I may have underestimated the obvious strength of Eugene's passion for Lizzie and his desire to commit one purposeful, moral action in his life. Twemlow's concluding remark that 'The *feelings* of a gentleman' (Italics mine) are 'sacred' (Book 4, Chapter the Last, p. 820), for example, is not randomly phrased. What Dickens is now able to show is that feelings cannot exist in isolation; they are subject to change, they can be submerged beneath a role influenced by the larger theatre of society. The later novels reveal a new awareness that class conventions can determine both emotional development and the ability to express personal feeling. For example, commenting on his father's approval of his marriage to Lizzie, Eugene tells Mortimer:

M. R. F. [...] was so affable as to remark [...] that Lizzie ought to have her portrait painted. Which, coming from M. R. F., may be considered equivalent to a melodramatic blessing.

[...]

[...] When M. R. F. said that, and followed it up by rolling the claret [...] in his mouth, and saying, 'My dear son, why do you drink this trash?' it was tantamount - in him - to a paternal benediction on our union, accompanied with a gush of tears. The coolness of M. R. F. is not to be measured by ordinary standards. (Book 4, Chapter 16, pp. 811-12)

This passage expresses a truth it had taken Dickens some time to learn: there is no universally understood language of the passions. The early distrust of 'coolness' and the trust given to openness - both common to melodrama - were eventually reviewed and modified. It is perhaps a tribute to Dickens's ability to balance his artistic integrity with his commercial popularity that the 'ambiguous ending' can co-exist with the conventional 'happy ending'.

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Sydney Carton is more consciously determined to commit himself to an absolute ideal than Wrayburn; he neither wavers nor doubts his own sincerity in sacrificing his own life to the happiness of Lucie Manette. William R. Harvey argues in familiar terms that:

Carton's death is a purposeful one, apparently the first worthwhile event of his life; and what is more important is that his death results from his *selfless* dedication to Lucie. Thus

Dickens diminishes much of the Byronism that surrounds Carton, one of the hallmarks of the Byronic character being his totally egocentric behaviour.<sup>66</sup>

Professing to Lucie early in the novel, that he is 'ardent and sincere in this one thing [his love]', sincere enough to lay down his life for her (Book 2, Chapter 13, p. 146),<sup>67</sup> Carton ultimately fulfils this promise. His final purposefulness ironically reminds us of Shelley's definition of a moral being in his analysis of Milton's Satan:

Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of [...] Satan [...]. Milton's Devil as a moral being is far superior to his God as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture.<sup>68</sup>

There are problems, however, with the conventional reading of the ending of *A Tale of Two Cities* which sees Carton presented not only as a hero, but also as a Christ-like figure. Undoubtedly, this reading is corroborated by the text and Carton is deified as much as any character in a Dickens novel, excepting perhaps Mr Pickwick. But there is also a subtext beneath the moral euphoria which cannot be ignored. To quote some of the 'prophetic' remarks Carton would have made, if he had been allowed:

I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous, and happy, in that England which I shall see no more. I see Her with a child upon her bosom, who bears my name. [...]

I see that I hold a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. I see her, an old woman, weeping for me on the anniversary of this day. I see her and her husband, their course done, lying side by side in their last earthly bed, and I know that each was not more honoured in the other's soul, than I was in the souls of both.

I see that child who lay upon her bosom and who bore my name, a man winning his way up in that path of life which once was mine. I see him winning it so well, that my name is made illustrious there by the light of his. I see the blots I threw upon it, faded away. I see him, foremost of just judges and honoured men, bringing a boy of my name, with a forehead that I know and golden hair, to this place - then fair to look upon, with not a trace of this day's disfigurement - and I hear him tell the child my story, with a tender and a faltering voice.

It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known. (Book 3, Chapter 15, pp. 357-58)

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<sup>66</sup> 'Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero', p. 311.

<sup>67</sup> Carton tells Lucie, 'think now and then that there is a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you!'

<sup>68</sup> Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Shelley's Prose: or Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. by David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), p. 290.

Carton's remarks betray as much an obsession with self as what Harvey calls 'selfless dedication to Lucie'. The 'purpose which he has conceived to be excellent', in the words of Shelley, is his own heroism. Carton hopes that after his death others will rewrite his life story in heroic terms. Even if one is convinced by the his love for Lucie, which is only sketchily drawn in the novel, it is difficult to believe that this is a purely selfless love. The dead Carton would undoubtedly cast a shadow over the marriage of Lucie and Charles; Carton's comment, 'I know that each was not more honoured and held sacred in the other's soul than I was in the souls of both', literally places him between the couple. As interestingly, moreover, Carton wants his name to be venerated through the acts of Lucie's son; though he has been unable to believe in his society and its institutions, he wants his namesake to be 'foremost of just judges and honoured men'.

This is not to say that Dickens is exposing Carton as a hypocrite. What Carton's hypothetical words demonstrate is the difficulty of both being true to oneself and representing oneself faithfully in a social situation. The ending of Carton's story shows the impossibility of achieving absolute selflessness, absolute sincerity, or of committing an act of heroism which lays claim to both qualities. In the words of André Gide, 'One cannot both be sincere and seem so'.<sup>69</sup> Carton is not immune to the applause of the theatre of society. In his case, the dramatic and extreme social crisis of the French Revolution enabled him to realise the best rather than the worst of his human potential.

This is not to devalue Carton's act of martyrdom, but to illustrate the *mélange* of motives and emotions which makes such acts possible. The object of Dickens's criticism is not those who crave and receive public applause, but the insincerity inherent in the social condition itself. Through death, Carton does fulfil his moral potential and is presented far more glowingly than his double, the conventional novelistic 'hero' Darnay - or any other Dickens character, for that matter. In Dickens's outburst against the demands of Victorian critics regarding the representation of heroism in the novel, discussed in Chapter 5<sup>70</sup>, he clearly demonstrates his frustration with the

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted by Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 70.

<sup>70</sup> See Forster's *Life*, pp. 715-16 and *Letters* (Nonesuch), II, 797.

artistic restrictions imposed by an outward concern for moral and social respectability. In the pairing of Carton and Darnay, Dickens contrasts an unconventional model of 'heroism' with a conventional fictional model. In his pairing of Bradley Headstone with Rogue Riderhood, likewise, a morally complex human being is consciously contrasted with a recognisable stereotype. Both pairings convey a scepticism about morally absolute stereotypes (like that of the hero and of the villain) familiar in nineteenth-century melodrama, and indeed in his own fiction.

Dickens's deconstruction of the concepts of sincerity, heroism and villainy has much in common with that of Byron. Ellen Moers argues that, though obsessed with Byronic individuals like Carton, Dickens had nothing in common with these characters 'save unspoken thoughts'.<sup>71</sup> This chapter has demonstrated that these thoughts were not unspoken and that the ambiguity of Dickens's artistic response to Byronism has not been fully appreciated. The surface of his late novels is animated by a subtext of sympathy with what is apparently reprehended.

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<sup>71</sup> *The Dandy*, p. 250.

## Chapter 8 - Sincerely Duplicitous Women in the Novels of Dickens

### 8. 1 - Wicked Women in the Nineteenth-Century Theatre: Subversive Roles and Role-Players

In *Dickens and Women*, Michael Slater provides an impressive list of stock stage types of female wickedness which appear in Dickens's early novels: the nagging, tyrannical wife, 'nightmare mothers', buxom women who turn to religion, socially competitive women, cultured women, schoolmistresses, spinsters, 'grotesque men-women', solipsists, match-making mothers, and unattractive young women.<sup>1</sup> All these types are indeed evident in Dickens's fiction, and the comic cotton wool which softens their perceived abnormalities should obviously not fool the reader into ignoring their serious relevance to the idealised 'norm' of femininity which Dickens presents in his novels. Dickens's supposed ideal of femininity is by now so well known and well criticised that it is scarcely worth repeating. It is perhaps in his portrayal of women that Dickens is generally thought to most deserve Trollope's nickname 'Mr Popular Sentiment'; his heroines were shaped by, and in turn reinforced the dominant ideology concerning the 'true' - angelic, domestic - nature of woman, an ideology spelt out most clearly perhaps in Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854-56) and Ruskin's 'Of Queens' Gardens' (1865) .

The dominant ideological myth that woman was sent from heaven to work wonders in the home was also, of course, emphasised in nineteenth-century melodrama of all varieties. Without wishing to make excuses for any immaturity or confusion in the presentation of women in Dickens's novels, this chapter will demonstrate that the nineteenth-century theatre can serve as an illuminating context for a sophisticated understanding of Dickens's novelistic women - a context more helpful by far than the familiar biographical story of Dickens's involvement with Mary Hogarth and his personal enthusiasm for young, virginal and virtuous girls. Until recent feminist work on the nineteenth-century theatre by Nina Auerbach and Claire Tomalin,<sup>2</sup> among others, the complexity of

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<sup>1</sup> (London: Dent, 1983), pp. 226-34.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Nina Auerbach, 'Alluring Vacancies in the Victorian Character', *Kenyon Review*, 8 (1986), 36-48 and Claire Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991). Tomalin's excellent analysis of nineteenth-century attitudes to actresses has been more useful to this thesis than her biographical detective work, fascinating though it is.

the relationship between images of the female found in the Victorian theatre and the ideals and anxieties about women found in Dickens's novels, had scarcely been broached, let alone understood. This chapter will demonstrate, through close analysis of the novels, that Dickens could divorce neither his conscious understanding nor his subconscious, creative imagination from the models of womanhood he encountered in the nineteenth-century theatre. What makes the relationship between Dickens's female malefactors and the theatre even more complex, in some respects, than that between his male villains and stage prototypes is the specific problem of Victorian attitudes to the professional actress.

