

'Like the Dickens': Charles Dickens and Simile

Miriam Helmers

UCL

PhD, English

I, Miriam Grace Helmets, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## Abstract

This thesis proposes that Dickens's prolific and distinctive use of simile is essential to his style. It takes a cross-disciplinary approach, using stylistic analysis and literary criticism to identify the features of simile and interpret the effects of Dickens's use of simile. It builds on previous linguistic scholarship to expand the definition of *simile* to include any explicit linguistic structure that creates direct figurative comparison.

'Similic' language, or structures of direct figurative comparison, underpins much of Dickens's unique figurative style. The language of analogy, and similes in particular, was commonly used by Dickens's contemporaries, and he was thus not unusual in the number of similes he employed. However, 'Dickensian simile' is highly unconventional in its remarkably self-conscious and peculiar character: his comparisons often manipulate the ordinarily clarifying and explanatory aspect of a similic comparison to create exaggerated, absurd, or bizarre imagery to serve his narrative purposes.

The chronological approach of the thesis shows how Dickens's use of simile developed throughout his career. From *Sketches by 'Boz'* to *Martin Chuzzlewit*, simile can be identified as emphasising Dickens's authorial flair; it is typically hyperbolic and self-conscious, often with comical effect. From *Dombey and Son* onwards, Dickens uses simile for increasingly subtle narrative strategies of characterisation. Even in his last, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens was still experimenting with simile. From a discussion of his transition from journalistic reporting to writing fiction, to a discussion of how his similic style in his letters works to create the image of himself as the 'Inimitable,' this thesis shows how simile is a significant authorial signature of Dickens.

## Impact Statement

My research will help bridge the gap between researchers in English linguistics and literature by focusing on a specific linguistic structure – simile – by means of a single-author literary study of Charles Dickens. It is innovative in the way that it blends stylistic analysis and literary criticism: it shows the value of stylistic terms and tools for a more precise demonstration of Dickens's use of simile, and it builds on past literary scholarship around Dickens's figurative language to push for a deeper literary analysis of the linguistic data. With the tables of data I have created with respect to Dickens's similes, which compare the frequency of simile in both Dickens's works and his contemporaries and catalogue the variety of uses of simile in his works, I have influenced other researchers, who have asked to see the data again or have told me that it has helped them refine areas of their own research. This compilation of data has proven scholars' past commentary on Dickens's prolific use of simile as well as shown the great variety of linguistic structures that can create a similitic comparison. I coined the word *similitic* in this thesis to mean any explicit linguistic structure that creates a direct figurative comparison. The enormous variety of similitic formulations in Dickens's work points to how concordance searches could be improved when looking for examples of simile in any literary work. My initial findings can help form a database for such concordance searches. Of value for studies in Dickens, specifically, is my discovery that Dickens used similitic images in his novels that were first tried out in his letters.

After sharing some ideas with Michaela Mahlberg at a Dickens Day conference (2019), I was invited to contribute to the CLiC Dickens blog with a piece on Dickens's hyperbolic use of figurative language. This piece was named editor's choice of *Digital Humanities Now*. I was invited to present my research at the London Stylistics Circle (2023) as an interesting new stylistic study, and I have been able to present aspects of

my research at the Dickens Society Symposium (2021 and 2023) and at UCL's English Graduate Conference (2022). This specialised stylistic research on Dickens also has an appeal for a wider audience than academia. I have been invited four times, through connections outside of academia, to present my research to high school students, post-secondary students, and young professionals. The attendees of these talks have become aware of the extent to which similitude imagery contributes greatly to Dickens's humour and some have expressed their eagerness to read his books. At a time when the practice of reading is declining in general, it is very encouraging that I can inspire these young people to read – and especially to read Dickens. I am confident that the research I am presenting in this thesis will continue to help others discover, as I have, the power of similitude creativity.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### *i.* Dickensian Simile

In Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, when Mr Peggotty tries to tell David how Mrs Gummidge has helped the family after Emily's disappearance, he says: "Missis Gummidge has worked like a – I doen't know what Missis Gummidge ain't worked like," said Mr Peggotty, looking at her, at a loss for a sufficiently-approving simile' (Ch. 51). Dickens highlights here the ordinary human inclination to find similes – original or idiomatic – to illustrate an experience. Mr Peggotty's inarticulacy, perhaps stemming from an unwillingness to offend by saying the wrong thing, is in character with his honest and simple nature. Nevertheless, his floundering is also Dickens's nod towards the endless potential for figurative comparisons: there is nothing that Mrs Gummidge *ain't* worked like. Mr Peggotty might have used an idiomatic expression such as *worked like a dog* or any number of more inventive comparisons, but Dickens leaves the simile tantalizingly blank and thus supercharged with meaning. His highlighting of the word *simile* in this passage is in itself a clue to Dickens's awareness of the potential of the trope. Besides playfully exploring the common tendency to draw comparisons using simile, and often highlighting the oddity of idiomatic similes that are taken for granted, Dickens also uses simile to introduce fantastical realms of exaggeration and absurdity. In its extraordinary and often bizarre manipulation of what is so much a part of ordinary language, 'Dickensian simile' challenges the idea that a simile should be explanatory or clarifying. This thesis will seek to demonstrate that Dickens's prolific and distinctive use of simile is an essential aspect of his figurative style. Dickensian simile underlies much

of what critics consider unique about Dickens's descriptive prose, and Dickens's own awareness of his similitude inventiveness reveals what he himself considered singular in his observation of the world. The Introduction will explain the literary-linguistic framework which I will use to study Dickens's works. After demonstrating what is meant by 'Dickensian simile,' the subsequent sections will discuss the importance of simile in general, its place thus far in Dickens studies, and its use by Dickens's contemporaries. The Introduction ends with a brief outline of the chapters that follow.

To begin by discussing what I mean by 'Dickensian simile,' it is telling that Katie Wales's *A Dictionary of Stylistics* uses an excerpt from the opening paragraph of Dickens's *Bleak House* to illustrate the meaning of *simile*. After providing a typical definition of a simile – 'From Lat. *similis* "like", simile is a figure of speech whereby two concepts are imaginatively and descriptively compared: e.g. My love is like a red, red rose; as white as a sheet, etc.'<sup>1</sup> – Wales adds a qualifying note to label other forms as 'quasi-simile' (*as if, appearing, resembling, etc.*), and then quotes the following passage from *Bleak House*: 'As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, [...] wandering like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill' (Ch. 1). Using an *as if* qualifying clause already renders the initial *as x as y* structure more complex than first appears. The *as if* creates a fanciful image of a pre-historic landscape where 'it would not be wonderful' to meet a dinosaur; and another simile using *like* is embedded in this first image: 'like an elephantine lizard.' The adjective *elephantine* is also arguably a simile, meaning *elephant-like*. As discussed in Section *ii.* of the Introduction, this thesis seeks to expand the definition of simile to include what I call 'similitude' language, which denotes

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<sup>1</sup> 'Simile', ed. by Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 383–84.

any words and phrases that create similes by explicitly linking domains.<sup>2</sup> There are layers of similitude description in the passage from *Bleak House*, and crucially these draw on (literally) unfamiliar territory to describe what would have been, for Dickens and many of his readers, the familiar muddy state of Holborn Hill. Simile underlies in this example what Chesterton has called Dickens's power to express 'with an energy and brilliancy quite uncommon the things close to the common mind.'<sup>3</sup> That natural tendency to find an appropriate comparison is amplified or distorted in Dickens's fiction. Ironically, Dickens convinces the reader that 'it would not be wonderful' to see what he sees.

It is also frequently simile that underlies Dickens's wonderful use of animism (or animation) and humanisation – where an object is animated or humanised – and the opposite phenomena of reification (or objectification) and dehumanisation where a human or animal is described as if it were an inanimate object. In *Barnaby Rudge*, the Maypole Inn is described like an old man:

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. [...] 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. (Ch. 1)

The similes all work towards the humanisation of the inn. Moreover 'it needed no very great stretch of fancy' to see these 'resemblances to humanity.' As with the

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<sup>2</sup> The only other use of *similitude* that I have found has been used in a much broader sense in a 2018 study on mental images. Lang et al. use *similitude* to denote anything figurative, as when they say, 'Images could be conceptualised as "concrete" (the perceived reality) and/or "similitude" (figurative)': H. Lang and others, 'The Existence and Importance of Patients' Mental Images of Their Head and Neck Cancer: A Qualitative Study', *PLoS ONE*, 13.12 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0209215>> [accessed 10 May 2023].

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (New York: Dodd Mead & Company, 1907), p. 108.

Megalosaurus in *Bleak House*, ‘it would not be wonderful’ to see the Inn in this way. As an example of objectification, in *Dombey and Son*, the messenger in Mr Dombey’s office, appropriately named Perch, is always to be found perched in his special place ‘on a little bracket, like a timepiece.’ Like a timepiece he accurately predicts Mr Dombey’s arrival ‘for he had usually an instinctive sense of his approach’ and, like any piece of property, ‘he might have laid himself at Mr Dombey’s feet’ in his efforts to be as deferential as possible (Ch. 13). The simile *like a timepiece* makes Perch one more item confirming Mr Dombey’s sense of proprietorship. Other characters such as Mr Pancks from *Little Dorrit* demonstrate the objectification or mechanisation of human beings through simile. When Pancks is introduced, he ‘snorted and sniffed and puffed and blew, like a little labouring steam-engine’ (Bk 1, Ch. 13). Unlike Perch, the imagery is extended throughout the novel, and Pancks becomes permanently associated with the machinery of a steam-engine, becoming one every time he appears. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, will explore how the repetition of imagery in Dickens reinforces an essential, almost inevitable view of a character.

Taking a chronological approach to Dickens’s works, this thesis traces the development of Dickens’s use of simile throughout his career, which has been divided into four periods: 1833-39, 1840-45, 1846-1853, 1854-1870. Each period covers a particular developmental stage in Dickensian simile. For each of his works, the number of similes was counted, divided by the word count, and multiplied by 10,000 to show the frequency of simile per 10,000 words. As shown in the chart below, the use of simile is not limited to his earliest or ‘immature’ works but is consistently frequent throughout his career:

Dickens's novels	Word count	Frequency of similitude cues (per 10,000 words)
<i>Sketches by 'Boz'</i> (1836)	193 157	17.60
<i>The Pickwick Papers</i> (1836-7)	310 694	22.50
<i>Oliver Twist</i> (1837-9)	162 313	15.96
<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i> (1838-9)	330 974	23.36
<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i> (1840-1)	221 859	31.60
<i>Barnaby Rudge</i> (1841)	259 931	25.70
<i>American Notes</i> (1842)	104 749	46.21
<i>A Christmas Carol</i> (1843)	29 252	56.75
<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i> (1843-4)	345 529	31.78
<i>Pictures From Italy</i> (1848)	73 778	68.18
<i>Dombey and Son</i> (1846-8)	363 853	35.67
<i>David Copperfield</i> (1849-50)	363 813	14.84
<i>Bleak House</i> (1852-3)	362 303	18.19
<i>Hard Times</i> (1854)	105 878	34.76
<i>Little Dorrit</i> (1855-7)	345 231	29.92
<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> (1859)	138 389	35.99
<i>Great Expectations</i> (1860-1)	188 912	18.69
<i>Our Mutual Friend</i> (1864-5)	334 139	17.99
<i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i> (1870)	97 851	25.14

Figure 1: Frequency of similitude cues in Dickens's works

Nevertheless, I will show that this aspect of his style developed over time, moving from a spontaneous, hyperbolic, and generally self-conscious use of simile to more nuanced and narrative-driven strategies, especially in characterisation. Before entering a detailed study of the stages of Dickens's similitude style, the Introduction will contextualise the discussion around simile in Dickens. It will assess the value of simile as a figurative trope as a basis for the treatment of *Dickensian* simile. After explaining the methods used in the thesis, it will offer a survey of critical texts that address simile in Dickens. Dickens's use of simile will then be compared with that of his contemporaries to show his uniqueness in this regard.

ii. Simile as a trope ‘in its own right’

Simile might be considered one of the simplest figurative tropes to define or exemplify.