While there had always been distrust of the professional actor as one who made his money pretending to be something he was not, this suspicion was intensified in the case of nineteenth-century responses to actresses. The reasons for this, generally speaking, were firstly, that in elevating the principles of sincerity and authenticity, the Victorians were inclined to enshrine them especially in the female sex; secondly, that professional actresses, by definition, denied and subverted both these principles and the consequent assumptions about women; and finally, that simply by having a profession, the Victorian actress thwarted the doctrine that a woman's place was in the home. In contemporary responses to the Victorian theatre, we can thus see a particular degree of confusion about the relationship between the parts played by women in the theatre and the women employed to play those parts.

This confusion is encapsulated in its purest form in an unidentified article in Dickens's journal *All the Year Round* entitled 'Harlequin Fairy Morgana' (20 August 1864).<sup>3</sup> Young Peebles the narrator, like the young David Copperfield, is ecstatic to be at the theatre, a place of 'soft realms of celestial light, happiness, and joy!' (p. 43). When the Fairy Queen of the pantomime appears, the young-old narrator reflects:

I felt a feeling - I can only liken to a sort of wrench - at my heart; and oh! from that moment I was an undone m - , boy I mean. A divinity, surely, hired secretly from somewhere up in the regions we heard of on Sundays (was this sinful?). (p. 44)

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<sup>3</sup> *AYR*, 12 (20 August 1864), 40-48.

The comic tone ultimately intensifies the poignancy of the young man's disappointment when, after a great deal of fruitless pining, he finds that the real fairy queen is one of the 'sickly unwholesome creatures, dressed rather like decayed housemaids'. She is dressed

in an old striped shawl, with a basket on her arm, and leading a very cold child [...]. She was as yellow as a guinea, and looked as if she had lately been ill.

The mature narrator laments in retrospect, 'O Harlequin Fairy Morgana, I have found a greater change than you, many and many a time since that day!' (p. 48). The real fairy queen disappoints the narrator because, though she appears to represent the ideal Victorian woman or 'divinity', in actuality, she is old rather than young and has a child, a fact which denies her sexual innocence; her child, moreover, like herself, is neglected and unhealthy.

But the young narrator is most disillusioned by the artifice of the actress, or by her ability to manipulate his fantasies. The tone of the mature narrator's last lament suggests that this deception was not the last or the greatest played on him by women. It is interesting that this lament - 'O Harlequin Fairy Morgana, I have found a greater change than you, many and many a time since that day!' - appears to be a general comment on the narrator's disappointment with life, not just with the stage. This comment is typical of the slippage or overlapping between life and the stage which characterises Victorian attitudes to women particularly; it is interesting and ironic that Victorian audiences so often looked to stage representations for ideal embodiments of 'the angel in the house', and so often looked to real life, to the overworked, put-upon actress, for a symbol of female wickedness.

It is perhaps fair to say then, that the professional actress, or the idea of the professional actress, was a more potent type of female immorality in the early and mid-nineteenth century than the female villain of melodrama. In fact, Michael Booth is the only critic I have been able to find who pays any detailed attention to the figure of the female villain in nineteenth-century melodrama - and he points out that the villainess never really came into her own as a melodramatic character until the second half of the nineteenth century. Booth explains that in early melodrama, the

embryonic villainess 'is usually a dissatisfied female associate of the villain who sympathizes with the plight of the hero and heroine and actively assists them' or 'if she actually commits acts of evil her guilt is mitigated by circumstances'; 'for out-and-out female villainy', Booth argues, 'one must really begin with *Lady Audley's Secret* [1862]'.<sup>4</sup> Although Booth is correct in saying that the villainess was more prominent in the second half of the century, I would argue with a slightly different emphasis, that an 'out-and-out' female villain like Lady Audley is the offspring of earlier prototypes, rather than a monstrous progenitress of future female malefactors.

The main thread that links melodramatic wayward women throughout the nineteenth century is that, significantly, many of them are perceived as actresses.<sup>5</sup> For example, the archetypal Millwood, the 'out-and-out' villainess of Lillo's *The London Merchant; or, The History of George Barnwell* (1731), exclaims over a century before Lady Audley was conceived:

If to seem what one is not in order to be the better liked for what one really is, if to speak one thing and mean the contrary, be art in a woman, I know nothing of nature. (I. 4. 10-13)

In Lady Clara Cavendish's *The Woman of the World* (13 November 1858, Queen's), Lisa Selby, the unrepentant villainess and accomplice to the hypnotist-villain, Monti, puzzles over the popularity of the virtuous heroine, Joanna: 'all that she *really* is, have I not *seemed*?'.<sup>6</sup> Lisa uses her ability to assume different roles to achieve the upward social mobility which she thinks will make her happy. J. Palgrave Simpson's *Broken Ties* (8 June 1872, Olym.), though written after Dickens's death, is interesting in this context because it crystallises the supposed links between female immorality and the stage. The central female character - presented more as a fallen woman than a villainess - is an opera singer called La Silvia, who has left her husband and son to pursue her passion for the stage. In later life, she comes face to face with them, and, helped by an old operatic friend who now dreams only 'of cradles, little frocks, and baby eyes',<sup>7</sup> and by the shame of

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<sup>4</sup> *English Melodrama*, pp. 156-57.

<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, many straightforwardly hot-headed female villains of the same breed as Dickens's Hortense in *BH* in Victorian melodrama, but they do not seem to me to demand the same amount of attention as their more theatrically aware sisters.

<sup>6</sup> *Lacy*, 38 (London: Lacy, [1859]), 9 (I. 2).

<sup>7</sup> *Lacy*, 96 (London: French, [1850, etc.]), 25 (II. 1).

the fact that her profession will thwart her son's plans for a respectable marriage, she realises the error of her ways. She tells her son, 'By *self-sacrifice*, I may prove a mother still', offering to 'retire from the world' and 'be dead to all' (pp. 39-40; II. 2 ). She is rewarded, and indeed, taken up on these generous offers, when her son and husband take her back into the bosom of the family. In case the audience is in any doubt about the moral message of the play, her last words (ironically spoken by a professional actress) are:

Life's fatal error is atoned at last,  
My future bless'd by pardon for the past.  
'Tis mine again, the true treasure flung aside,  
Domestic love, true woman's dearest pride. (p. 41; II. 2 )

Unsurprisingly, more subversive of the dominant ideology is George Soane's *Lilian, the Show Girl* (10 October 1836, Surrey). The heroine Lilian is a show girl but virtuous, and in addition, she is intelligent, strong-willed and a vocal proto-feminist. She tells her would-be genteel seducer, Everard, that she will give in to him if pressed, but reminds him of his responsibility for the consequences: 'Will you corrupt the life stream of its source? will you make me that I dare not name?'.<sup>8</sup> This so confuses Everard's neat system for stereotyping women that he, like most of the audience perhaps, does not know what to make of it all:

Is this real? can it be real? For coquetry it is the sex's instinct; [...] to have a girl fling herself into one's arms and say 'touch me if you dare' with a look so pure withal - so innocent! I should as soon have kissed the marble image of a saint, as have breathed upon her lips! Incredible! (p. 10; I. 2)<sup>9</sup>

Though the play does much to redress the popular image of the actress as whore, the potentially radical and original idea of making the heroine a professional performer is partially undermined by the revelation that Lilian is actually, unbeknown to herself, of genteel stock.

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<sup>8</sup> *Duncombe*, 24 (London: Duncombe, [1825, etc.]), 9 (I. 2) .

<sup>9</sup> Note, however, Everard's assertion that 'coquetry' - a form of acting which involves manipulating one's sexual attractiveness - is 'the sex's instinct'. Everard thus assumes that all women are sexually provocative actresses at heart, at the same time that he doubts the assumption. The *OED* gives as one of its definitions of coquetry: 'the use of arts intended to excite admiration or love, merely for the sake of vanity'.

Lady Audley herself contrasts fundamentally with Lilian the show-girl. A social rather than professional role-player, she - like Lady Clara Cavendish's Lisa Selby - uses her theatrical talents to deceive others and gain upward social mobility. Braddon's original novel makes it quite clear that Lady Audley is an actress by nature. Robert Audley mutters to himself, 'what an actress this woman is. What an arch trickster - what an all-accomplished deceiver'<sup>10</sup>. In C. H. Hazlewood's adaptation of the novel, *Lady Audley*, on seeing Robert, makes an obvious reference to herself as an actress, telling herself, 'here comes Robert Audley, he must not see me with a cloud upon my brow! Let me again resume the mask, which not only imposes on him, but on all the world'.<sup>11</sup> But the fact that Lady Audley - in the original novel and the extant stage adaptations - does, in fact, experience inner turmoil which she takes great pains to hide is just one of the ways in which she is more than an 'out-and-out' villainess. For Lady Audley is a victim as well as a villain, and her misdeeds result largely from her desire to escape from the miserable position allotted to her. Left indefinitely with a pathetic, drunken father by a thoughtless husband who goes off to seek 'their' fortune, robbed by society of an opportunity to use her intelligence to raise herself through honourable work, she turns her life into a lie. Though Lady Audley is eventually presented as mad, Braddon handles the issue of female insanity with delicate ambiguity, enabling the modern reader to see clearly how a diagnosis of madness could be used as a convenient fiction to oppress and marginalise women who threatened the dominant ideology and status quo.

Lady Audley does so in various ways, not least of which is the fact that she has the childish appearance of the typical heroine of stage melodrama, or as the jealous Alicia puts it in William E. Suter's adaptation of the novel, of 'a frivolous, heartless, giggling wax doll!'.<sup>12</sup> Michael Booth maintains that the archetypal villainess has dark hair and looks;<sup>13</sup> Booth's villainess is typified, for

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by David Skilton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; repr. 1991), p. 256 (Book 2, Chapter 10).

<sup>11</sup> *Lady Audley's Secret* (25 May 1863, Vic.), *Lacy*, Suppl. 2 (London: Lacy, [1850, etc.]), 17 (II. 1).

<sup>12</sup> *Lady Audley's Secret* (21 February 1863, Queen's), *Lacy*, 57 (London: Lacy [1863]), 20 (I. 4).

<sup>13</sup> *English Melodrama*, p. 20. Booth maintains that the 'raven-haired villainess, or adventuress' is often the accomplice of the villain.

example, by Ravina, the reformed bad woman of Pocock's *The Miller and his Men*. Thus Lady Audley's doll-like appearance is radically subversive of the conventional assumptions about physiognomy common in novelistic and stage melodrama. Her entire character is likewise at odds with the general tendency of melodrama to externalise and simplify the inner life. We saw in Chapter 2 that not all melodramatic types externalise their emotions - the genteel villain of domestic melodrama, for example, is virtually passionless, yet attempts to hide the fact. But Lady Audley, like most wicked women in Victorian melodrama, complicates its moral, emotional and histrionic patterning to an extent not matched by any of the various kinds of male malefactors produced by the genre.

This chapter will concentrate on the bad women of melodrama, rather than the comic types of traditional farce listed by Michael Slater, or the fantastical types of pantomime. The principal reason for this is that the raw materials of melodrama - passion, histrionicism and moral polarity/certainty - must be fascinatingly distorted to accommodate the deviant woman. The most intriguing question mark, for the writer of stage melodrama, hovered over the inner emotional life of the female malefactor, and the relationship between the woman's 'essential' self and the outer persona she presents to others. In the male villain of domestic melodrama, for example, there is usually a simplistic correlation between the villain's talent as an actor and his emotional hollowness - that is, the better the actor, the more passionless the man. The wicked women of nineteenth-century melodrama, by contrast, can never achieve such a balance between theatrical talent and heartless vacuity.

Thus, although Lady Audley - in the original novel and stage adaptations - is perceived by herself and others as passionless, it is clear to novel readers and stage audiences that she is not. In Mary Braddon's novel, she actually analyses her own emotional make-up for Robert Audley:

'I have grown up in an atmosphere of suppression,' she said, quietly; 'I have stifled and dwarfed the natural feelings of my heart, until they have become unnatural in their intensity [...].'

Robert Audley stood looking at her with awe-stricken admiration. Her beauty was elevated into sublimity by the intensity of her suppressed passion. (Book 2, Chapter 5, p. 200)

Having said this, as she explains in the novel (Book 3, Chapter 3, p. 347) and in Suter's adaptation, though she does feel intense passion, it is all of self and she is incapable of feeling for others. In Suter's adaptation, when Sir Michael discovers her secrets, she tells him:

I should be sorry for you if I could, for you have been very good to me, but I can't, I can't. I can feel nothing but my own misery. I have ever been selfish, now more selfish than ever in my misery. Happy, prosperous people may feel for others - I laugh at other people's sufferings, they seem so small compared to my own. (p. 37; II. 5)

These two excerpts capture several of the distinguishing characteristics of most female malefactors in Victorian melodrama: repression of passion which intensifies that passion, utter selfishness, an inability to empathise with others and an inability to escape from biting personal misery and suffering.

Though in Wilkie Collins's first stage adaptation of his own novel *Armadale* (1864-66),<sup>14</sup> the fascinating Lydia Gwilt eventually sacrifices her own life for that of the man she loves, the adaptation adopts as a major theme the continuous flux of her emotional life, and the misery which circumstances and her own nature have made an unavoidable fact of her life. In addition, of course, Collins explores the tensions created by her ability to disguise her inner life and manipulate her social persona. She explains to her villainous accomplice, Dr Downward, 'You know the horrors I have gone through, the miseries I have suffered, the wickedness [...] that I have committed since' (pp. 11-12; I). Dr Downward offers her no escape from her miserable isolation, however, and in fact the play explores his sadistic attempts to make her drop her actress's mask and reveal her intensely passionate nature. For example, in the first act, Miss Gwilt offers him her wrist almost as a challenge: 'I excite myself? I'm the coolest of the cool. [...] Would you like to feel my pulse?' (p. 12; I). In Act 2, after the Dr has reduced her to tears, she reflects, 'How odd that I should have heart enough to set my pulse galloping, after such a life as mine has been!' (p. 38). Lydia Gwilt in fact underestimates her own capacity for humane and generous feeling; after initially telling Midwinter - as Lady Audley told Sir Michael - that she can't offer love because she has 'suffered as

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<sup>14</sup> *Armadale* (London: Smith, Elder, 1866), pp. 1-75.

few women suffer' (p. 22; I), she finally makes the ultimate self-sacrifice by laying down her own life.

Her suicide is not simply prompted by love, however; it is also the result of intense misery and self-loathing. Lisa Selby, the defiant villainess of *The Woman of the World* must also die before the play is out, but her death, unusually, is caused by a burst blood-vessel rather than suicide. It is as if the playwright, Lady Clara Cavendish, cannot believe that such intense misery and hatred as Lisa feels - she soliloquises, 'The happiness sought by guilt, is but an illusion' (p. 38; II. 4) - can remain repressed without causing physical damage. Though Ravina of *The Miller and his Men* is one of the near-villainesses in melodrama who is not a role-player, she too knows the unhappiness that comes from leading a double life and disguising immorality - she tells Grindoff/Wolf, 'Content! such guilt as thine can never feel content. Never will thy corroded heart have rest' (p. 63; II. 2). Her own conviction about the misery which must inevitably accompany a dishonest life is so strong that she betrays the forces of evil with 'one glorious act of repentance' (p. 65; II. 3).

It was, of course, the main aim of melodrama, as a highly moralistic genre, to portray virtue triumphant, and to promote the message that the wages of sin are misery, suffering and very possibly death. It was also in keeping with the simplifying tendencies of melodrama for creators of female villains to portray their creatures as naturally or innately masochistic. If we look at the minutiae of these Victorian melodramas, however, there are very few examples of wicked women who are shown to be evil and suffering without good reason. From Ravina to Lydia Gwilt and Lady Audley, wayward women are presented, to a considerable degree, as having been forced into certain patterns of behaviour. Lady Audley is badly treated by the men in her life, Lydia Gwilt by her social superiors. Because of the Victorian ethos that woman's place was not in the public arena, it was virtually impossible for a talented, intelligent and poor woman to raise herself from drudgery if she did not take the path either of marriage or deceit - or indeed a deceitful marriage. In addition, whereas Victorian melodrama presents male actor-villains as, for the most part, motivelessly

malignant gentlemen who repress their inner emotions in order to appear fashionable or respectable, female villains are presented, to differing extents, as having been obliged to act roles. The kind of misery and suffering which accompanies the female's life of imposture rarely touches genteel villains like Dickens's John Chester; the inner torment and unhappiness which even supposedly 'out-and-out' villainesses are made to undergo can only make these women more sympathetic to audiences, especially as they themselves are the main victims of their own supposed sins.

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It is probably for these reasons that the figure of the wicked woman was marginalised in early and mid-Victorian melodrama; her presence could only serve to undermine or subvert its moral scheme and its overt propaganda that women should remain angelic in feeling and demeanour, whatever their grievances. But if the Victorians could push to one side the paradoxes presented by the fictional figure of the villainess-actress, they could not ignore the affront to their values represented by the all-too-real, flesh-and-blood professional actress - who was not so easily sidelined in her own social drama. The actress appeared in important ways more monstrous and threatening to the establishment than the female villain - though paradoxically, the affinities of the stage villainess with the actress gave the fictional figure the subversive potential which meant she had to be marginalised. Looked at from the outside, the actress appeared to possess all the bad points, with none of the redeeming features of the stage type she sometimes had to play: rather than suffering for assuming various masks, she was financially rewarded; she could assume a second self for an evening's performance, yet walk away afterwards without the burden of having to maintain her façade; she was courted rather than victimised by men, and, in the case of successful actresses, fame and fortune could buy her the freedom to live by her own moral and sexual rules. And of course, not the least of her sins was her wish to work outside the heaven of the home.

It goes without saying that this is a highly glamorised picture of the life of a professional actress, as the valuable recent work (discussed below) of scholars like Claire Tomalin, Tracy C. Davis and Jan McDonald has shown. Nevertheless, women who worked in the theatre were never

free from a chorus of critical abuse; and documentary evidence suggests that they were a far greater cause of concern to those who upheld conventional Victorian values than the melodramatic or fictional villainess ever was. This was of course because the disruptive potential of the fictional 'type' could be controlled by - predominantly male - playwrights in a way that the actress's subversive potential could not. The threat posed by the professional actress was thus explicit, whilst the threat of her fictional sister remained implicit. An *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article of 1797 set the theme for commentaries on professional actresses of the next century, though its tone and understanding of the moral issues involved is more subtle than those to come:

There are some very agreeable and beautiful talents, of which the possession commands a certain sort of admiration; but of which the exercise for the sake of gain is considered, whether from reason or prejudice, as a sort of public prostitution. [...] The exorbitant rewards of players [...] are founded upon these two principles: the rarity and beauty of the talents, and the discredit of employing them in this manner.<sup>15</sup>

Tracy C. Davis's article, 'Actresses and Prostitutes in Victorian London',<sup>16</sup> argues convincingly that the common assumption that actresses were prostitutes was, in general, incorrect, though there are many good practical reasons why the two professions were confused: actresses were often seen with gentlemen, received gifts from them and sometimes became their mistresses, theatres in London were often in the same areas as brothels, prostitutes frequented theatres, actresses sometimes had to wear skimpy costumes which showed off their bodies and suggested sexual pleasure, etc. Another more general reason for the false synonymity perceived between actresses and prostitutes was, of course, the fact that both groups of women used their physical appearance to gain independence.

But as Jan McDonald's article, 'Lesser Ladies of the Victorian Stage',<sup>17</sup> has shown, independence was an illusory dream for many struggling actresses in the provinces, who became prey to exploitative managers rather than domineering husbands and were scarcely paid for their work. Despite the reality of life for many actresses - hard work and social isolation - they received

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Claire Tomalin in *The Invisible Woman*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>16</sup> *Theatre Research International*, 13 (1988), 221-34.