A typical dictionary entry defines simile as a figurative comparison using *like* or *as*, with an accompanying formulaic example. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines *simile* as:

A comparison of one thing with another, usually in regard to a particular attribute, esp. as a figure of speech. In later use often understood to refer specifically to expressions in which the comparison is made using the word *as* or *like*, such as (*as*) *brave as a lion*, *a face like a mask*, etc.<sup>4</sup>

While *A Dictionary of Stylistics* does adhere to this kind of typical definition of simile as a comparison with *like* or *as*, it was noted above how it includes other ‘quasi-simile’ forms that include *as if*, *appearing*, *resembling*, etc. It is one of the only dictionaries that acknowledges these other forms, which are difficult to place. This thesis considers all such quasi-similes as falling under the umbrella of similitic words or phrases: explicit linguistic cues that associate distinct fields of reference in a figurative manner.

This approach takes its cue from Michael Israel, Jennifer Riddle Harding, and Vera Tobin’s 2004 article ‘On Simile,’ which broadens simile to include such quasi-similes, arguing that it is misleading to define simile with *like* or *as*, as most dictionaries tend to do: ‘We claim that similes really are just explicit, figurative comparisons, and therefore any construction which can express a literal comparison should in principle be available to form a simile.’<sup>5</sup> The authors’ aim is to demonstrate that simile is a ‘figure in its own right,’<sup>6</sup> observing that in cognitive linguistics the influence of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is still felt. The *Rhetoric* defines simile as a kind of metaphor, the only

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Simile, n.’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2022) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2270657310>> [accessed 8 August 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Michael Israel, Jennifer Riddle Harding, and Vera Tobin, ‘On Simile’, in *Language, Culture, and Mind*, ed. by Michel Acher and Suzanne Kemmer (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2004), p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

difference being an explicit marker of comparison to connect different domains (fields of reference) (*x is like y*, vs. *x is y*).<sup>7</sup> In a 2008 study, for example, Dedre Gentner and Brian Bowdle propose that simile and metaphor are the same figurative statements in different grammatical forms, simile being the form of comparison and metaphor being the form of categorisation.<sup>8</sup> However, Israel, Harding, and Tobin's article and other more recent studies persuasively argue that simile is distinct from metaphor both in terms of grammatical structure and cognitive processing.<sup>9</sup> Interest in simile has not been lacking through the centuries, as demonstrated by collections and dictionaries of similes<sup>10</sup>; however, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), which explains how we unconsciously experience one thing in terms of another (TIME IS MONEY, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, etc.), led to the predominance of cognitive metaphor in linguistics studies for many years.<sup>11</sup>

The key difference between simile and metaphor as relevant to this thesis lies in the explicit link involved in a similitude construction which cues a conscious association of

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (New York: Modern Library, 1954), III, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Dedre Gentner and Brian Bowdle, 'Metaphor as Structure-Mapping', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, ed. by Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 109–28 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511816802.008>> [accessed 15 May 2023].

<sup>9</sup> These selected studies represent some recent areas of research on simile: Shibata Midori and others, 'Does Simile Comprehension Differ from Metaphor Comprehension? A Functional MRI Study', *Brain and Language*, 121.3 (2012), 254–60 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bandl.2012.03.006>> [accessed 1 December 2018]; Catrinel Haught, 'A Tale of Two Tropes: How Metaphor and Simile Differ', *Metaphor and Symbol*, 28.4 (2013), 254–74 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2013.826555>> [accessed 3 February 2020]; Felix S. Pambuccian and Gary E. Raney, 'A Simile Is (Like) a Metaphor: Comparing Metaphor and Simile Processing Across the Familiarity Spectrum', *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 75.2 (2021), 182–88 <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/simile-is-like-metaphor-comparing-processing/docview/2486208954/se-2>> [accessed 6 August 2022]; Henri Olkonien, Raymond Bertram, and Johanna K. Kaakinen, 'Knowledge Is a River and Education Is like a Stairway: An Eye Movement Study on How L2 Speakers Process Metaphors and Similes', *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 25.2 (2022), 307–20 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728921000869>> [accessed 6 August 2022].

<sup>10</sup> Elyse Sommer, *Similes Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Canton, Michigan: Visible Ink Press, 2013); Frank Wilstach, *A Dictionary of Similes* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1924); Wilstach (pp. xii-xiii) lists some collections of similes from 1595 (*Certaines very proper and most profitable similes, also manie very notable virtues*, by Anthonie Fletcher) to 1903 (a section on 'A New Treasury of Similes' in *Lean's Collectanea* by Vincent Stuckey Lean).

<sup>11</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).



one concept with another (x is *like* y) rather than an identification that cannot be avoided (x is y). As Rosanna Warren emphatically declared in a 2008 roundtable on ‘The motive for metaphor,’ metaphor is *not* the same as simile, since metaphor is about identity and simile is about analysis. She referred to Coleridge’s definition of simile as an ‘associative operation.’<sup>12</sup> The writer can never be fooled, as it were, into mapping one frame onto another: the mapping, or interconnection of two distinct fields through comparison, is linked explicitly by a linguistic marker (i.e. *like* or *as*), which prompts an awareness of the comparison. This awareness elicits a reflection on the appropriateness of the image. In other words, the associative operation draws attention to itself through that explicit marker which prepares the reader for the comparison. An appropriate or idiomatic comparison may pass practically unnoticed; a far-fetched, incongruent, or otherwise ‘inappropriate’ comparison needs more processing. An example of such an inappropriate comparison can be seen in *Oliver Twist*, when Oliver spends his first night at the undertaker’s. The little boy is terrified by the ‘gloomy and deathlike’ coffin he sees, fittingly enough; but then the following passage makes a comparison that is out of keeping with a mood of terror: ‘Against the wall, were ranged, in regular array, a long row of elm boards cut into the same shape, and looking in the dim light, like high-shouldered ghosts with their hands in their breeches-pockets’ (Ch. 5). The coffin-lids are imagined not only as ghosts but as ghosts adopting a specific and comical attitude. Dickens is playing with the shape of the coffin here, but the same shape is rendered as only ‘gloomy and deathlike’ in the sentence before. The one simile (*deathlike*) may go unnoticed, but the second comparison with high-shouldered ghosts challenges the appropriateness of the image.

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Fry and others, ‘Motive for Metaphor’ (The Philoctetes Center for the Multidisciplinary Study of the Imagination, 2008) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1WhOICr1bE>> [accessed 25 May 2020].

Simile can also link target and source domains<sup>13</sup> in different structural ways, which require a different way of processing the mapping. In their book on *Figurative Language* (2014), Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser build on the concept of ‘narrow scope’ and ‘broad scope’ similes proposed by Carol Moder.<sup>14</sup> A narrow scope simile is mainly attributive and compares a specific aspect of the target with the source: in *Sketches by ‘Boz,’* in ‘Brokers’ and Marine-store Shops,’ there is a shop that contains ‘two or three very dark mahogany tables with flaps like mathematical problems.’ While this simile might not be wholly intelligible (again, the reader questions the appropriateness of the image), grammatically the comparison is self-contained. A broad scope simile on the other hand explains the initial comparison with an added clause. This is a typical structure for jokes. Mr Weller (senior) uses this in *The Pickwick Papers* when he tells Sam, ‘coaches, Sammy, is like guns – they requires to be loaded with wery great care, afore they go off.’ And Sam ‘smiled a filial smile’ at this ‘parental and professional joke’ (Ch. 23) – a joke which is one of many puns in Dickens. Dancygier and Sweetser use these concepts of narrow scope and broad scope to suggest that similes (especially using *like*) are attuned to a certain asymmetry in analogical mappings ‘where the more dependent target domain is being construed as the relatively more autonomous source and not vice versa.’<sup>15</sup> In other words, the target reality directs the comparison rather than the source. In *Dombey and Son* when Mr Dombey is ‘laying himself on a

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<sup>13</sup> The *target* of a comparison is what is commonly known as the *tenor* in literary analysis and the *source* is what is commonly known as the *vehicle* (see [Figure 4](#)).

<sup>14</sup> Carol Lynn Moder, ‘It’s like Making a Soup: Metaphors and Similes in Spoken News Discourse’, in *Language in the Context of Use: Discourse and Cognitive Approaches to Language*, ed. by Andrea Tyler, Yiyoun Kim, and Mari Takada (De Gruyter Inc., 2008), pp. 301–20 <<https://www.proquest.com/legacydocview/EBC/364698/bookReader?accountid=14511&ppg=307>> [accessed 6 August 2022]; Carol Lynn Moder, ‘Two Puzzle Pieces: Fitting Discourse Context and Constructions into Cognitive Metaphor Theory’, *English Text Construction*, 3.2 (2010), 294–320 <<https://doi.org/10.1075/etc.3.2.09mod>> [accessed 10 November 2017].

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, *Figurative Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 142.

sofa like a man of wood without a hinge or a joint in him' (Ch. 26), it is an aspect of the target reality, i.e. Mr Dombey's stiffness, that prompts using the source of a 'man of wood.' Israel, Harding, and Tobin explain that the basic distinction between simile and metaphor is that metaphor *creates* the similarity by imposing a conceptual framework from the source onto the target,<sup>16</sup> while explicit comparison (literal and figurative) *assess* what the source and target already have in common. Dancygier and Sweetser go further to suggest that, in some instances of simile, the target domain imposes on the source domain. Dickens's 'high-shouldered ghosts' in *Oliver Twist*, for example, reflect more the shape of the target coffin-lids than the source of 'ghosts.' A simile thus has the potential to cross-map and blend several source domains depending on the salient aspects of the target domain.

Dickens's versatile use of similitic language anticipates the value of simile as demonstrated in Israel, Harding, and Tobin's article 'On Simile' and in Dancygier and Sweetser's book *Figurative Language*. What some critics have complained of in Dickens – his 'extravagance of similes'<sup>17</sup> – is in fact a confirmation of this recent analysis of simile's versatility. His most unusual comparisons anticipate Israel, Harding, and Tobin's affirmation that simile compares 'things normally felt to be incomparable, typically using vivid or startling images to suggest unexpected connections between source and target.'<sup>18</sup> Even when Dickens uses a simile which is commonplace or idiomatic, and therefore not unexpected, he will turn it on its head. A notorious example

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<sup>16</sup> Israel, Harding, and Tobin, p. 124. In the typical metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY for example, concepts belonging to the source domain of 'journey' are imposed on our understanding of the target domain of 'life' and so create the analogy. We might find ourselves 'running on fumes' when trying to reach some life goal; but this is being created by the underlying conceptual metaphor rather than by any similarity between life and a journey as distinct domains.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Rosenberg, 'Vision into Language: The Style of Dickens's Characterisation', *Dickens Quarterly*, 2.4 (1985), 115–24 (p. 116).

<sup>18</sup> Israel, Harding, and Tobin, p. 124.

of this is in the opening passages of *A Christmas Carol*, [discussed further in Chapter Three](#), where the narrator questions the idiomatic ‘dead as a door-nail’ to describe Jacob Marley: ‘I don’t mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade’ (Stave 1). Dickens’s playful analysis of the simile highlights it, in fact, as if to celebrate the delightful and completely accepted absurdity of the commonplace idiom. He thereby shows that it is also in the nature of similitic language to make comparisons that are not always explanatory or even intelligible. The simple simile, in other words, can produce unexpectedly complex linguistic effects – something that Dickens masterfully manipulates in his writing.

### *iii.* A Study in Stylistics

As a single-author study, this thesis may not seem open to wider application in terms of language and style; however, the combined approach of literary and corpus-based stylistic analysis does open this study to a broader understanding of simile and its stylistic implications. It could be situated within the growing field of corpus stylistics, which Michaela Mahlberg defines as a field that ‘investigates the relationship between meaning and form’ through ‘the application of corpus methodology to the study of literary texts.’<sup>19</sup> The thesis has a primarily literary focus and thus belongs in the broader category of ‘literary stylistics,’ which discusses the relation between the style of a

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<sup>19</sup> Michaela Mahlberg, ‘Clusters, Key Clusters and Local Textual Functions in Dickens’, *Corpora*, 2.1 (2007), 1–31 (p. 4) <<https://doi.org/10.3366/cor.2007.2.1.1>>.

literary work and its function – aesthetic or literary. This thesis uses linguistic tools but relies heavily on close readings of Dickens’s novels and letters and on contemporary reviews and works of literary criticism. It evaluates the development of Dickens’s similitic style from *Sketches by Boz* to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, demonstrating how simile is both a trademark of Dickens’s self-conscious authorship and a tool for his different narrative strategies. Dickens’s awareness of his own similitic tendency is shown in a chapter dedicated to his letters. In essence, this thesis reveals a hermeneutic key to Dickens’s narrative style through his use of simile.

Mahlberg’s co-designed CLiC web application<sup>20</sup> has been useful for collecting data and identifying recurring stylistic elements in the Dickens corpus with rapid keyword searches. I have also used the AntConc concordance tool, especially with texts not included in the CLiC website.<sup>21</sup> With AntConc, I was able to run searches and calculate frequencies of similes by inputting *.txt* files of the works of Dickens and his contemporaries from *Project Gutenberg*.<sup>22</sup> The following charts (Figures 2 and 3) represent the varied use Dickens made of such similitic phrases or ‘cues.’ The examples are compiled from four novels chosen from the four stages of Dickens’s career (as defined above): *Sketches by Boz* (1836), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), *Bleak House* (1852-3), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5). The overall frequency of similitic cues in each of these works can be found in the [chart above](#). The tables below are not designed to show the frequency of each kind of simile but simply to list the variety of similitic structures. Many of the cues are used once or very few times as a kind of permutation of

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<sup>20</sup> Michaela Mahlberg and others, ‘CLiC 2.1 Corpus Linguistics in Context’ <<https://clic.bham.ac.uk>> [accessed 20 January 2018].

<sup>21</sup> Laurence Anthony, ‘AntConc’ (Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University, 2018) <<http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software>>.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Project Gutenberg’, n.d. <<https://www.gutenberg.org>> [accessed 1 December 2017]. The *.txt* files have been cleaned by removing any text pertaining to Project Gutenberg copyright and editorial information.

basic similitude patterns, and the relative frequency of a particular similitude structure is thus negligent. The basic and most frequent patterns have been categorised as *\*like\**, *as*, and *as if/as though* (Figure 2).<sup>23</sup> I used the AntConc and CLiC concordance tools to search these umbrella terms and noted down the variations. All other cues have been listed under the category of *other*, from which only a selection has been provided (Figure 3). I have further qualified the broader categories in terms of a) direct comparisons of equal terms (*comparative*), b) comparisons where one term is maximised as the greatest instance of x (*superlative*), and c) comparisons that indicate that something is almost or not quite like something else (*approximating*).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The category *\*like\**, with asterisks, represents how the term needs to be entered into the concordance software to return results that have *like* embedded, such as *unlike* or *likeness*.

<sup>24</sup> I borrow the term *superlative* from Israel, Harding, and Tobin's concept of the 'Superlative Source Constraint' (SSC) which will be [discussed in Chapter Three](#). The SSC happens when the source of the simile becomes the maximum instance of the target reality – as in the phrase 'her argument was *as clear as glass*,' where glass is the clearest thing to which the argument can be compared.

CATEGORY	comparative	superlative	approximating
<b>*like*</b>			
	like	(quite) as much (like) x as y	look*/seem* like
	x-like	very like	something/somewhat like
	like so many x	as much unlike x as possible	not (at all) unlike
	likeness	exactly like x	rather like
	unlike	in colour and pattern unlike any one ever saw before, with the exception of	felt like
	like a larger species of x	(no) more like x than y	if x could be y like another z
	likewise	so like x that y	supposed to have been originally intended for a x ... which conjecture has likened to a y
	like enough to x	never more unlike x	something in the likeness of x
		like nothing in the world but x	a certain likeness to x
		look* equally/very like	might have been likened to x
			so likened
			observed to bear a likeness to x
<b>as</b>			
	as x as y	(quite) as much (like) x as y	as might be x
	as x	nothing so x as y	look* as x as y
	as x ... so y	as much unlike x as possible	of nearly the same colour as x
	in much the same manner as	such x as would y	may be regarded as x
	not so much x as y	so x as to be y	as much to say
	just as much as x	as never was seen before	
	served as x	as many x	
	much as x	very much as x	
	as compared with x		
<b>as if/as though</b>			
	much as if/as though	as (much) x as if/as though	as if
		look* exactly as if	as though
		very much as if/as though	look*/seem* as if/as though
		as if he were x indeed	rather as if
			rather seemed as if

Figure 2: Chart of figurative cues in Dickens: \*like\*, as, as if/as though

other	comparative	superlative	approximating
	(analogy)	(no) more x than y	seem*
	(comparison)	so x that y	kind of/sort of
	(with) the x of y	not x but seemed to y	air of x/x air
	(apposition)	x was nothing to y	[ADJ] x-ic/x-al/x-ish/x-ness/x-en/x-ous/x-y/x-ine
	of that x ... which	x only to be equalled by that of y	attitude/manner of x
	parallel	with a x that would y	appear*
	represent* x	there's no simile for x	as it were
	analogous to that of x	quite a (little) x	resembl*
	just the colour of x	a perfect x	x-looking
	much the same amount of x	nothing more than x	might have x
	after the fashion of x	assumed all the x of y	if x ... then y
	x-headed	there was nothing in x but was in keeping with y	look*
	facsimile	nothing that looked older or more worn than x	(somewhat) in the nature of x
	in the form of x	did not x half the y	species of / of the x species
	in x style	forcibly reminds one of x	appearance of x
	much in the style of x	if x had y it would have been much less inexplicable than it was	something between x and y
	touch of x	wholly indescribable	about the size and shape of x
	had the effect of x	it would be impossible to say	(almost) fancy
	wonderfully suited to x	marvellous resemblance	x look/look of x
	wanted but x to be y	which no one can imagine who has not witnessed it, and of which any description would convey a very faint idea	might have fancied
	one of those x who almost invariably, though one hardly knows why, recall to one's mind y	to describe x ... would require some new language; such, for power of expression, as was never written, read, or spoken	x suggestive of y
	remind of x	it was impossible to look at his face without being reminded of x	might as well have x
	recalling x	that sort of x which is much easier to be imagined than described	one might infer, from x's appearance
	upon the same humane principle	let any man have the boldness to assert, if he can, that he ever beheld any object on the face of the earth which at all resembles it, unless, indeed, it were x	apparently with x
	x the size of y	for which the English language has yet no name	one might have thought
	x matching y	most x imaginable	resembling in shape and dimensions
	combining the qualities of x and y	never saw x so y	in which a lively imagination might trace a remote resemblance
	neither more nor less than	no more x than if	generally resembling x
	of x build	easier to fancy x than y	general dim resemblance to x
	built on the model of x	one of the most x that can possibly be imagined	communicated the appearance of x
	show of x	to be met with in no other place in existence, not even excepting x	fancied
	x was but a type of y	very much the appearance of	fancied we saw
	imitation of x	what x can compare with y	fancy might have made it
	image for x	which would have beaten x hollow	might have been a delusion of my heightened fancy

Figure 3: Chart of figurative cues in Dickens: other



The *other* category signals some of the drawn-out expressions that Dickens uses when making comparisons. It contains the most variety of examples, the majority of these being used only once or twice, although there are patterns of usage as in the phrases *air of x*, *manner of x*. In general, the compilation of all the cues shows the varied structure of comparative language used in Dickens's works.

While this thesis connects the fields of literature and linguistics by using methodologies proper to each field, there are certain inherent limitations in this combined approach. The constraints of space leave much room for exploration in both fields. For example, in Section *iv*. the Introduction compares Dickens's use of simile with that of some of his contemporaries, but it cannot offer a close reading of all of the contemporary texts. Moreover, I have based the comparison of Dickens with his contemporaries on the common similitic cues *\*like\**, *as*, and *as if/as though* rather than on the cues in the *other* category. This has limited the scope of the analysis, even if it does demonstrate Dickens's unique style in comparison to his contemporaries. Neither a thoroughly close reading of these texts nor an exhaustive search for all the similitic permutations is possible. Then, the concordance tools themselves are limited in what the searches reveal. They are useful in terms of finding linguistic patterns when there is a specific word or phrase to search for (i.e. *as if* or *seem\**); but only through a manual perusal of the Dickens corpus have I been able to capture non-recurring examples in the charts above. Furthermore, the numbers returned by the searches do not necessarily reflect figurative examples of comparison, since the linguistic markers may be the same for both figurative and non-figurative examples. An example *Our Mutual Friend* shows how *as if* can be used non-figuratively:

It could not be said that [Bella] was less playful, whimsical, or natural, than she always had been; but it seemed, her husband thought, as if there were some rather graver reason than he had supposed for what she had so

lately said, and as if throughout all this, there were glimpses of an underlying seriousness. (Bk 4, Ch. 5)

The *as if* belongs to John Rokesmith's observation of Bella's demeanour and is not an attempt to imagine a fantastic alternate reality. Mahlberg points to non-figurative examples in her analysis of the *as if* cluster in the Dickens corpus.<sup>25</sup> Refining the searches to allow for non-recurring similitude structures or for distinctions between figurative and non-figurative examples could lead to an entire study on how to detect varying permutations of surface-level similitude features in Dickens; but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. My hope is that researchers in both linguistic and literary fields can use this study as a springboard for further investigation.

To be consistent in the use of terminology I have opted to use some terms that are used in stylistic rather than in literary criticism. The terms I have used most frequently are listed in the chart below and have been mostly defined and exemplified in Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short's *Style in Fiction*<sup>26</sup>:

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<sup>25</sup>Mahlberg, p. 20; a 'cluster' is a repeated sequence of two or more words.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

Conceptual domain	A mental representation of a segment of human experience (i.e. everything belonging to or related to the idea of ‘love’)
Frame <sup>27</sup>	Another way of understanding a <i>conceptual domain</i> ; a <i>frame</i> may be established by the literary context and thus used with greater flexibility
Implied author <sup>28</sup>	A reference to the actual author within a text. However, the views of this <i>implied author</i> cannot necessarily be ascribed to the actual author. The role of the <i>implied author</i> is often that of narrator when the narrator is not obviously a character in the story.
Mapping	How concepts from one <i>conceptual domain</i> are connected to another through figurative comparison (directly via simile or indirectly via metaphor)
Mind-style <sup>29</sup>	A particular cognitive viewpoint created by the choice of language.
Target and Source	Equivalent to <i>Tenor</i> and <i>Vehicle</i> in traditional literary analysis: the target concept or domain is that which is being figuratively described with reference to another concept or domain, which is called the source concept or domain.

Figure 4: Chart of stylistic terms

In terms of primary and secondary sources, I have used the texts of Dickens’s novels that are the closest to the original publications to see his writing in correct chronological context. The majority of these are the Oxford critical editions of Dickens. Because of its complicated publishing history, I have used the Clarendon edition of *Oliver Twist*, which notes the variations between the text serialised in *Bentley’s Miscellany* and the different editions of 1838 and later years. I have used the Nonesuch Edition of the Christmas books for their re-printing of the original Chapman and Hall publications. For Dickens’s early journalism and *Sketches by ‘Boz’* I have relied on the Dent volumes edited by Michael Slater, on the *British Newspaper Archive* (British Library), and on digitised versions of the original sketches (UCL digital resources). I

<sup>27</sup> Dancygier and Sweetser refer to frames more than domains when discussing the theory of ‘blending’ (how imagery maps concepts differently according to which frames are being sourced).

<sup>28</sup> Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Wayne Booth defines the ‘implied author’ as separate from the ‘real author.’