<sup>17</sup> *Theatre Research International*, 13 (1988), 234-49.

little praise either for industry or talent. John Styles's 1806 tract, *An Essay on the Character, Immoral and Anti-Christian Tendency of the Stage*, which went to a third edition, describes the moral degradation which acting supposedly breeds:

Transform her character: let modesty, the guardian of every female virtue, retire; let the averted eye which turns disgusted from the remotest approach of evil grow confident; let that delicacy of sentiment which feels a 'stain like a wound' give place to fashionable apathy; let the love of home and taste for the sweetly interesting employments of the domestic scene be exchanged for the pursuit of theatrical entertainment, and the vagrant disposition of a fashionable belle, and the picture is reversed; the female is degraded, and society has lost its most powerful, captivating charm.<sup>18</sup>

In 1809, the actress Ann Holbrook herself advised women against seeking a living on the stage; interestingly, she warned them against melodrama particularly:

A woman also ought to be deterred from the Stage by the fact that people in general regard Actresses, at best, but as doubtful characters. If we consider their frequent appearance in male habits, their carrying thinness of clothing to excess, and the postures in which the *new-fangled Melo-Drama* places females thus clad, we cannot wonder that the strictly prudent should avoid any intimacy with women, be their inward virtue what it may, whose outward seeming borders on licentiousness.<sup>19</sup> (Italics mine)

Towards the end of the century, though more and more women were embarking on a stage career,<sup>20</sup> their sisters were still advising them against it. For example, 'A Lady', in 1885, wrote *An Appeal to the Women of England to Discourage the Stage*:

Ask yourself whether it is possible for a woman to become an actress without suffering any moral deterioration. What is a woman's greatest charm? Does it not consist in a modest, retiring disposition, and, if so, is the stage likely to foster and cherish it?<sup>21</sup>

However, as far as this thesis is concerned, the most important reason for Victorian animosity towards actresses, is the radical denial they presented of the idea that women embodied by their very nature the principles of sincerity and authenticity. This point has been perceptively

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<sup>18</sup> (Newport, Isle of Wight: Medina Press, 1806), p. 34; quoted by Tracy C. Davis in 'Actresses and Prostitutes in Victorian London', p. 229.

<sup>19</sup> Ann Catherine Holbrook, *The Dramatist; or, Memoirs of the Stage* (Birmingham: Martin and Hunter, 1809), p. 60; quoted by Jan McDonald in 'Lesser Ladies of the Victorian Stage', p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> Jan McDonald maintains in 'Lesser Ladies of the Victorian Stage' (p. 247) that 3,696 women entered the theatrical profession in 1891 compared with 384 in 1841.

<sup>21</sup> (London: Masters, 1855), p. 9; quoted by Jan McDonald in 'Lesser Ladies of the Victorian Stage', p. 235.

commented upon by recent critics. Tracy C. Davis argues that actresses, like prostitutes, 'were women whose identity, sincerity, and appearance were illusory'.<sup>22</sup> Claire Tomalin states that 'to pretend to be what you were not and to make a good job of it made you morally suspect', pointing to Fanny Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814), Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), Thackeray's Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* and his Emily Fotheringay, the professional actress in *The History of Pendennis* (1850), as fictional explorations of the issue.<sup>23</sup> But the complexity of the question of the actress's threat to the principle of sincerity is perhaps most sophisticatedly and succinctly analysed in Nina Auerbach's article, 'Alluring Vacancies in the Victorian Character':

In nineteenth-century novels and in Victorian life as well, women were supposed to embody an integrity of being that offered ballast to the excruciating complexities of men and the painful falsifications of the society they made. Female identities, in art and in life, were squeezed into one-dimensional stock roles [...]. Actresses, those sacred monsters, [...] like fictional heroines, [...] pleased audiences by perfecting the sincere self-fabrication demanded of ordinary women as well. Woman's sincerity assured observers that a knowable self existed: her devious dimensionality inspired awe at the self's hidden boundlessness.<sup>24</sup>

Auerbach shrewdly perceives that the actress's 'sincere self-fabrication' and 'devious dimensionality', though gratifying to theatre audiences, ultimately threatened the very foundations of Victorian society. The actress's ability to impersonate the sincere, angelic, domestic heroine of melodrama, for example, suggested that moral and spiritual purity could (and often had to) be feigned - by professional and, perhaps more importantly, by non-professional acting women. Or, as Erving Goffman explains in a different context, realistic performances can be threatening because

a competent performance by someone who proves to be an impostor may weaken in our minds the moral connection between legitimate authorization to play a part and the capacity to play it.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the actress ultimately awakened the anxiety that the angel in the house could be the devil in disguise.

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<sup>22</sup> 'Actresses and Prostitutes in Victorian London', p. 227.

<sup>23</sup> *The Invisible Woman*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*, p. 67.

## 8. 2 - Dickens's Deviant Women: Passionate Performers

### 8. 2. 1- Sincerely Fiery Females

Most of the female deviants I shall be discussing have not committed what could be called 'masculine' crimes; that is, most have not, like Hortense or Madame Defarge, for example, broken the *written*, codified laws of the patriarchal society they inhabit. Many are in fact 'sexual offenders'; that is, they have actively violated the *unwritten* Victorian code or ideal of femininity. They have married for money, like Edith Dombey, or had an illegitimate child, like Lady Dedlock. Then again, some are neither criminals in the eyes of the law, nor have they actually committed a 'sexual offence'; they are, like Rosa Dartle or Miss Havisham, 'sexual offenders' by nature rather than by action, women who are guilty of the worst sin of all, that of *being* 'unfeminine'. Sexual offenders of all kinds are more interesting, in many respects, than convicted criminals, because they are obliged to be more devious. They must act roles, wear masks, negotiate a strategy for the presentation of self in a society which does not want to acknowledge the complexity of female selfhood. As Lady Dedlock tells Esther, 'If you hear of Lady Dedlock, brilliant, prosperous, and flattered; think of your wretched mother, conscience-stricken, underneath that mask!' (*BH*, Chapter 36, p. 512). Except when the crime is that unique sexual crime of prostitution, criminality for most women in Dickens perversely offers a carnivalesque freedom from the restrictions of the patriarchal order.

But just what are these restrictions? The dilemma for women who do not happen to be born in the mould of the angel in the house is neatly summed up by Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son*:

With all those yearnings, and gushings, and impulsive throbbings that we have implanted in our souls, and which are so very charming, why are we not more natural? (Chapter 21, p. 288)

Though Victorian society enshrined the principles of sincerity and honesty in its ideal of the female sex, as we have seen, it did not expect, or allow for, extreme passion in its women - whether this passion was sexual or otherwise. As Michael Slater has documented,<sup>26</sup> deviant women in Dickens's

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<sup>26</sup> *Dickens and Women*, pp. 354-56.

fiction are often excessively passionate, channelling their passion against the structure of patriarchal society, rather than providing an anchor for it. What Slater does not emphasise, however, is that Dickens's passionate women may not simply *unleash* their pent up passion. What interests Dickens as much as openly fiery women is women who repress their passion and don a social mask, women who are forced to become role-players. Such unfortunates offend against the sexual code in two ways: they are violently passionate and also duplicitous, thus violating the ideals of both submissiveness and sincerity associated with femininity proper.

Yet the dilemma for these women (and also for Dickens) is that they can be seen, from one perspective, as innocent victims. Ironically, the ghastly Mrs Skewton's enquiry locates a crucial ambiguity which raises its head again and again in Dickens's portrayal of deviant women: when she talks of the 'impulsive throbbings that we have implanted in our souls', does she mean that women implant their own passions and are thus wilfully responsible for their own fiery natures, or does she mean that women have passions implanted in their souls by outside forces? Indeed, are these passions innate? Ultimately, are such women fiery monsters of their own making or hapless victims of a society which makes them resentful? In any case, what is clear in Dickens's novels is that passionate women, to avoid violating one of the articles of the unspoken code of femininity, are forced or encouraged to repress their passion. They thus break another unwritten law by becoming insincere or deceitful.

Edith Dombey is passionate, cynical and a social role-player. While the male characters in *Dombey and Son* cast her in the stock roles of wife and mistress alternately, literary critics frequently see her as a stereotypical 'bought bride' and/or a near relation of the deviant women of nineteenth-century melodrama.<sup>27</sup> The fact that she 'centers the main arguments about the role of

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<sup>27</sup> F. R. Leavis, for example - in *Dickens the Novelist*, p. 48 - argues that the theme of the 'Bought Bride [...] takes Dickens into a realm where he *knows* nothing. What he takes for knowledge is wholly external and conventional; determined, therefore, unresistingly by all the theatrical clichés and sentimental banalities of the high-life novelette and the equivalent drama'. Ian Milner - 'The Dickens Drama: Mr. Dombey', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 24 (1970), 477-87 (p. 484) - states that, 'Edith is of course "melodramatic"; she makes her way in the novel accompanied by a mounting array of rhetorical cliché'.

women in the strongly patriarchal world of commercial capitalism' has been commented upon.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, it is easy to see the general importance of her repression of emotion in a novel investigating the death or repression of feeling. Again, Edith, like Florence Dombey and Alice Marwood is thematically significant in terms of the parent/child relationship analysed in the novel as a whole. Edith and Alice are obviously particularly relevant in this respect because both are presented as, most immediately, victims of patriarchal exploitation - though their respective family microcosms cannot be divorced, of course, from the patriarchal macrocosm of commercial capitalism depicted in *Dombey and Son*.

This chapter, however, will demonstrate the way in which the widely criticised 'melodramatic' or 'theatrical' aspects of Dickens's presentation of Edith in fact enrich or complicate Dickens's investigation of her deviant femininity. There are some obvious instances of melodramatic rhetoric, from the narrator and from Edith, which are obviously open to criticism. But these instances should not blind us to the positive side of the question: that is, in *Dombey and Son*, Dickens employs melodrama and 'theatricality' in an ambitious and sophisticated way, not to obscure, but to explore and reveal the character of Edith Dombey.