<sup>29</sup> A term coined by Roger Fowler, in *Linguistics and the Novel* (London and New York: Methuen & Co., 1977). This will be explored in detail in Chapter Five.

have also examined the working notes for Dickens's novels.<sup>30</sup> My study of his letters relies on the 12 volume edition edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey.<sup>31</sup> I have drawn on contemporary responses to Dickens's work by searching ProQuest databases of periodicals (19<sup>th</sup> century, British and American). In many cases, Philip Collins's collection of extracts from contemporary responses in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* has been a starting point for further research.<sup>32</sup> Secondary sources mainly include literary scholarship on Dickens, especially with regards to his use of figurative language, and linguistic studies on figurative language.

#### iv. Giving Simile its Due in Dickens Criticism

While figurative language in Dickens has often been discussed, the role of simile in his work has not been given sufficient attention or has been treated dismissively. One telling example of how critics have viewed Dickens's similes is David Lodge's commentary on the opening description in *Hard Times* of Mr Gradgrind, whose head is 'all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside' (Ch. 1). Lodge says, 'If there is a flaw in this chapter it is the simile of the plum pie, which has pleasant, genial associations alien to the character of

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<sup>30</sup> *Dickens' Working Notes for His Novels*, ed. by Harry Stone (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> *The British Academy/The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey, 12 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Oxford Scholarship Online <<https://www-oxfordscholarlyeditions-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/display/10.1093/actrade/9780198114475.book.1/actrade-9780198114475-book-1>> [accessed 3 December 2019].

<sup>32</sup> *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1971). I have sometimes used unquoted material from the original sources of the extracts contained in *The Critical Heritage*. If the material can be found in Collins's extracts, I acknowledge *The Critical Heritage* as a source.

Gradgrind, to whose head it is, quite superfluously, applied.’<sup>33</sup> Lodge is not curious about the reason for the superfluity, or the deliberate incongruity of the comical image. In effect, a close analysis of simile in Dickens has been lacking since the earliest responses to his work. Dickens’s nineteenth-century contemporaries commented on Dickens’s use of figurative comparison without offering any useful analysis. Words of censure and words of praise alike are offered as unsubstantiated opinion. In *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), R. H. Horne lists some of Dickens’s ‘Happy Words and Graphic Phrases’ – among which are the coffin-lids ‘like high-shouldered ghosts with their hands in their breeches pockets’ in *Oliver Twist* (Ch. 5).<sup>34</sup> The examples are listed rather than analysed. Although there is a brief commentary on the humanisation of Arthur Gride’s furniture in *Nicholas Nickleby* – a figurative description that reflects Gride’s own miserliness – there is no mention that it is principally simile that is achieving this effect.<sup>35</sup> Several similes in the same passage from *Nicholas Nickleby* work to compare the furniture to Gride’s own decrepit wretchedness, as when ‘A tall grim clock [...] when it struck the time, in thin and piping sounds, *like* an old man’s voice, rattled, *as if* it were pinched with hunger’ (Ch. 51; emphasis added). J. A. Lovat Fraser’s short 1906 essay ‘Dickens and His Comparisons’ is the earliest work dedicated specifically to Dickens’s figurative comparison. Fraser does not greatly differentiate metaphor and simile in his commentary, but most of the examples are similes. The examples are compiled rather than analysed, and his claim that Dickens’s later works do not contain many such comparisons is erroneous, as the charts above demonstrate, showing the unabated frequency of simile cues in the novels throughout his career. Nonetheless, the

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<sup>33</sup> David Lodge, ‘The Rhetoric of Hard Times’, in *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 144–63 (p. 151).

<sup>34</sup> R. H. Horne, *A New Spirit of the Age* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1844; repr. Westmead: Gregg International Publishers Ltd., 1971), 1., pp. 54–5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

question he asks – ‘Who but Dickens could have invented such unexpected comparisons?’<sup>36</sup> – is all-important, for it emphasises the singularity of Dickens in this regard. Dickens’s similes stand out from those of his contemporaries for being ‘unexpected,’ at the very least.

Dorothy Van Ghent’s 1950 essay on ‘The Dickens World,’ the first to critically analyse Dickens’s animism, briefly links animism with his use of simile.<sup>37</sup> She explores the near ‘demonic possession’ of things and the effect of ‘forbidden life’ or ‘aggressiveness that has got out of control’ in Dickens’s animism, and how this often has the disconcerting reciprocal effect of living things being emptied of life.<sup>38</sup> Analysing a passage from *Martin Chuzzlewit* describing the rooftop of Todgers’s boarding-house, Van Ghent mentions that the disconcerting humanisation of the chimney pots – that ‘seemed to be turning gravely to each other now and then’ among other things (Ch. 9) – stems from the ‘conservative’ *seemed to be* and *as if*, but she does not analyse this aspect further.<sup>39</sup> These similitic phrases might be called conservative in that they are approximating rather than definitive. They invite rather than force the reader to map a certain image: the mapping is meant to be assessed rather than taken for granted, as discussed above in terms of the nature of similitic comparison. Nevertheless, Dickens

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<sup>36</sup> J. A. Lovat Fraser, ‘Dickens and His Comparisons’, *The Dickensian*, 2.7 (1906), 185–86 (p. 186) <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/scholarly-journals/dickens-his-comparisons/docview/1298944016/se-2?accountid=14511>> [accessed 1 December 2020].

<sup>37</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent, ‘The Dickens World: A View from Todgers’s’, *The Sewanee Review*, 58.3 (1950), 419–38 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27538007>>. Following Van Ghent, Harald William Fawcner’s thesis, ‘Animation and Reification in Dickens’s Vision of the Life-Denying Society’ (University of Uppsala, 1977) is the first full-length study on animism and reification in Dickens. The following selected studies also include a discussion of Dickens’s animism: Jerome Thale, ‘The Imagination of Charles Dickens: Some Preliminary Discriminations’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 22.2 (1967), 127–43 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2932740>>; George Leslie Brook, *The Language of Dickens* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1970); Stefanie Meier, *Animation and Mechanisation in the Novels of Charles Dickens*, Swiss Studies in English, 111 (Bern: Franke Verlag, 1982); Daniel Tyler, ‘Dickens’s Language’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Robert L. Patten, John O. Jordan, and Catherine Waters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 631–46.

<sup>38</sup> Van Ghent, p. 419.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425. The same passage from *Martin Chuzzlewit* is discussed in [Section v](#).

takes the conservative nature of simile and turns it on its head by using it to trigger vivid, and what Van Ghent has even called terrifying, illusions. Similic structure is conservative in one sense; but Dickens uses it to make comparisons that challenge the idea of how appropriate or natural a simile ought to be.

J. Hillis Miller's 1958 work *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* has been influential in the discussion of Dickens's metaphorical language, and it briefly discusses similic language as well. He argues in poststructuralist fashion that the typically Dickensian phrases of *seemed to say*, or *as though he would have said* take away the meaning from what the characters are saying: 'There is no possible comparison of outer appearance and inner reality by which the detached spectator or the isolated characters can establish the validity of an interpretation.'<sup>40</sup> Similarly, 'the omnipresence' of *as if* in Dickens while giving rise to 'the most brilliant metaphorical transformations' is associated with the philosophical notion of Dickens's disintegration of self.<sup>41</sup> For Hillis Miller, nothing holds substantially together in Dickens. Hillis Miller takes a distancing philosophical approach rather than analysing the language itself. He does not address the associative nature of the approximating phrases of *seemed to say*, *as if*, etc. and how they connect different frames of reference and thus expand rather than disintegrate possible interpretations. The *as if* phrase in the following passage from *Our Mutual Friend* is an example of how a comparison can add substance to an interpretation of a character and scene:

[The Night-Inspector,] with a pen and ink, and ruler, [is] posting up his books in a whitewashed office, as studiously as if he were in a monastery on top of a mountain, and no howling fury of a drunken woman were banging herself against a cell-door in the back-yard at his elbow. (Bk 1, Ch. 3)

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<sup>40</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 107.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152

The Inspector is clearly not a monk, and so the *as x as if* phrase might seem to dissociate the reader from the real surroundings; however, the fanciful, incongruous comparison is also clearly meant to indicate the absolute calm and serenity of the Inspector in the midst of chaos and horror.

Other scholars echo Hillis Miller's idea that nothing holds together substantially in Dickens's prose.<sup>42</sup> Although Brian Rosenberg's 1985 essay on 'The Style of Dickens's Characterisation' critiques Hillis Miller's analysis of the Dickensian *as if*, it essentially agrees with a fragmentary reading of Dickens. By using different similes one after another, for example, Dickens makes a scene or a character split into several different images which may seem difficult to reconcile in the reader's imagination. The description of Maggy's dress in *Little Dorrit*, for example 'had a strong general resemblance to seaweed, with here and there a gigantic tea leaf. Her shawl looked particularly like a tea-leaf after long infusion' (Bk 1, Ch. 9). Rosenberg calls this an 'extravagance of similes [...] none of which is easily captured in a visual image.'<sup>43</sup> However, each individual simile is in fact easily captured in a visual image: of seaweed, tea leaves, and the sodden aspect of that graphic comparison to a 'tea-leaf after long infusion.' Rosenberg wishes for a unified visual image perhaps, but he does not realise that the target reality is what is being emphasised. The appearance of the wet rags that make up Maggy's clothes is what inspires these comparisons. Rosenberg concludes that Dickens seeks to describe what is ultimately indescribable, which is why he must resort

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<sup>42</sup> John Glavin writes, for example: 'At the end of a long passage of Dickensian description, you only think you know what you've seen. Go back and try to draw it; you find the street, the building, the room spontaneously combusts. Its lines won't come together or hang true. Instead, language delightedly, delightfully, dissolves identity, solidity, value in just about every thing and person and place the ambient culture expects to value, name, and prize. In Dickens, then, what you see is what you, inevitably, don't get, can't get because it's just some version of mirage.' John Glavin, *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Rosenberg, p. 116.



to simile and metaphor and thus undermine his own capacity to capture reality by dispersing it in the most various of images: ‘the language is at once exceptionally specific and profoundly uncertain about its own ability to capture what is most meaningful.’<sup>44</sup> I argue that the ‘exceptionally specific’ nature of the simile does show Dickens’s capacity of transmitting what is most meaningful about a certain truth, a certain sensation. This thesis seeks to demonstrate that simile has a specific purpose in Dickens and is not a sign of some malaise in realistic description.

In his 1970 study *The Language of Dickens*, George Leslie Brook takes a language-focused approach which is useful for this thesis, praising Dickens’s ‘frequent and effective use of similes.’ He gives simile fair treatment, separately from metaphor, although it seems that, for Brook, simile ultimately serves a metaphorical effect. Brook gives examples of how simile can be elaborately sustained until it becomes what could be seen as an extended metaphor, becoming ‘condensed into a metaphor or succession of metaphors.’<sup>45</sup> One example of this, noted by J. Hillis Miller as well, is in *Our Mutual Friend* when one of the retainers at the Veneerings’ dinner party is described as offering drinks to the guests ‘like a gloomy Analytical Chemist’ (Bk 1, Ch. 2); he is then identified thereafter as the ‘Analytical Chemist’ or just the ‘Analytical.’ This thesis will consider how this is not metaphorical language, as the extended use of the initial simile relies on the first comparison to make sense. Brook is also the first to consider Dickens’s ‘favourite comparison’ of *as if* as a specifically linguistic trick, saying that it is mainly used for ‘some improbable but amusing’ description.<sup>46</sup> Brook’s linguistic description of Dickens’s preference for direct comparison is helpful but limited, for simile is one more

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> Brook, p. 32.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

item in a broad survey of several aspects of Dickens's language. Moreover, he lists examples of what 'Dickensian' simile can do, but he does not affirm Dickens's preference for simile or offer a reason for this preference. Similarly, in *The Violent Effigy* (1973), John Carey emphasises that Dickens frequently uses similes to animate objects and 'objectify' animate beings – 'People transfigured by Dickensian similes into furniture or other impedimenta inhabit the novels almost as thickly as animated furniture'<sup>47</sup> – but he does not offer a concrete analysis of the similitic language.

In the past two decades, Dickens's similitic language has been given greater attention. Saoko Tomita's paper on 'Rhetorical Expressions by Simile in *David Copperfield*' presented at the 2008 PALA conference offers a linguistic analysis of the different constructions of the *like* and *as* simile in *David Copperfield*<sup>48</sup> and usefully connects simile with Dickens's habit of humanising non-persons or dehumanising persons, as exemplified above with the Maypole Inn in *Barnaby Rudge*. However, Tomita's analysis is limited to one novel; it is heavily technical, with little literary interpretation of different constructions; and it limits similitic language to *like* or *as* without considering the expanded range of similes discussed above. Simile is largely neglected in Daniel Tyler's 2013 collection on *Dickens's Style*,<sup>49</sup> although Philip Horne comments in passing on the *as if* phrase in his essay on 'Style and the Making of Character in Dickens.' He provides a definition of *as if* as a simile that qualifies an action as *like* would qualify a noun.<sup>50</sup> The word *like* can also act adverbially, as in *Little Dorrit* where Frederick Dorrit's 'trousers were so long and loose, and his shoes so

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<sup>47</sup> John Carey, *The Violent Effigy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 102.

<sup>48</sup> Saoko Tomita, 'Rhetorical Expressions by Simile in *David Copperfield*' (presented at the International Conference of the Poetics and Linguistics Association, University of Sheffield, 2008), pp. 1–15 <<http://www.pala.ac.uk/uploads/2/5/1/0/25105678/tomita2008.pdf>> [accessed 1 March 2022].

<sup>49</sup> *Dickens's Style*, ed. by Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Philip Horne, 'Style and the Making of Character in Dickens', in *Dickens's Style*, ed. by Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 155–75 (p. 160).

clumsy and large, that he shuffled like an elephant' (Bk 1, Ch. 8); nevertheless, Horne usefully highlights the adverbial and thus versatile nature of the *as if* phrase, since it can qualify not only verbs, but adjectives and other adverbs (and of course verbal, adjectival, and adverbial clauses). John Mullan underlines Dickens's preferential use of *as if* in his book *The Artful Dickens*. He argues that the 'Dickensian *as if* is the phrase, more than any other, that unlocks the novelist's fantastic vision of the sheer strangeness of reality.'<sup>51</sup>

Mahlberg's article on clusters in Dickens lends quantitative data to this claim and to Brook's earlier analysis of *as if* to show the frequency of the phrase in the Dickens corpus. Mullan and Mahlberg give many examples of how Dickens uses *as if* to indulge in extraordinary flights of fancy. However, the focus is on *as if* and not on other kinds of similitic language in Dickens. Mahlberg notes that while the recurring pattern of *as if* becomes the focus through a key-word search, the same kind of comparison may take other forms.<sup>52</sup> The example she uses is from *Our Mutual Friend* when Mrs Wilfer informs her husband that Bella has been married, speaking 'with a lofty air of never having had the least co-partnership in that young lady: of whom she now made reproachful mention as an article of luxury which her husband had set up entirely on his own account and in direct opposition to her advice' (Bk 4, Ch. 5). This is a Dickensian flight of fancy comparable with many of his *as if* phrases, the difference lying only in the similitic language used. In the spirit of the alternate realities posited by the Dickensian *as if*, Mrs Wilfer is imagined, perhaps self-imagined, as an austere and overbearing business partner rather than spouse, who disapproves of Bella's marriage as a

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<sup>51</sup> John Mullan, *The Artful Dickens: The Tricks and Ploys of the Great Novelist* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2020), p. 17. Mullan also comments on Dickens's use of *as if* in 'Dickens's Tricks', *Essays in Criticism*, 68.2 (2018), 145–66 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/escrit/cgy007>> [accessed 3 May 2019].

<sup>52</sup> Mahlberg, p. 20.

clandestine and, above all, imprudent business deal with a ‘luxury item.’ Since the cherubic Mr Wilfer is practically incapable of deceit and even now has trouble pretending not to know where Bella is, this fanciful language is a projection of Mrs Wilfer’s self-justifying worldview alone. It is an example of how Dickens uses a variety of similitude structures for his unusual comparisons. The *as if* construction, while one of the most frequent, is not the only key to Dickens’s ‘fantastic vision’ of life. Dickens’s prolific use of simile has received some attention in the critical discussion of his figurative language. However, the analysis usually shifts to metaphorical language or the use of *as if* as a specific phrase that is not quite considered a simile. I argue that *as if* does belong to similitude language in general, and that similitude language in Dickens needs to be examined as a catalyst for his figurative style. Simile is a Dickensian signature.

#### v. An Age of Analogy: Dickens and his Contemporaries

Simile is a Dickensian signature, but he is not alone among Victorian writers who use similitude expressions with frequency. Jonathan Farina’s essay on “‘Dickens’s As If’: Analogy and Victorian Virtual Reality’ (2011) demonstrates that *as if* clauses were a normal construction for Victorian authors in an age where analogical language was embedded in the language of science. Farina argues that Dickens’s use of *as if* was not so different from his contemporaries in that there was a general ‘epistemology’ of *as if* in Victorian times.<sup>53</sup> Farina calls the use of *as if* an ‘investment in the subjunctive

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<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Farina, “‘Dickens’s As If’: Analogy and Victorian Virtual Reality’, *Victorian Studies*, 53.3 (2011), 427–36 (p. 432) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/victorianstudies.53.3.427>> [accessed 3 May 2019].

mood,' describing *as if* as a 'conditional simile.'<sup>54</sup> He explains that this conditional simile was often the mode of expression in scientific analogy to express a new reality while resisting the idea that one can know that reality completely. Farina references Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) as an example, where Lyell 'reiterates anxiously that the proper objects of geological knowledge are not visible. Analogy attenuates this awkwardness and mediates Lyell's access to the unseen.'<sup>55</sup> In a similar way, Farina argues, Victorian fiction-writers use the *as if* to describe the inaccessible depths of a person's feelings or experience. He gives an example from *Bleak House*, when Esther reads Mr Jarndyce's proposal: she cries 'as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost' (Ch. 44).

Farina's argument is complemented by Devin Griffiths's research in his *Age of Analogy* (2016). Griffiths discusses how analogies were needed to understand the novelties of scientific and technological exploration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was a scientific trend: an attempt to understand reality through explicit comparison to what was already known.<sup>56</sup> Making analogical comparisons, narrowly at sentence level and broadly at the thematic level (historical comparisons for example), is something evident in Victorian writers of fiction and non-fiction alike. Griffiths notes the importance of *explicit* comparison to the Victorian mindset, for this explicit structure is what allows for discursive analysis.<sup>57</sup> As discussed above in the section on the nature of simile, the observed reality is not identified with the image as it would be grammatically in metaphor; the analogy *A is to B as C is to D* – or *A is like B* sets the two domains distinctly apart. The mapping is meant to be considered separately, linguistically

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 427, 430.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 428.

<sup>56</sup> Devin Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature between the Darwins* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

speaking, rather than a mapping of identification as in metaphorical structure. Similic language thus emphasises the reality that is under observation. This scientific trend of analogy makes sense when it comes to so-called ‘realist’ authors of the Victorian period, who would favour explicit comparison to keep the observed reality quite separate from the imaginative field of comparison. However, Dickens cannot be called a realist author in the way he uses analogy, for his similes often work to transform that observed reality. His unusual comparisons cannot always be considered ‘conditional similes,’ as Farina would argue, for Dickens is usually not attempting to describe something he cannot quite name. Rather than offering a familiar analogy for something unknown or inaccessible, he frequently gives us a new or disconcerting analogy for something familiar. While not unique among his contemporaries in his preference for analogical structure, Dickens’s analogies are often unique.

As outlined above, this thesis divides Dickens’s career into four periods, and for the purposes of comparison, I have selected a few contemporary pieces of fiction from each period to compare works written within the same timeframe. I have chosen ten different authors (five men and five women) and an equally distributed selection of their works. From the chart of similic cues in Dickens, I have taken the most common from each category to compare with his contemporaries: *like*, *as x as y*, *as if* and *seem*\*. The charts below (Figures 5-8) show the frequency of these cues per 10 000 words. The data in these charts has not been filtered for non-figurative uses of the cues. Manual searches of Dickens’s works have more accurately filtered the data to show the frequency of similic cues in the Dickens corpus alone,<sup>58</sup> but to normalise the comparison with his contemporaries, whose works I have not searched manually, the data has been left

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<sup>58</sup> These frequencies are reflected in [Figure 1](#).

unprocessed. As mentioned above, to find the frequencies, *.txt* files for the works of Dickens and his contemporaries have been downloaded from *Project Gutenberg* and inputted into the *AntConc* concordance software.

1833-39						
Charles Dickens	Year	Word Count	like	as x as y	as if	seem*
Sketches by Boz	1836	193157	12.17	10.35	6.26	3.47
The Pickwick Papers	1837	310694	7.40	7.31	4.92	4.22
Oliver Twist	1839	162313	7.70	8.93	6.96	8.56
Nicholas Nickleby	1839	330974	8.46	8.37	6.07	7.92
<b>William Harrison Ainsworth</b>						
Rookwood	1834	159153	19.54	13.19	3.02	8.23
Jack Sheppard	1839	157376	8.32	13.28	3.05	6.54
<b>Edward Bulwer-Lytton</b>						
The Last Days of Pompeii	1834	152604	9.83	4.52	4.13	12.65

Figure 5: Period 1 – Similic cues in Dickens and his contemporaries (1833-1839)

1840-44						
Charles Dickens	Year	Word Count	like	as x as y	as if	seem*
The Old Curiosity Shop	1841	221859	11.13	8.97	7.21	8.88
Barnaby Rudge	1841	259931	13.85	9.27	6.08	8.81
American Notes	1842	104749	18.04	7.92	3.25	9.45
A Christmas Carol	1843	29252	18.80	9.91	9.91	5.13
Martin Chuzzlewit	1844	345529	11.84	9.70	8.68	6.89
<b>William Harrison Ainsworth</b>						
The Tower of London	1840	188326	6.32	10.09	2.28	3.93
Windsor Castle	1843	117218	7.34	9.98	1.71	5.03
<b>Edward Bulwer-Lytton</b>						
Zanoni	1842	156662	10.02	4.47	6.32	18.38
<b>William Makepeace Thackeray</b>						
The Luck of Barry Lyndon	1844	129417	7.88	15.53	1.85	3.32

Figure 6: Period 2 – Similic cues in Dickens and his contemporaries (1840-1844)

<b>1845-53</b>						
<b>Charles Dickens</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Word Count</b>	<b>like</b>	<b>as x as y</b>	<b>as if</b>	<b>seem*</b>
Pictures from Italy	1846	73778	27.24	10.03	9.08	9.35
Dombey and Son	1848	363853	15.67	8.55	10.86	9.43
David Copperfield	1850	363813	14.29	10.64	10.14	9.04
Bleak House	1853	362303	14.82	10.76	8.20	9.61
<b>William Harrison Ainsworth</b>						
The Lancashire Witches	1849	235543	12.10	10.02	5.05	7.77
<b>Edward Bulwer-Lytton</b>						
The Caxtons	1849	200425	12.97	9.38	4.54	13.02
<b>William Makepeace Thackeray</b>						
Vanity Fair	1847	311471	8.83	10.72	3.05	3.60
<b>Elizabeth Gaskell</b>						
Mary Barton	1848	166872	17.08	12.64	9.41	12.46
Cranford	1853	72881	13.86	12.35	10.98	8.92
<b>Charlotte Brontë</b>						
Jane Eyre	1847	189410	15.52	12.62	5.49	14.41
Villette	1853	197578	17.46	10.27	3.80	18.88
<b>Anthony Trollope</b>						
La Vendee	1850	182006	8.19	12.86	0.11	3.41
<b>Margaret Oliphant</b>						
Merkland	1850	169144	22.23	6.98	3.07	5.32
<b>Wilkie Collins</b>						
Basil: A Story of Modern Life	1852	118485	9.28	15.78	5.49	9.37

Figure 7: Period 3 – Similic cues in Dickens and his contemporaries (1845-1853)