In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens uses the fundamental melodramatic tension between emotional expression and repression, not simply for dramatic effect, but to investigate a crucial and real dilemma for the passionate woman in Victorian society. Should she externalise her thoughts and feelings, in the interests of her personal sense of 'sincerity'? Or should she hide her inner emotion, in order to conform to social expectations and preserve her value as a marketable commodity for marriage? That is, should she *act* in a way which members of her society will interpret as sincere?

Through the character of Edith, Dickens investigates the causes and effects of a particularly female brand of emotional repression. Edith stifles her passion for much of the time through a curious mixture of personal pride - she does not want to lose self-control - and

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Montaut, 'The Second Mrs. Dombey', *Dickens Quarterly*, 4 (1987), 141-153 (p. 142).

self-loathing - she has resigned herself to the fact that she will not command such market value if she lets passion ruin her ornamental potential. Nevertheless, her sadness at the loss of her potentially 'natural heart'<sup>29</sup> becomes a refrain throughout the novel. When the narrator observes near the end of the novel, 'She was moved and weeping. Had she been oftener thus in older days, she had been happier now' (Chapter 61, p. 825), he is not sharing any insight with the reader that Edith herself does not perceive.

However, the fact that emotional outpourings are not always so acceptable - to either the narrator or to Victorian society - is reinforced through the presentation of Edith's novelistic shadow, Alice Marwood. Alice is an interesting double for two reasons in particular: first, because of the synonymy often perceived between actresses and prostitutes in Victorian Britain (in this case, Edith is a social performer who has prostituted herself on the marriage market). Second, Alice is particularly significant in the light of Dickens's investigation of female passion, its causes and effects. While Florence's presence in the *Dombey* home itself ensures that Edith's 'tempest of passion [is] hushed' (Chapter 30, p. 409), Alice's wild nature is a volcano of hatred and resentment symbolising her own ultimate, imminent eruption.

Alice is less successful than Edith at stifling her own passions, though the energy she puts into the attempt is as frightening to the narrator as the passion itself. When Good Mrs Brown tells Alice that Carker is 'thriving', the narrative description which ensues could serve as a paradigmatic illustration of Dickens's ambiguous attitudes to female passion:

the face and form before her [Mrs Brown] were unshaped by rage. It seemed as if the bosom would burst with the emotions that strove within it. The effort that constrained and held it pent up, was no less formidable than the rage itself: no less bespeaking the violent and dangerous character of the woman who made it. (Chapter 34, p. 471)

The word 'unshaped' accurately suggests the main and significant difference, for Dickens's narrator, between Edith and Alice. Whereas Edith is constantly compared to a statue or a frozen object, imprisoned by the form of her own beauty like a figure on Keats's grecian urn, Alice is 'unshaped'

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<sup>29</sup> She upbraids her mother: 'Oh Mother, Mother, if you had but left me to my natural heart when I too was a girl [...] how different I might have been!' (Chapter 30, p. 418).

by passion. Despite the fact that Edith is presented as suffering intensely within the urn of her social persona, the narrator finds it difficult to forgive Alice for marring her good looks with passion. The ambiguity contained within the last sentence of the above quotation echoes that of Mrs Skewton, discussed earlier; when the narrator refers to 'the woman that made it', 'it' could refer to either 'the effort' Alice makes to constrain her temper or to 'the rage' itself. If we accept the latter possibility then there is once more a suggestion that women are responsible for their own passions.

Despite all the attention that is paid to Alice's background, the narrative itself is consistently ambivalent about whether there can be any excuse for the extremity of Alice's negative, subversive passions - or more to the point, whether there can be any excuse for revealing or venting such passions. For the slight but significant difference between Edith and Alice is that Alice is not an accomplished role-player like Edith. This difference can partly be explained in social and legal terms: Edith is a woman of rank who has something to lose by relaxing her social image; Alice is a prostitute and convict who has nothing further to lose and no real hope of gain if she were to don a mask of calm.

But the important point is this. If there is one surprising characteristic that Edith and Alice have in common it is a specifically female brand of 'sincerity'. Certainly Alice, at first glance, appears to fit Erving Goffman's limited definition of sincerity:

When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term 'sincere' for individuals who believe in the impressions fostered by their own performance.<sup>30</sup>

Alice's inner being, that is to say, is at one with the social persona she projects; she is 'honest' about her thoughts and feelings and she believes in the truth of her social performances. Edith, by contrast, appears to be anything but sincere. Her social mask hides her passionate self. Like Goffman's cynic, in fact, she has no belief in her own performances and cares little about the feelings of the audience upon whom she imposes.

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<sup>30</sup> *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p. 28.

But Edith's social hypocrisy is paradoxically superficial. Indeed, it suggests just how quickly Goffman's pair of definitions could be reversed. Throughout the novel, Edith has an acute sense of a 'true' self which she believes herself to have betrayed; moreover, in her continuous attempts to be true to what is left of her better self, she ironically reveals a degree of sincerity more remarkable by far than the 'sincerity' of long-suffering, unquestioning Dickens heroines like Kate Nickleby or Lizzie Hexam. What is impressive about Edith is that she understands the complicating - or fabricating - factors involved (as discussed in Chapter 7) in attaining a state of sincerity which is socially acknowledged; moreover, as Edith appreciates, for a woman to appear sincere in an exploitative patriarchal society is especially problematic. Such 'sincerity' can in fact be more duplicitous than Edith's thoughtful and principled refusal to play the angel in the house.

To fully understand Edith's particular brand of sincerity, it is essential to appreciate that Edith's 'theatricality' is only rarely thoughtlessly histrionic; for most of the time, Edith is a calculating, self-conscious, social role-player. Edith's strategy for negotiating her precarious moral and social position is twofold: first, in social situations, she is as undemonstrative as possible, to minimise the responsibility she feels for the hawking and vending<sup>31</sup> in which she is centrally implicated. Dombey and Carker both misread her character, because both - in different ways - reinvent her as a two-dimensional, conventional stock type; Dombey expects her to adopt the role of wife, Carker that of mistress. But Edith erects a kind of taciturn denial of the readings that both men impose upon her. She confronts Dombey less like an angel in the house, and more like a trained lawyer:

Did I ever tempt you to seek my hand? Did I ever use any art to win you? Was I ever more conciliating to you when you pursued me, than I have been since our marriage? Was I ever other to you, than I am? (Chapter 40, p. 543)

Dombey's construction of Edith as wife is in fact a reconstruction, but one which most Victorian men and women would create. Edith, like Alice for most of the novel - Alice asks Harriet Carker,

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<sup>31</sup> In Chapter 27, she asks her mother, 'Have I been hawked and vended here and there, until the last grain of self-respect is dead within me, and I loath myself?' (p. 382).

'Why should *I* be penitent, and all the world go free?' (Chapter 33, p. 464) - has the courage to posit her own sense of truth against that of the world she lives in, to assert that there can and should be more than one reading of female behaviour.

Edith's second means of coping with her predicament is related to the first: she perceives herself not as a unified being but as two selves, the public and the private, or the apparent and the 'real'. She refuses to become her social persona; her mental stability and self-respect in fact depend on her conception of herself as an actress playing a role. Thus, though some commentators have found Edith's physical violence to her own person laughably melodramatic, I would argue that, passages such as the following (describing Edith on the eve of her marriage to Dombey) should be seen in terms of the presentation of Edith overall. Viewed in this way, they are more accurate and complex than a first reading would reveal:

with her dark hair shaken down, her dark eyes flashing with a raging light, her broad white bosom red with the cruel grasp of the relentless hand with which she spurned it from her, pacing up and down with an averted head, as if she would avoid the sight of her own fair person, and divorce herself from its companionship. Thus, in the dead time of the night before her bridal, Edith Granger wrestled with her unquiet spirit, tearless, friendless, silent, proud, and uncomplaining. (Chapter 30, p. 420)

Edith's violent gestures in this instance signify more than the melodramatic masochism of a stock villainess; Dickens distinguishes, for example, between 'her own fair person' and 'herself'. Edith is tormented, as she is for much of the novel, because she wants to divorce her appearance from the self that it betrays; she wishes to destroy the beautiful shell which has imprisoned her.

In this respect, she is more similar to Alice Marwood than my earlier provisional distinction between the two implied. Though Alice appears to be sincere in Goffman's terms, erasing any division between self and persona, and believing in the role she plays, she is not quite as straightforward as this description would imply. Though 'honest' about her thoughts and feelings, this does not necessarily mean, in her case, that she projects her inner self truly. For the capacity to do so, as I discussed in Chapter 7, is bound up with questions of self-knowledge and self-expression. Both Alice and Edith in fact vacillate in their attitudes to their 'essential' selves.

Thus, whereas the above analysis of Edith emphasises her belief in her better self, there are also many moments in the novel when she perceives herself as wicked to the core; in the case of Alice, whilst much of the time she vents her self-loathing, her torment stems from her instinct that she has, or once had, a better self - hence her refusal to accept money from Harriet Carker. Her public persona of the prostitute does not, therefore, reflect her recurring sense of her true worth and her resentment of her lot is intensified.

It is my belief that these parallel or corollary vacillations in the images of self held by Edith and Alice go some way towards explaining the exaggerated influence of their unpleasant mothers over their lives. Alice is more straightforward than Edith in this respect. She was bred into a career of prostitution before she knew any better, but, on her return from captivity, lets her mother know that she no longer respects her maternal authority. Edith, on the other hand, is fully aware of Mrs Skewton's role as pimp in the marital prostitution that her marriage to Dombey represents, but still goes along with it. It might be argued that Edith's marriage to Dombey represents her submission to the will of the hideous yet pathetic Mrs Skewton, a submission tending to invalidate any claim that could be made for Edith as a strong, sincere woman. Edith's marriage to Dombey suggests nothing of the sort: it represents Edith's submission to her own worst sense of self and her submission to a vision of the world which she feels offers no real freedom or happiness to the beautiful, passionate woman. No doubt Mrs Skewton played a major part in forming Edith's jaded vision of the world, but once Edith becomes conscious of the forces that have moulded her, she has the chance to reject them. Edith marries Dombey not because she is weakly submissive to Mrs Skewton but because she thinks that she (Edith) is a cynic. In marriage, however, her idealistic self paradoxically torments her as she longs to attain a state of sincerity.