<b>1854-70</b>						
<b>Charles Dickens</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Word Count</b>	<b>like</b>	<b>as x as y</b>	<b>as if</b>	<b>seem*</b>
Hard Times	1854	105878	12.94	9.92	8.12	8.41
Little Dorrit	1857	345231	12.46	9.04	9.70	7.85
A Tale of Two Cities	1859	138389	14.16	7.59	8.09	6.29
Great Expectations	1861	188912	14.45	8.52	13.34	9.26
Our Mutual Friend	1865	334139	13.20	8.59	11.28	9.58
The Mystery of Edwin Drood	1870	97851	12.06	8.18	10.73	10.73
<b>William Harrison Ainsworth</b>						
Boscobel; or The Royal Oak	1872	160502	6.42	10.47	1.87	7.48
<b>Edward Bulwer-Lytton</b>						
The Coming Race	1871	54061	13.87	5.73	3.51	14.24
<b>William Makepeace Thackeray</b>						
The Newcomes	1855	372839	10.49	11.02	2.44	5.71
<b>Elizabeth Gaskell</b>						
North and South	1855	186655	14.09	12.54	10.29	11.79
Wives and Daughters	1866	280470	12.76	16.33	9.98	9.02
<b>Charlotte Brontë</b>						
The Professor	1857	90008	14.78	12.55	3.00	10.55
<b>Anthony Trollope</b>						
The Warden	1855	73407	5.59	10.35	0.14	3.81
Can You Forgive Her?	1865	323637	8.19	14.12	0.43	6.40
<b>Margaret Oliphant</b>						
The Athelings	1857	166678	19.26	10.98	3.84	6.18
Brownlows	1868	221917	20.28	12.08	8.65	9.37
<b>Wilkie Collins</b>						
The Woman in White	1860	250594	7.82	13.65	3.75	6.50
The Moonstone	1868	199864	8.96	13.21	4.45	5.65
<b>George Eliot</b>						
Adam Bede	1859	222832	23.38	16.65	9.92	10.23
The Mill on the Floss	1860	214297	19.69	11.25	8.49	11.53
Felix Holt	1866	186432	14.16	9.76	5.15	16.63
Middlemarch	1872	323815	15.94	11.12	8.31	15.50
<b>Mary Elizabeth Braddon</b>						
Lady Audley's Secret	1862	153996	10.07	9.94	6.23	9.16
The Doctor's Wife	1864	170753	18.97	8.78	5.80	13.29
Birds of Prey	1867	167088	11.19	9.28	3.53	15.26

Figure 8: Period 4 – Similic cues in Dickens and his contemporaries (1854-1870)

The charts show that while some of his contemporaries use these cues with notably less frequency, others match or even surpass Dickens in the frequent use of similitude cues, as shown by the highlighted areas. The *as if* category is one that Dickens uses with more frequency than most of his contemporaries from each period, which helps to confirm the claims discussed earlier that *as if* is a particularly Dickensian phrase. Interestingly, the female writers generally surpass Dickens in frequency for the other categories in the third and fourth periods. While these numbers confirm the general tendency among Dickens and his contemporaries to use similitude structure, the data by itself cannot confirm whether Dickens's own similitude style is unusual. The greater frequency of some similitude cues among Dickens's contemporaries by no means collates with a greater number of unusual comparisons. In the first period, there is a greater frequency of *as x as y* in William Harrison Ainsworth's works; but the majority of the concordance hits in *Jack Sheppard*, for example, reveal comparisons based on close or natural resemblances between the target and source. In at least one instance, a comparison between Jonathan Wild and a fox is drawn out in a way that seems comparable to Dickens's exaggerative style:

His eyes were small and grey; as far apart and as sly-looking as those of a fox. A physiognomist, indeed, would have likened him to that crafty animal, and it must be owned the general formation of his features favoured such a comparison. (Epoch 1, Ch. 2)

Ainsworth then catalogues the resemblance in the nose, the forehead, etc. It might seem that Ainsworth exaggerates by drawing out the comparison in this way, but in fact he is only continuing to emphasise the close resemblance. Meanwhile, in the same period, Dickens uses a kind of anti-similitude and unpredictable exaggeration in *Nicholas Nickleby* when describing the 'domestic economy' of the Nicklebys' cottage 'in which [...] the good lady [Mrs Nickleby] had about as much share, either in theory or practice, as any

one of the statues of the Twelve Apostles which embellish the exterior of St Paul's Cathedral' (Ch. 45). The positive *as x as y* form of the comparison points to a negative similarity: neither Mrs Nickleby nor the Apostles have a real understanding of domestic duties. There is no close physical resemblance at all to emphasise: the connection between Mrs Nickleby and the Twelve Apostles is purely a negative one – absurdly so, and not predictable at all. Dickens's contemporaries in the first period generally use figurative comparison for common or obviously close similarities. Edward Bulwer-Lytton even draws attention to his use of 'a homely but faithful simile' to describe the noises of the witch's lair in *The Last Days of Pompeii*: the 'loud and grating noise [...] seemed to resemble the grinding of steel upon wheels' (Bk 3, Ch. 10). It is the nature of a 'faithful simile' plainly to illustrate the mysterious sounds of the lair: it is not meant to exaggerate or to challenge us as to its appropriateness. Meanwhile, as will be discussed in the second chapter, exaggeration or linking by unusual association is a key feature of Dickens's similes that emerges in his earliest works.

In the second period, as well, Dickens's contemporaries mainly use the figurative cues for commonplace resemblances or 'homely but faithful similes.' In Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni*, for example, the character Nicot 'sprang forward a step, with hands clenched, and showing his teeth from ear to ear, like a wild beast incensed' (Ch. 2.vii). *Zanoni* has more instances of *seem*\* than Dickens's works at this stage; however, the *seeming* imagery in *Zanoni* is consistent with the overall weird or supernatural atmosphere of that novel, as when Clarence Glyndon sees a phantom figure approaching him:

It seemed rather to crawl as some vast misshapen reptile; and pausing, at length [...] again fixed its eyes through the filmy veil on the rash invoker. All fancies, the most grotesque [...] would have failed to give to the visage of imp or fiend that aspect of deadly malignity which spoke to the shuddering nature in those eyes alone. (Ch. 4.vii)

At the end of the scene, Glyndon faints and wakes up in bed as if everything had been a dream. Thus, the fanciful language here is meant to *be* fanciful in its description of the supernatural. Dickens, however, takes figurative comparison to another level of the grotesque by infusing the normal with the mysterious when there is no necessity of plot or character. When describing Todgers's boarding house in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the narrator takes us up onto the rooftop where the objects there 'took hold of the attention whether the spectator would or no'; among other things, 'the revolving chimney-pots on one great stack of buildings, seemed to be turning gravely to each other now and then, and whispering the result of their separate observation of what was going on below' (Ch. 9). In Van Ghent's exploration of Dickens's animism, [mentioned in Section iv](#), she draws an overall negative impression of the 'hallucinatory vividness' of this passage from *Martin Chuzzlewit*.<sup>59</sup> While the narration suggests that the reader, along with Dickens's fictitious observer, cannot help but see these gravely whispering chimney-pots, the diversion tactic of what Van Ghent calls a 'conservative' *seemed to be* actually emphasises the creative daring of the spectacle. Dickens uses a subtle *seem* to launch the reader into an alternate reality 'whether they will or no'; just as 'it would not be wonderful' to meet the Megalosaurus on Holborn Hill.

In the third and fourth periods, Dickens's contemporaries use the similitude cues with more versatility, yet there are still key differences in the way Dickens uses the same cues. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* uses *as if* more frequently than Dickens. However, Gaskell mainly uses *as if* to show a specific gesture or attitude or what might be reasonably inferred from such a gesture or attitude. Many of the examples are non-figurative, as when the narrator speaks of Miss Jessie Brown's reaction to the deaths of

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<sup>59</sup> Van Ghent, p. 25.

her sister and father. On one occasion, Miss Jessie ‘looked faded and pinched; and her lips began to quiver, as if she was very weak’ and on another ‘she came back almost calm as if she had gained a new strength. [...] She could even smile – a faint, sweet, wintry smile – as if to reassure us of her power to endure’ (Ch. 2). Among the examples that could be considered figurative, the ‘flight of fancy’ is hardly far-fetched. There is still a close resemblance between source and target domains. When Mrs Forrester approaches the narrator to give some money to Miss Matty’s cause, she is ‘trembling all the time as if it were a great crime which she was exposing to daylight’ (Ch. 14). While it might be considered exaggerated to compare Mrs Forrester with a criminal, the comparison is a natural one to show Mrs Forrester’s disproportionate sense of shame at the small amount she is giving due to her poverty. In the third period, Dickens uses *as if* for characterisation as well; but the source domain becomes a fantastical place. In *David Copperfield*, when describing the imposing character of Steerforth’s valet Littimer, David relates:

He took out of his pocket the most respectable hunting-watch I ever saw, and preventing the spring with his thumb from opening far, looked in at the face as if he were consulting an oracular oyster, shut it up again, and said, if I pleased, it was half-past eight. (Ch. 21)

The whole character of the man and David’s relationship to him is contained in this dignified consultation of the oracular oyster. In his timidity, David imagines Littimer to have a mysterious ascendancy over him; yet the juxtaposition of ‘oracular oyster’ where ‘oyster’ comically deflates the ‘oracular’ also reveals the essentially shallow nature of Littimer and the unfounded fears of David. The fifth chapter will explore how similitic language reveals the mind-style of Dickens’s characters, and this use of *as if*, more than simply capturing a gesture or even an entire attitude, shows both how David perceives Littimer and what the valet is really like.

In the fourth period, George Eliot's works stand out as rivalling Dickens in the use of simile; in fact, Griffiths uses George Eliot's work as the prime literary example in his *Age of Analogy* for the dominance of the Victorian analogical trend. In Eliot's *Adam Bede*, *like* is used more frequently than in Dickens's works and some of the more significant examples are comparably comical and related to character description. Mrs Poyser is described as 'knitting with fierce rapidity, as if that movement were a necessary function, like the twittering of a crab's antennae' (Bk 4, Ch. 31). In the midst of Hetty Sorrel's disappointment at not being allowed to go for a lady's maid, compounded by her sadness after Arthur Donnithorne has broken off their relationship, Mrs Poyser's energetic character brings some comic relief to the scene. More than this, however, there is a sense that her character forms part of a kind of 'natural history' of humanity. The source of the comparison is taken from Eliot's observation of the natural world and is an appropriate image for Mrs Poyser's alertness to any news that may impact her or her family. It is by no means a 'homely' simile, but it is a 'faithful' one in that respect. Dickens also draws on the natural world for his characterisation; but he resists the faithful aspect of similitic language. When Pip and Joe Gargery go to meet Miss Havisham, Pip tells us, 'I could hardly have imagined dear old Joe looking so unlike himself or so like some extraordinary bird; standing, as he did, speechless, with his tuft of feathers ruffled, and his mouth open, as if he wanted a worm' (Bk 1, ch 13). Unlike Eliot, Dickens is purposely vague about his own 'natural history' of humanity: Joe is 'like some *extraordinary* bird' rather than simply 'like a bird.' Dickens subtly conflates the target of the comparison – Joe's awkward attitude – with the source domain and thus diffuses the factual nature of a bird's appearance.

While Eliot does not repeat the crab-imagery with Mrs Poyser, the 'extraordinary bird' imagery resurfaces when Joe visits the grown-up Pip in London; Joe will not let

Pip take his hat and holds it carefully 'like a bird's nest with eggs in it.' The comparison morphs into identification when Joe is seen 'getting the bird's-nest under his left arm for the moment and groping in it for an egg with his right' or standing 'still with both hands taking great care of the bird's nest' (Bk 2, Ch. 8). As opposed to the solitary comparison of Mrs Poyser's energetic knitting with a crab's antennae, Joe's extraordinary-bird-like attitude is confirmed with the repetition of the imagery. While Eliot frequently extends a comparison, she does not usually repeat it. Furthermore, while both Eliot and Dickens use the simile for comic effect, in the case of Joe there is a darker undertone to the comic imagery; for if the imagery is Pip's perception of Joe, as is logical from his first-person narration, it is also evidence of Pip's superior attitude towards Joe, even when Pip is young. Joe's awkwardness, especially in the later scene, has much to do with feeling out of place with someone who should have warmly welcomed him. This comes across when Pip complains of Joe calling him 'sir': 'Joe looked at me for a single instant with something faintly like reproach. Utterly preposterous as his cravat was, and as his collars were, I was conscious of a sort of dignity in the look' (Bk 2, Ch. 8). While the 'extraordinary bird' imagery is amusing, Joe's nobility is at odds with his bird's nest. This kind of incongruent humour will be examined in Chapter Six.