Edith and Alice are ultimately sincere in the only way possible for an intelligent, passionate, Victorian female. They are true to a hidden self, a self driven underground by the social restrictions on the behaviour of women. Of course, as I suggested in my last chapter, a sincerity which is socially acknowledged is extremely difficult - if not impossible - for men too; but

Victorian males at least had greater freedom to project themselves in a way which they *believed* to be honest. For the Victorian female in particular, a sense of one's own personal sincerity often had to coexist with a consciousness of one's social hypocrisy. Edith and Alice both have as much thoughtful integrity as any of the other characters in the novel. Mrs Skewton declares in terms reminiscent of John Chester in *Barnaby Rudge*:

The world is coming to such an artificial and ungrateful state, that I begin to think there's no Heart - or anything of that sort - left in it, positively. (Chapter 37, p. 509)

Both Edith and Alice, whatever wrongs they may have committed in the eyes of their society, affirm positively that there is such a thing as the human heart. Edith's ultimate defiance of Dombey and Carker is what Joseph Donohue identifies in melodrama as 'the climactic display of the immanent'.<sup>32</sup> Though she must pay the price of becoming a social outcast, she is ultimately true to herself and affirms her own individual sincerity. The conclusion of Alice Marwood's story, by contrast, is artistically and psychologically inappropriate. Her repentance to Harriet Carker (Chapter 53, p. 718) shows Dickens trying to make her conform to society's *idea* of a sincere woman, rather than to the alternative model of sincerity the novel has constructed through her own character and that of Edith.

The fact that Edith can be true to herself only by becoming a social outcast is itself a radical subversion of Victorian values. Likewise, the emphasis placed on Edith's conditioning wins sympathy for her character and predicament. Edith is herself conscious of her society's tendency to squeeze women into two-dimensional roles, and she evades and manipulates its habit of stereotyping human beings. This means that she is anything but a stock type, or a fallen woman immersed in her 'role'. And finally, her defiance of Dombey and Carker, which is in effect a rejection of the Victorian world, can be interpreted as the heroic, rebellious stand of an individual against a corrupt society.

<sup>32</sup> *Theatre in the Age of Kean*, p. 111.

Admittedly, a more hostile feminist interpretation could maintain, with equal validity, that what Dickens is doing with the character of Edith is endowing an apparently wayward woman with the characteristics of the conventional stage heroine - or turning a genuine 'sexual offender' into a cliché and disarming her by these means. For example, Dickens uses Edith's relationship with Florence to show the reader that Edith is a good woman 'deep down'. Edith's love for Florence demonstrates that she possesses one of the qualities Dickens most admired in virtuous women, their feeling of sisterhood. Edith's virtual adoption of Florence as a daughter shows the maternal spirit which Dickens believed to be natural in women. In addition, her constant harping on her 'better self' suggests to the reader that she, like Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, is innately virtuous. In the same vein, the ending of Edith's story can be interpreted as a last minute failure on Dickens's part, rather than a reflection of his social and moral radicalism.

But what I want to show is the inadequacy of regarding Dickens's deviant women simply as stock types. For instance, to regard Edith in the terms I've just outlined, as no more than the passive reflection or creature of Dickens's supposed social attitudes, is itself to regard her as a stock type, though of criticism as much as of fiction. Edith Dombey herself, as we have seen, understands the inadequacy and destructiveness of perceiving women as 'flat', finite types. Tellingly, Dickens himself reveals a similar understanding, in *Little Dorrit*, when the actress Fanny superficially labels Amy a 'flat' sister (Book 2, Chapter 14, p. 571). The text makes clear, of course, what Nina Auerbach would call the 'devious dimensionality' behind Little Dorrit's veneer, a dimensionality appreciated by few in the novel and which Clennam is particularly slow to perceive. There is no denying that Dickens draws on stock types of wayward womanhood, but, Janus-like, his texts simultaneously reveal that the mythologising or fictionalising of femininity such clichés involve can be emotionally and morally crippling for the women expected to conform to them.

### **8. 2. 2 - Deviant Women as Art Objects**

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argues that even the least sophisticated woman, when she is dressed

does not present *herself* to observation; she is, like the picture or the statue, or the actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there - that is, the character she represents, but is not. It is this identification with something unreal, fixed, perfect as the hero of a novel, as a portrait or a bust, that gratifies her; she strives to identify herself with this figure and thus to seem to herself to be stabilized, justified in her splendor.<sup>33</sup>

In Dickens's novels, several deviant females are presented as art objects as well as actresses. In *Dombey and Son*, for example, Edith is likened to 'a handsome statue; as cold, as silent, and as still' (Chapter 30, p. 413). Elsewhere Carker notes 'a most extraordinary accidental likeness' between Edith and a woman in a picture, 'Perhaps it is a Juno; perhaps a Potiphar's Wife; perhaps some scornful Nymph' (Chapter 33, p. 455); this is, of course, a telling example of the tendency of Carker - and *Dombey* - to reinvent Edith as a type. The statuesque appearance of Edith, however, is emphasised throughout the novel; in conversation with Florence about *Dombey's* paternal shortcomings, Edith's face 'strove for composure until its proud beauty was as fixed as death' and her manner is 'stately and quiet, as a marble image' (Chapter 35, p. 486); 'The tears that were visible in her eyes as she kept them fixed on Florence, showed that the composed face was but as a handsome mask' (Chapter 35, p. 487). In *Bleak House*, Guppy initially suspects a link between Lady Dedlock and Esther when he sees a portrait of the latter (Chapter 29, p.406), whilst Tulkinghorn, along with fashionable society in general, regards her as 'a study' (Chapter 48, p. 660). The portrait of Lady Dedlock at Chesney Wold, of course, is repeatedly and fatalistically associated with Lady Dedlock herself. Moreover, it is not only young, beautiful women in Dickens's novels who are compared with art objects; both Mrs Steerforth and Mrs Clennam are transformed into statues by their emotional breakdowns<sup>34</sup> and Miss Havisham is unforgettably compared with 'some ghastly wax-work at the Fair' (*GE*, Volume I, Chapter 8, p. 59).

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<sup>33</sup> Trans.by H. M. Parshley, Everyman's Library, CIIIVII (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953; repr. London: Campbell, 1993), p. 560.

<sup>34</sup> See *DC*, Chapter 56, p. 687 - 'she lay like a statue, except for the low sound now and then' - and *LD*, Book 2, Chapter 31, p. 772: 'There, Mrs. Clennam dropped upon the stones; and she never from that hour moved so much as a finger again, or had the power to speak one word. [...] Except

Interestingly enough, however, given de Beauvoir's comments and subsequent feminist research into both the representation of women as objects of the male gaze and the commodification of the female, Dickens's wayward women are not shown to be gratified by their identification with art objects. On the contrary, to confine my discussion initially to Edith Dombey and Lady Dedlock, both are presented as prisoners of their beauty. To repeat my earlier Keatsian analogy, the two women are figured as suffering selves, trapped inside the aesthetically beautiful object perceived by the outside world. At her reconciliation with Esther, for example, Lady Dedlock exclaims (as I quoted earlier), 'If you hear of Lady Dedlock, brilliant, prosperous, and flattered; think of your wretched mother, conscience-stricken, underneath that mask!' (Chapter 36, p. 512). She distinguishes here between society's image of herself and her own suffering self. Lady Dedlock urges Esther to remember in future that whatever appearance she (Lady Dedlock) presents, 'the reality is in her suffering' (Chapter 36, p. 512). Lady Dedlock talks about herself in the third person here, not because she regards herself as an object, but because she is adopting the perspective on her own behaviour which she knows will be Esther's vantage point. She is well aware of the gulf between the appearance and the actuality, and this device only increases the reader's sense of the poignant gap between the reality of her suffering and the appearance of passionlessness suggested by her aesthetically beautiful exterior.

The striking feature, then, of Dickens's dramatisation of the objectification and commodification of women in Victorian society, in *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*, is that the wayward women in question are presented as subjects as well as objects - a fact which complicates any superficial reading of the texts which sees Dickens's gaze as turning women into objects alone. In *Dombey and Son*, for example, though Dombey sees Edith as an object, Dickens emphasises throughout the text her sense of herself as subject, her sense of a better, private self which even Carker does not fully perceive or understand. Moreover, in terms of the critique of capitalism which the novel offers, Edith's social commodification is undermined by her resentment of her

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that she could move her eyes and faintly express a negative and affirmative with her head, she lived and died a statue'.

status as object; here too, though Edith and the reader perceive that she is regarded socially as an object, Edith's indignation is an expression of her subjectivity. As we have seen, Lady Dedlock is also presented - and indeed, like Edith, sees herself - as both object and subject throughout the novel's narratives which, it is worth remembering, are themselves 'objective' and 'subjective' by turns. Again, the suffering woman's sense of herself as subject subverts society's treatment of her as object.