The more striking similes in Eliot's fiction are often related to science or the natural world – one of the reasons Griffiths champions her as the literary representative of scientifically-minded analogies. The following passage from *Middlemarch* uses the microscope as the source of an elaborate analogy:

Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. In this way, metaphorically speaking, a

strong lens applied to Mrs Cadwallader's match-making will show a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed. (Bk 1, Ch. 6)

Eliot turns a very specific understanding of the microscope's usage to droll effect.

While the simile uses a somewhat unfamiliar source domain, yet there is the 'realist' effort to keep the target and source domains quite separate. Eliot even inserts 'metaphorically speaking' to remind the reader of the figurative nature of the comparison. If the embedded simile *as if they were so many animated tax-pennies* is incongruent in its unexpected source, the main source domain is carefully defined before it is used to compare Mrs Cadwallader's match-making. Eliot makes the comparison appear quite appropriate in that sense, and the figurative caution, as it were, differentiates this example from Dickens's more fantastical analogies. These examples from all four periods show that Dickens is not the only writer among his contemporaries who favours similitic language. However, when specific styles are compared, Dickens's use of simile seems the more remarkable for the way in which he challenges the explanatory, clarifying, or otherwise expected nature of simile. The following section outlines how this thesis will explore the idiosyncratic nature and development of Dickensian simile throughout his career.

#### vi. Outline of Chapters

As noted above, this thesis takes a chronological approach to Dickens's work. The first two chapters after the Introduction will discuss Dickens's early use of simile. Chapter Two (1833-39) focuses on Dickens's transition from reporting to fiction-writing, demonstrating his flair for unusual, hyperbolic, or melodramatic similitic description in



*Sketches by Boz, The Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, and Nicholas Nickleby*. Chapter Three (1840-45) analyses the ‘too-much-ness’ or obviously self-referential quality of Dickens’s figurative comparisons in the novels of the early 40s (*The Old Curiosity Shop, Barnaby Rudge, and Martin Chuzzlewit*) and the Christmas books (especially *A Christmas Carol*). It shows how Dickens creates a ‘narrator-persona’ for himself through his use of simile. Chapter Four interrupts the chronological structure of the thesis to discuss Dickens’s authorial signature from a different angle, analysing Dickens’s use of simile in his letters as a stylistic trademark of his ‘inimitability.’ It considers to what extent his letters have been treated for their literary merit and argues that Dickens’s letter-writing can be seen as authorial exhibitionism through his use of similitic language.

The last three chapters consider a shift in Dickens’s similitic style in his later works. Chapter Five (1846-1853) looks at how Dickens experiments with narrative form and begins to move away from an obviously self-conscious ‘narrator-persona’ in his use of similitic language. *Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, and Bleak House* reveal a gradual tendency in Dickens’s use of simile to relinquish authorial ‘inimitability’ and lend more individuality and interiority to his characters. Chapter Six (1854-1862) looks at how simile creates incongruous humour in the later ‘darker’ novels, *Hard Times, Little Dorrit, A Tale of Two Cities, and Great Expectations*. Finally, Chapter Seven contrasts the caricaturising effect of similitic description in *Our Mutual Friend* and in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* to explore how, even in his last, unfinished novel Dickens uses simile in a new way, hiding rather than revealing a character’s interiority for the sake of the mystery narrative. While Dickens’s similitic style develops over time as he uses it for increasingly subtler effects, it is yet consistently an authorial trademark that cannot be separated from his style without changing much of what is unique about his figurative

language. 'Dickensian simile' emerges from the very beginning of his career and remains essential to his style until the end.

## Chapter Two: Dickensian Dichotomies in the Early Writings (1833-39)

### *i.* Dickens's 'Signature and Brand'

The early years of Charles Dickens's career (1833-1839) saw his transition from an anonymous reporter and contributor of short stories or sketches – collected in *Sketches by 'Boz'* (1836) – to a famous author producing three novels in three years: *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9). This time of transition has been discussed by several critics, who have demonstrated that both necessity and ambition were spurs for Dickens's particularly intense activity during these early years.<sup>1</sup> The fast pace of the reporter's life, and later the need to produce monthly parts for the serialisation of the novels, all whilst bringing up a young and growing family, may account for the 'restless experimental quality'<sup>2</sup> of his early writings. Duane Devries says, 'Dickens's early development was largely associated with a search for effective style and form' and there are only 'intimations [...] of the style that, from *Pickwick Papers* on, would be recognised as "Dickensian."<sup>3</sup> 'Dickensian' is not defined here, except inasmuch as it signifies the result of 'working conscientiously with various stylistic elements to improve the quality of humour, to redeem characters from utter flatness, to create fuller and more colourfully detailed scenes, and to maintain a more consistently satiric tone of voice.'<sup>4</sup> Devries's later analysis takes an equally

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<sup>1</sup> The works consulted are mainly: Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Duane Devries, *Dickens's Apprentice Years: The Making of a Novelist*, Revised (Brighton: EER, 2017); and John M. L. Drew, *Dickens the Journalist* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Devries, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

broad approach to plot, character, and structure in Dickens's sketches, not greatly developing what is meant by the 'various stylistic elements' that lead to improving the quality of humour, etc. This chapter investigates Dickens's early style specifically through his use of simile as a salient stylistic element emerging in this first period.

Dickensian simile, as discussed in the Introduction, challenges the typically clarifying nature of simile through an absurd, exaggerated, or otherwise unexpected use of figurative comparison. This distinguishable stylistic element in his work can already be seen in his early writings. Nevertheless, Dickens's similitic language in this first period reveals certain dichotomies of style. This chapter will first consider the stylistic differences between Dickens's reporting and his early sketch-writing. The unusual or hyperbolic nature of simile in Dickens's *Sketches by 'Boz'* is absent in his reports and reviews of this period, and it points to an attention-grabbing manoeuvre that claims ownership for his writing. Even if 'Boz' is not yet 'Charles Dickens,' the *Sketches* rather than the early journalism reveal Dickens's tell-tale similitic signature that will continue into his novel-writing. Meanwhile, other literary sketches in this early period show that Dickens's similitic tendency develops as part of a popular trend of using simile for its entertainment value. Especially in more comic or ironic writing, simile is an effective tool for a spontaneous and amusing description that serves as a comical aside. Dickens takes advantage of this popular trend with a prolific use of such entertaining similes that have, moreover, an idiosyncratic flavour. Dickens's similitic style in the first three novels reveals a second and more complex kind of stylistic dichotomy which is also influenced by popular entertainment. An analysis of Dickens's use of simile in *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Nicholas Nickleby* reveals a conflict between subscribing to or satirizing a melodramatic mode of writing. His more extraordinary similes are rarely used in sombre or sentimental passages, and this leads to a distinct stylistic difference.

The popularity of melodrama in this period influenced Dickens's use of simile and in these early novels, Dickensian simile – as defined earlier – becomes mainly limited to the comic mode of description as practiced in the *Sketches*. Nevertheless, Dickens's incongruous use of simile at times leads to a kind of tragi-comedy that hints at the more integrated similitic style of his later works, which will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Duane Devries takes a pragmatic view of Dickens's early newspaper career, saying, 'It may be that his position on the [*Monthly*] *Chronicle* simply provided him with the minimal financial security that a budding literary artist needs while serving his apprenticeship to the craft.'<sup>5</sup> In *Dickens the Journalist*, meanwhile, John M. L. Drew considers Dickens's journalistic training as crucial to his novelistic output, viewing Dickens's career as a novelist in light of his simultaneous career as a journalist, first as an employee of the *Monthly Chronicle* and later as the editor of his own journals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. Drew's analysis explains certain aspects of Dickens's fictional style – especially in terms of attention to detail, satirical commentary, and the way the narrative adapts to serial publication. However, Drew is less effective in his attempt to show that Dickens's characteristic figurative language permeates both genres from the very beginning. Admittedly, Dickens's later journalism does contain more figurative description. In his later satirical or political commentary he will often assume a narrator-character's voice that leads to some outrageous figurative description. An example of this is seen in 'Births. Mrs Meek, of a Son' (22 Feb 1851) where Dickens takes the role of 'Mr Meek' in a commentary on the practices of midwifery, and especially on 'swaddling,' which was still practiced at this time even though it was criticised:

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<sup>5</sup> Devries, p. 22.

I wish to know why, when my child, Augustus George, was expected in our circle, a provision of pins was made, as if the little stranger were a criminal who was to be put to the torture immediately on his arrival, instead of a holy babe? [...] Is my son a Nutmeg, that he is to be grated on the stiff edges of sharp frills? Am I the parent of a Muslin boy, that his yielding surface is to be crimped and small-plaited? [...] Was Augustus George intended to have limbs, or to be born a Torso? I presume that limbs were the intention, as they are the usual practice. Then, why are my poor child's limbs fettered and tied up? Am I to be told that there is any analogy between Augustus George Meek, and Jack Sheppard? (p. 325)<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, this extract shows more that Dickens's later journalistic writing was influenced by the figurative style of his fiction than that his fiction was influenced by his journalistic training. Attention to Dickens's use of simile in the early period of his writing (1833-39) reveals that at least in the beginning of his career, journalism and fiction-writing remained separate for Dickens and required two different styles.

Outlining Dickens's early employment in the *Monthly Chronicle*, Drew writes:

The confidence to establish a signature and a brand for the kind of chronicling and sketch-writing at which he excelled would not come until Dickens had secured a permanent position in the volatile newspaper trade in which he was now apprenticed.<sup>7</sup>

If this 'signature and brand' is something that is supposedly present in all of Dickens's writings, then Drew's conclusion explains why none of Dickens's earliest parliamentary reports can be safely identified as his – nothing of his work for the *Mirror of Parliament* (1831) or the *True Sun* (1832-34) has been identified; but it does not explain why later reports and reviews, written after having published several fictional works, do not display that flair for the fantastic that can already be seen in his early tales. The first identifiable

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<sup>6</sup> 'The Amusements of the People' and Other Papers: Reports, Essays and Reviews 1834-51, ed. by Michael Slater, The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism, 2 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1996), II, pp. 322-26.

<sup>7</sup> Drew, p. 20.

report<sup>8</sup> appears after Dickens has written five fictional pieces for the *Monthly Magazine*.<sup>9</sup> These stories already evince his unusual similitude style, not present in any other of his writings at this stage.<sup>10</sup> Dickensian simile in the *Sketches* will be discussed in greater detail below; but some preliminary examples from ‘The Bloomsbury Christening’ (Apr 1834) show how Dickens uses simile in his earliest fiction. On his reluctant way to the christening of his future godson, Mr Dumps is forced to come into unpleasant contact with another passenger in the omnibus ‘who had been walking about all the morning without an umbrella, and who looked as if he had spent the day in a full water-butts – only wetter.’<sup>11</sup> The hyperbole of ‘only wetter,’ with its colloquial flavour of exaggeration, destabilises the initial simile even as it apparently clarifies it. There is nothing wetter than something that is thoroughly wet. Then Mrs Kitterbell is introduced as ‘a tall thin young lady with very light hair, and a particularly white face – one of those young women who almost invariably, though one hardly knows why, recal [sic] to one’s mind the idea of a cold fillet of veal.’<sup>12</sup> The roundabout phrasing draws attention to the comparison, which the reader

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘Report from Edinburgh on Preparations for the Grey Festival’, *Morning Chronicle*, 17 September 1834, p. 4, British Newspaper Archive; This does not include the report on the case of Jarman v. Bagster and Wise (1830) when Dickens worked as a freelance reporter for Doctors’ Commons; the two booklets enclosing the case are generally thought to be his work – a transcription shows the different linguistic registers set by the defendants and by the ‘legalese’ of the court (Drew 11-12).