Having said this, Dickens's novels do not uphold a simplistic dichotomy between society's objectification of women, on the one hand, and female resistance to that objectification on the other. Both Edith and Lady Dedlock, as my earlier analysis maintained, are to some extent complicit in turning themselves into art objects. Both imitate objects and adopt roles through a curious mixture of pride (they do not want to lose self-control) and self-loathing (both have compromised themselves by playing society's games and adhered to rules they resent). Of course, they are complicit in the process of social commodification because both appreciate that a statuesque exterior can act as a protective mask as well as a prison, an impenetrable veil which hides the secret, better self of the subject; in *Bleak House*, for example, we read about Lady Dedlock, 'she drew her habitual air of proud indifference about her like a veil' (Chapter 36, p. 510). By perceiving themselves not as unified personalities but as two selves, the public and the private, or the subject and the object, both feel able to preserve a sense of inner integrity hidden beneath the public, social veneer of the object. Thus, though neither Edith nor Lady Dedlock are shown to be gratified by their identification with objects, both perceive themselves in a way consistent with de Beauvoir's analysis of female self-objectification. Neither believes her inner self to be on display; each is, in de Beauvoir's words, 'like the picture or the statue, or the actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there - that is, the character she represents, but is not'. This is a particularly female brand of social hypocrisy, however, which paradoxically preserves a peculiar inner honesty and integrity. To Dickens's male hypocrites, appearance is all, to Dickens's devious women, the inner sanctum of the self is of paramount importance.

Edith Dombey and Lady Dedlock are not then, like de Beauvoir's female, motivated by conditioned vanity. Their self-objectification is pragmatic, allowing them a secret, private self within the inevitable, unavoidable prison of the object. Thus, if the woman's representation of herself as an object can be seen as a compromise or even surrender to the male gaze, from another perspective, it can be seen as a pragmatic seizure of limited potential power; by manipulating her own appearance, the female subject can at least make her prison private and protective - as well as oppressive. Such subtleties in Dickens's treatment of the idea of the woman as object are overlooked by some critics, who perceive a familiar theme and assume a familiar handling of it. When John Carey, for instance, observes in the characterisation of Edith, 'a tendency to freeze her into a work of art',<sup>35</sup> he does not consider the question of who exactly is doing the freezing, and the importance of that question. Though Carker, Dombey and Edith herself are all complicit, for their different reasons, in the commodification of the female, the text's simultaneous emphasis on the suffering female as subject precludes any simplistic reading of the novel which assumes that the author himself perceives deviant women as art objects.

I emphasise the word 'deviant' because it is significant that Dickens's wayward women are likened to works of art, whereas his 'good' women are not. This is, of course, something to do with a primitive dichotomy between the natural and the artificial, the angel and the whore. But Dickens's manipulation of the idea of the woman as art object is also connected with his investigation of female repression of passion, fashionable society's admiration of the statuesque, and commercial society's valuing of the female as a commodity. Dickens's male characters are presented and present themselves as (art) objects to suggest a lack or denial of the inner emotional self (John Chester, in *Barnaby Rudge*, is the best example). When Dickens's female characters are connected with art objects, the primacy of the private, feeling self is paradoxically suggested. This is true even of some of Dickens's older, less beautiful, female artifacts (Mrs Skewton and Mrs Merdle are obvious exceptions). Mrs Steerforth and Mrs Clennam end their days as statues not because they are

<sup>35</sup> *The Violent Effigy*, p. 87.

inhuman or passionlessness, but because the intensity of conflicting passions which they have repressed for years finally erupts and breaks them. It is in fact as statues that they paradoxically become most sympathetic as human beings, because it is then that their status as monstrous victims is crystallised. Likewise, Miss Havisham's presentation of herself as 'ghastly wax-work' is an attempt to parade, freeze and immortalise the pain she has experienced; she turns herself into a monument of female suffering at the hands of men and ultimately becomes a monument of female masochism.

### **8.3 - Women as Sex Objects**

In *The Invisible Woman*, Claire Tomalin maintains that Dickens's well-behaved young women are 'inoculated against sexuality by their creator before their stories begin; they are about as tempting as wax fruit'.<sup>36</sup> Angus Wilson argues similarly that there is no character in Dickens's novels who 'gives woman the true dignity of a whole body and a whole mind'.<sup>37</sup> John Carey comments in a familiar vein on the 'erotic paternalism'<sup>38</sup> Dickens feels towards his inoculated pieces of female wax fruit. Between them, these critics bequeath, from generation to generation, the received, unquestioned idea concerning Dickens's attitude to sexuality in women; Dickens, the story goes, deeply traumatised by the death of his wife's seventeen-year-old sister, Mary Hogarth, with whom he was obsessed, could never regard women who did not look like children as sexually attractive. The revelations about his later relationship with the young actress Ellen Ternan only added weight to this theory (though in many ways, given that Ternan was an actress, this later relationship should have complicated analyses of Dickens's taste in women).

In no area of Dickens studies has biographical material warped critical perspectives more glaringly or more damagingly, in my view. The main problem haunting traditional interpretations of Dickens's attitude to female sexuality as that attitude is expressed in the novels themselves, is that

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<sup>36</sup> p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> *The World of Charles Dickens* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1970), p. 103

<sup>38</sup> *The Violent Effigy*, p. 158.

of logically linking the two halves of the recurring critical argument. The argument maintains, on the one hand, that Dickens's angelic child women are 'about as tempting as wax fruit', and on the other, that Dickens himself is upholding these sterilised creatures as the sole objects of sexual desire in his novels. This train of thought begs the question: if Dickens's child-women are no more sexually appealing than plastic dolls, how can critics then deduce that Dickens intends them to be regarded otherwise?

There is, of course, no doubt that those child-women Kate Millett labelled 'insipid goodies'<sup>39</sup> are regarded by other characters within the texts themselves as sexually attractive. The image of Quilp leering at Little Nell, for instance, is difficult to forget, and there are countless other examples: Kate Nickleby is ogled by Sir Mulberry Hawk, Dolly Varden is rough-handled by the savage Hugh, Pet Meagles is desired by both Gowan and Clennam, and Bella Wilfer's flirtation with her father rather nauseatingly suggests her awareness of her own sexuality.

But if it is true that the virtuous heroine, however child-like and however insipid, is often regarded as the focus of male sexual desire in the texts themselves, it is also true that Dickens's deviant women are presented as objects of sexual attraction. The critical commonplace that Dickens was unable to associate maturity with sex has often blinded commentators to the fact that it is not only suffering heroines in Dickens's novels who are regarded as objects of sexual desire. Dickens's deviant women are adults, aware of their own sexuality and sexual attractiveness. To give several examples: Edith Dombey is subjected to both Carker's voyeurism and his sadism, and Lady Dedlock's relationship with Tulkinghorn contains similar elements, though Tulkinghorn has none of Carker's sensuality; the serpentine Rosa Dartle attracts both Steerforth and the young David, who felt himself 'falling a little in love with her' (*DC*, Chapter 24, p. 304); Miss Wade is the ex-lover of Gowan and her relationship with Tattycoram is strongly sexually charged; Estella is a flirtatious *femme fatale* who, even as a young girl, possesses an adult's awareness of how to manipulate her sexuality, with ruinous effects on Pip's happiness.

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<sup>39</sup> *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), p. 90.

In the words of *The Violent Effigy*, sex in Dickens's novels 'is not banished but driven underground, to emerge in perverted and inhibited forms'.<sup>40</sup> As Dickens's wayward women are frequently enmeshed in perverted male-female power relations, it is not surprising that they often act as a textual locus for an implicit investigation of adult sexual relationships in Victorian society. Perhaps the most intense sexual energy, in Dickens's novels, is expressed through the fraught struggles for power between adult men and adult women; and these power struggles frequently take a sado-masochistic form. Of course, Dickens's 'good' heroines too, like the heroines of stage melodrama, are the ultimate masochists and suffer interminably at the hands of sadistic men. What is more interesting about the power relations involving Dickens's deviant women, however, is that they refuse to surrender power completely; indeed, they crave power for themselves. The resulting friction is the most intense and disturbing glimpse of adult sex that the novels have to offer.

Perhaps the most striking example of the emergence of sex in a perverted and inhibited form is presented as a rare and brief journey into the realm of sexual fantasy:

Did the phantom of such a woman flit about him on his ride; true to the reality, and obvious to him?

Yes. He saw her in his mind, exactly as she was. She bore him company, with her pride, resentment, hatred, all as plain to him as her beauty; with nothing plainer to him than her hatred of him. He saw her sometimes haughty and repellent at his side, and sometimes down among his horse's feet, fallen and in the dust. But he always saw her as she was, without disguise, and watched her on the dangerous way that she was going. (*D&S*, Chapter 46, p. 618)

This is Carker fantasising about Edith. But the striking feature of his sado-masochistic day-dream is that it could be that of several male characters in Dickens's novels who are both attracted by, and desire to punish, the active, deviant woman - indeed, to force her into her properly passive role. The memorable, throbbing scar on Rosa Dartle's lip is indelible evidence of the blow Steerforth inflicted on her - and more complexly, it symbolises Steerforth's assertion of power over a woman he possibly loved, a woman whose tool of power is her sharp tongue, her control over language. Carker's 'secret sense of power in her [Florence's] shrinking from him' (Chapter 37, p. 502) is one

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<sup>40</sup> Carey, p. 171.

he clearly enjoys over Edith herself.<sup>41</sup> It is also that experienced by Tulkinghorn in the presence of Lady Dedlock. Miss Wade is conquered by Gowan, as she records in her 'History of a Self-Tormentor' (*LD*, Book 2, Chapter 21, pp. 644-51). But these women often experience a parallel and corollary desire to dominate. Edith's final triumph over Carker and his death under a train would in fact have appealed to the craving for power displayed by nearly all Dickens's deviant women (with the possible exception of Lady Dedlock). These women desire, use and abuse power; they are sadists when given the opportunity. Edith Dombey obviously derives some relish from her thwarting of the expectations of both Dombey and Carker; Rosa Dartle's wish to have Little Emily whipped until she is dead (*DC*, Chapter 50, p. 616) is, on one level, an expression of the intensity of her sexual desire for Steerforth; Miss Wade's victimisation of Tattycoram positions her firmly in the centre of an abuse cycle; Madame Defarge's sadistic violence is a reaction against the rape of her sister, the murder of her family, against aristocratic and male power; finally, *Great Expectations* as a whole is a superbly subtle investigation of the crippling effects of sado-masochistic relations between men and women.

In 'The Subjection of Women', John Stuart Mill, that most merciless of contemporary critics of Dickens's attitudes to women, argues that lack of liberty for women can only result in distorted cravings for power.<sup>42</sup> Mill's arguments are ironically borne out in Dickens's texts, where women who desire liberty in an oppressive society can only console themselves through perverted power games. Again, the desire of Dickens's male sadists to punish deviant women can also be read, in the light of social conditioning, as their need to force females into the passive submission which society expects of them. Whether Dickens intended his texts to be read in such a way is not the relevant issue. His wayward women consistently focus his investigation of adult sexual relationships and the perverted and inhibited forms they take in the patriarchal world of Victorian England.

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<sup>41</sup> See *D&S*, p. 502: 'Proudly as she opposed herself to him, [...] the triumph and superiority were his, and [...] he knew it full well'.

<sup>42</sup> *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. by John Gray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 471-582 (p. 578).

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In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argues that, though Dickens achieves 'a nearly perfect indictment of both patriarchy and capitalism in *Dombey and Son*', he does so 'without ever relinquishing the sentimental version of women which is the whole spirit of Ruskin's "Of Queens' Gardens". 'It is one of the most disheartening flaws in the master's work', she goes on,

that nearly all the 'serious' women in Dickens' fiction, with the exception of Nancy [in *Oliver Twist*] and a handful of her criminal sisters, are insipid goodies carved from the same soap as Ruskin's Queens.<sup>43</sup>

It is an ironic feature of some feminist work on Dickens that it adopts essentially the same perspective on Dickens's texts as have traditionalist readings more sympathetic to patriarchal values. For Kate Millett, for example, Dickens's sentimentalised portrayal of women is ultimately far more important than his indictment of patriarchy; and his 'insipid goodies' are more noteworthy than that 'handful of criminal sisters' who do not conform to the Victorian ideal of femininity. Thus, Kate Millett despises Dickens's admiration of 'insipid goodies' whereas the more traditional critic may not; but the striking thing is that both are reading Dickens in the same way. It is clear that our interpretation of Dickens's texts depends very much on the perspective that we choose to adopt; it is also clear that mere repetition of the received idea concerning Dickens's representation of women - in whatever variety of intonation - is ultimately a disservice to his novels and the variety they encompass.

Though I do not disagree with the general interpretation of the significance of Dickens's 'good' heroines as angels in their patriarchal houses, I have taken this reading for granted in order to concentrate on a more neglected area of Dickens's texts. There is no reason why, because Dickens attempts to marginalise some of his deviant women, feminist critics should do likewise. Surely the contrary should be true. And indeed, characters like Edith Dombey, Lady Dedlock, Miss Havisham, and so forth, could never be said to be at the margins of their respective texts. As Kate Flint suggests:

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<sup>43</sup> pp. 89-90.

within and outside Dickens' texts, we do discover the presence of those whose deviance is so pronounced that they have the effect of denying this supposed or desired norm [of femininity].<sup>44</sup>

It may, however, be impossible to give any definite response to the question of whether or not Dickens's deviant women are powerful enough presences within their respective texts, or within his work as a whole, to subvert the supposed ideal or 'norm' of femininity embodied in the 'good' heroines. What is more appropriate is to avoid rigidity of interpretation or perspective and emphasise the protean and fluctuating nature of the texts themselves. In my depolarisation of those supposed 'opposites' sincerity and artificiality, object and subject, sexual and asexual, sadist and masochist, I have tried to think in terms of metamorphosis rather than stasis. For it would surely be ironic if the twentieth-century reader - and the twentieth-century female reader in particular - chose to adopt one role or perspective, rather than to exploit the 'devious dimensionality' which was the covert means of achieving limited freedom for the thinking, feeling Victorian female.

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<sup>44</sup> *Dickens* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), p. 113.

## CONCLUSION

Keats's symbol of the imagination as a delicate, precious and potentially infinite spider's web<sup>1</sup> tells us much about the imagination of Charles Dickens. For those who see Dickens as vulgar, as a mere entertainer, as superficial, as the creator of 'baggy monsters'<sup>2</sup> rather than works of art, such an analogy will seem inappropriate. For this reader, however, it is entirely fitting: it captures the rare quality of Dickens's novels, so often overlooked due to their familiarity; it reflects the crafted complexity of his works; it suggests the unique results which can be achieved by employing the most unlikely and homely materials as props and supports. And perhaps as usefully, in the context of this thesis, the symbol of the spider's web illustrates the interconnectedness of things, the interdependency of the individual strands and filaments which make up a work of art.

This study has attempted to explore some of the most important of these interconnections, to offer an impression of the amalgam of disparate elements of which Dickens's novels are composed. In attempting to do so, my thesis has itself adopted a web-like as well as a linear structure, in its attempt to engage with a large body of material and a wide variety of issues. Only in this way, I felt, could I do justice to the extraordinary combinations of forms, feelings, and insights which we find in Dickens's works. I have been at pains to avoid the formulaic, to render fully the harmonious diversity of Dickens's work, and to give the reader a real sense of Dickens's protean creative processes.

As mentioned in my introduction, the first aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how two prominent threads in Dickens's writing - the 'dark' and the 'theatrical' - are interconnected. If I have achieved this aim, I will have made a contribution to two significant areas of Dickens research: to

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<sup>1</sup> On 19 February 1818, Keats wrote to Reynolds: 'almost any Man may like the spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel - the points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are few and she fills the Air with a beautiful circuiting. Man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Web of his Soul, and weave a tapestry empyrean full of symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wandering, of distinctness for his luxury' - *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Maurice Buxton Forman, 4th edn (rev.) (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase was used by Henry James in his Preface to *The Tragic Muse* (1890) to describe the formlessness of nineteenth-century novels like Thackeray's *The Newcomes* (1853-55) and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863-69) - *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. by R. P. Blackmur (New York: Scribner's, 1935), pp. 70-97 (p. 84).

criticism of the 'macabre' Dickens and to research on the relationship between the popular theatre and Dickens's novels. Again, I have attempted to shed some light on the ways in which the two areas of criticism are linked. On a basic level, of course, my study has discussed the influence of various models of melodramatic villainy on Dickens's representations of immorality and deviance. But this connection between his characters and their prototypes is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. My aim throughout has been to advance our understanding of Dickens's *methods* of manipulating and transforming the conventions and stereotypes of melodrama to convey a profound and complex understanding of deviant psychology and behaviour. Hence the exploration I have offered of generic differences between the novel and the theatre - which is another way of speaking of Dickens's exploitation of novelistic resources in order to give characters who may seem superficial when taken out of context, moral, imaginative and emotional weight and depth. This he does by 'positioning' characters textually (as in the case of Charley Bates and the Artful Dodger), through self-reflexive lines of narrative discourse, and importantly, through the transforming powers of his prose. Though many critics praise the 'energy', 'vitality', etc., of Dickens's prose, there has been very little understanding of the ways in which it infuses psychological and emotional depths into characters who are easy to criticise out of novelistic context.

Lack of understanding of Dickens's self-conscious manipulation of the resources of both language and the novel form has been responsible for much of the critical animosity and bewilderment concerning Dickens's novels from the Victorian period to our own. My analysis of the fusion between the 'dark' and the 'theatrical' in Dickens's works is integral, of course, to the old debate about Dickens and the inner life. To recollect a few of the most branding judgements on Dickens's art, George Eliot argued that Dickens was 'he scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming [...] transcendent in his unreality',<sup>3</sup> G. H. Lewes compared Dickens's characters to 'frogs whose brains have been taken out for

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<sup>3</sup> 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review*, 10 (1 July 1856), 51-79; repr. in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. by A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren, pp. 107-39 (p. 111).

physiological purposes';<sup>4</sup> Henry James regarded Dickens as 'the greatest of superficial novelists';<sup>5</sup> and E. M. Forster, who did acknowledge that Dickens's characters could give the - perhaps deceptive - impression of being 'round', could only attribute Dickens's success in this respect to 'a conjuring-trick'.<sup>6</sup> All these critics have difficulty grasping the relationship between the theatrical and the psychological, between 'external' and 'internal' art. This thesis has argued that the two modes (of writing and of understanding), far from being mutually exclusive, can be interdependent and mutually enhancing. The Dickensian 'conjuring-trick', as I have suggested, is no trick, in fact, once one fully appreciates the crucial, transforming role of linguistic and novelistic context in Dickens's art.

The second aim of this thesis is to add to our understanding of the relationship between 'high' and 'low' art, 'serious' literature and popular 'entertainment' - a question broached by Leavis and George Eliot among others, and integral to Dickens Studies. In the present academic climate, of course, debates about the nature of English Studies, about Cultural Studies, and the validity of a canon of English literature, have become particularly urgent. I have, however, tried to avoid any simplistic 'championing' of either 'high' or 'low' art in an attempt to make a more constructive contribution to the discussion. What is important, I feel, is to encourage real understanding of *how* 'high' and 'low' art, serious literature and popular entertainment are related to each other. Through careful analysis of *both* the malefactors of Dickens's novels and the melodramatic villains which informed them, I aimed to illuminate the means by which Dickens transmutes the stereotypical and the primitive into figures of moral, imaginative and emotional depth. To avoid repetition, the crux is again linguistic and novelistic context. Like Shakespeare, Dickens did not disparage popular theatrical conventions. But Dickens is a Shakespeare of the novel, not of the theatre. It seems peculiarly appropriate, therefore, to end by turning back on his creator Nicholas Nickleby's words about Shakespeare:

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<sup>4</sup> 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 11 (February 1872), 141-54 (p. 148).

<sup>5</sup> *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 787.

<sup>6</sup> *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 79.

[He] brought within the magic circle of his genius, traditions peculiarly adapted for his purpose, and turned familiar things into constellations which should enlighten the world for ages. (*NN*, Chapter 48, p. 633)

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