<sup>9</sup> ‘A Dinner at Poplar Walk’ (Dec 1833), ‘Mrs Joseph Porter “Over the Way”’ (Jan 1834), ‘Horatio Sparkins’ (Feb 1834) ‘The Bloomsbury Christening’ (Apr 1834), and ‘The Boarding House’ Nos. 1 and 2 (May and Aug 1834).

<sup>10</sup> Most of these writings have been collected by Slater in two volumes: Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers 1833-39*, ed. by Michael Slater, The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens’ Journalism, 2 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1994), I; Charles Dickens, *The Amusements of the People’ and Other Papers: Reports, Essays and Reviews 1834-51*, ed. by Michael Slater, The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens’ Journalism, 2 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1996), II. The remaining pieces have been consulted in their original place of publication via the *British Newspaper Archive* and digital library resources. The sketches and journalistic pieces or news reports discussed in this chapter come from a list of identified works in Michael Slater’s edition of Dickens’s journalism (II, pp. 372–78). Elements of Dickens’s style (acute observational detail, interspersal of dialogue, etc.) and external or circumstantial evidence have helped identify as his what would otherwise remain anonymous reports and reviews.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘The Bloomsbury Christening’, *Monthly Magazine, or British Register*, Feb. 1800-June 1836, April 1834, 375–86 (p. 379) <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/historical-periodicals/bloomsbury-christening/docview/4545740/se-2?accountid=14511>> [accessed 8 December 2019].

<sup>12</sup> Dickens, ‘The Bloomsbury Christening’, p. 381.

is assured is nothing unusual, for Mrs Kitterbell is ‘one of those young women’ whom everyone would think of ‘invariably’ in the same way. Whereas a simile is normally an invitation to evaluate the comparison drawn, the implication here is that the narrator’s point of view is the only valid one.

More than a lack of confidence or a need for financial security, it is likely a question of genre and above all, anonymity, that limits Dickens’s ‘signature and brand’ in his reporting, reviewing, or essay-writing in this first period (1833-39). He could use a recognizable brand of figurative language in his stories (by ‘Boz’) that would be out of place in anonymous reports or reviews. Drew argues that in this early period Dickens already challenges the genre of reporting with a distinctive style: ‘Dickens was clearly given leeway in his reporting to be not only partisan but personal, and – by contrast with the prevailing norms of the genre – to emerge indirectly as an authorial presence.’<sup>13</sup> However, this authorial presence is quite limited when it comes to simile, even if the pieces contain other aspects of Dickens’s style. In most of Dickens’s early reports, there is no extemporaneous commentary. The reporter usually satisfies himself with a dry, ‘Perfect order was preserved throughout, and the appearance of the vast body of persons, who were all respectably and cleanly dressed, was most imposing.’<sup>14</sup> The reported speeches contain the speaker’s hyperbolic figurative language, which may have had an influence on Dickens as he recorded it. For example, a certain Mr. Muntz expostulates against the Duke of Wellington, saying, ‘Another of his measures was, that very celebrated child of his, the Beer Bill. Like many other of his children, it was not a just child [a laugh].’ Years later, Dickens wrote in a satirical review:

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<sup>13</sup> Drew, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘Birmingham, Great Public Meeting’, *Morning Chronicle*, 1 December 1834, p. 3, British Newspaper Archive; listed by Slater as ‘Report on Meeting of Birmingham Liberals.’



All measures which have for their object the improvement of the popular condition [...] are very troublesome children to their fathers in the House of Lords. They cost a world of trouble in the bringing up; and are, for the most part, strangled by the Herods of the Peerage, in their cradles.<sup>15</sup>

Dickens extends and embellishes the metaphor; but the image of parliamentary bills being ‘children’ may have been a common one. In any event, this possible influence is the only remarkable thing from this report. The insertion of ‘[a laugh],’ ‘[prolonged cheering]’ etc is common practice for election reports in the *Morning Chronicle* and is not specific to Dickens. Neither is there anything remarkable about a report on a parish meeting in Southwark, although circumstantial evidence has identified it as Dickens’s.<sup>16</sup>

When the reporter varies from the specific task of transmitting speeches verbatim or giving a strictly factual account of an event, there are glimmers of that ‘authorial presence’ that Drew mentions. In the first report identified as Dickens’s, the ‘Report of the Edinburgh Dinner to Lord Grey,’ there is no similitic language, but Michael Slater notes Dickens’s characteristic humorous observation, not evident in other reports of the same event. Dickens’s report details how one gentleman begins to eat before the dignitaries have arrived and leads many to follow his example, despite cries of protest: ‘This is, perhaps, one of the first instances on record of a dinner having been virtually concluded before it began.’<sup>17</sup> That comedic moment is arguably in Dickens’s style, as is a parenthesis inserted in a report on an election campaign speech. The candidate has denounced ‘that wretched remnant of a Whig Ministry’ and this insertion follows:

[The epithet “wretched remnant” appeared to give inexpressible satisfaction to one individual in the vicinity of the speaker, who from this

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<sup>15</sup> Dickens, II, p. 47; ‘Letter to Lord Ashley,’ *Morning Chronicle*, 20 Oct 1842.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘St. Saviour’s, Southwark,’ *Morning Chronicle*, 5 December 1834, p. 3, British Newspaper Archive; listed by Slater as ‘Report of Southwark parish meeting (?)’: the question mark means that the piece has been identified as Dickens from circumstantial evidence rather than external evidence (Dickens, II, p. 372).

<sup>17</sup> Dickens, II, p. 8; ‘Report of the Edinburgh Dinner to Lord Grey,’ *Morning Chronicle*, 15 September 1834.

moment to the conclusion of the proceedings, soliloquised audibly at every pause, 'Wretched remnant! Ha, ha, ha! Oh Lord! I shall never forget it!'.<sup>18</sup>

It was already a daunting task for a reporter to capture a speech in shorthand, transcribe this into publishable material, and then race competing newspaper agents back to London, to be the first to publish the speech in the next morning's newspaper. The extra effort required in a time-bound task to insert that moment of irrelevant characterisation is something that does draw attention to the writer of the piece. Nevertheless, these last examples do not necessarily challenge the observational style required of the reporting genre, even if they do draw attention to a writer who remains anonymous. The fact is, in the style of writing, Dickens never overtly claims authorship for these pieces, for all that they subtly show his personal sense of humour. He accepts an anonymity that belongs to the genre, never subverting it with the distinctive similitic style of his sketches. Drew argues that Dickens employs his figurative flair in one election report, imagining a chivalric scene in the appropriate setting of the 'Castle yard' at the beginning of the report and arguing that it 'develops, amongst much standard journalistic preamble, the analogy of the hustings as theatre or tournament, complete with spectating ladies, colour symbolism, and a hero of the hour.'<sup>19</sup> The analogy is only implicit in this report, however,<sup>20</sup> and does not compare to the figurative leaps that are obvious in his other writings.

Dickens may accept but clearly does not prefer the anonymity of being a mere reporter. This is shown in the first theatre review that has been identified as his on *The Christening* by J. B. Buckstone. Buckstone's farce was basically an adaptation of

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Essex (South). - Nomination', *Morning Chronicle*, 13 January 1835, p. 3, British Newspaper Archive; listed by Slater as 'Election report from Chelmsford.'

<sup>19</sup> Drew, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Express from Exeter. Morning Chronicle Office, Saturday Morning, Six o'Clock. South Devon Election.', *Morning Chronicle*, 2 May 1835, p. 3, British Newspaper Archive; listed by Slater as 'Election Report from Exeter.'

Dickens's story 'The Bloomsbury Christening' and it played successfully at the Adelphi Theatre in 1834 and 1835. In his review of the play, Dickens writes:

We hailed one or two of the characters with great satisfaction – they are old and very particular friends of ours. We met with them, and several of the jokes we heard last night, at a certain 'Bloomsbury Christening' described in 'The Monthly Magazine' some little time since.<sup>21</sup>

While it would be inappropriate for a mere reporter to claim ownership of a play he is reviewing, he can still give a clear indication of where the credit is due: 'The Christening' has originated in 'Boz' not Buckstone. Dickens makes a similar comment in another review when the play was revived a year later:

Who is the author of this piece? We read a comic tale in *The Monthly Magazine*, a couple of years ago, we believe, of which *The Christening*, as represented, seems to be little more than a transcript, with a change in the names of the characters.<sup>22</sup>

These reviews indicate that Dickens will fight for these pieces to be recognised as his own, even if the author of 'The Bloomsbury Christening' is still 'Boz' rather than 'Charles Dickens' – and only 'Boz' (as is the case for a few other early sketches) in the re-publishing of the story as one of the *Sketches*. Dickens's struggle for personal recognition presages his advocacy of copyright laws throughout his life.

Dickens also fights for recognition of his work in private letters. In a letter to George Hogarth,<sup>23</sup> speaking of 'light papers' in the style of his 'street sketches,' Dickens writes of his desire to 'receive something for the papers beyond my ordinary Salary as a Reporter.'<sup>24</sup> Robert L. Patten explains that Dickens dropped the *Monthly Magazine*

<sup>21</sup> Dickens, II, p. 10; 'Theatre Review: *The Christening* by J. B. Buckstone,' *Morning Chronicle*, 14 Oct 1834.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Adelphi', *Morning Chronicle*, 29 September 1835, p. 3, British Newspaper Archive; listed by Slater as 'Theatre Review: *Christening*, etc.'

<sup>23</sup> George Hogarth (1783-1870) was a lawyer and newspaper editor whose daughter, Catherine, married Dickens in 1836.

<sup>24</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 1; 'To George Hogarth,' 20 Jan 1835.

when that extra payment was not forthcoming.<sup>25</sup> Upon giving his notice to John Easthope<sup>26</sup> to leave the *Morning Chronicle*, Dickens politely claims to have performed his duties ‘with so much pleasure to myself’ and ‘with so much satisfaction to my Employers’; yet anonymous reporting was a career he is exchanging for one ‘less burdensome and more profitable.’<sup>27</sup> Dickens had already produced at least seven numbers for *The Pickwick Papers* by this time and this is the ‘less burdensome’ career that he has in mind. In another letter to Easthope written soon after, he expresses his chagrin at not being rewarded more for his great exertions as a reporter, which involved:

[...] travelling at a few hours’ notice hundreds of miles in the depth of winter—leaving hot and crowded rooms to write, the night through, in a close damp chaise—tearing along, and writing the most important speeches, under every possible circumstance of disadvantage and difficulty.<sup>28</sup>

He warns Easthope not to discourage by unfair treatment other ‘young men whom you will constantly find quitting a most arduous and thankless profession.’<sup>29</sup> More than a natural desire for greater remuneration, these letters indicate Dickens’s attitude towards the thankless anonymity of reporting. While he may simply be seeking a more profitable career, the tone of the letters communicates a demand for recognition as well. Rather than giving up his sketch-writing when the *Monthly Magazine* does not give him extra payment beyond his ‘ordinary Salary as a Reporter,’ he gave up the *Monthly Magazine* instead. His relationship with the *Morning Chronicle* was also clearly strained because of what he considered a lack of due recognition of his efforts. Dickens thus actively

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<sup>25</sup> Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and His Publishers*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Sir John Easthope (1784-1865) was a politician and journalist and owner of the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper that employed Dickens from 1834 to 1836. Dickens wrote 5 letters to him in 1836.

<sup>27</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 1; ‘To John Easthope,’ 5 Nov 1836.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 Nov 1836.

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

pursued a style of writing that allows him to escape from the anonymity of reporting and become 'Boz' in earnest.

In the preface to the first edition of the *First Series* of the *Sketches by 'Boz'* (1836), young Dickens appears eager for the public's approval of his early work, writing an elaborate comparison:

In humble imitation of a prudent course, universally adopted by aeronauts, the Author of these volumes throws them up as his pilot balloon, trusting it may catch some favourable current, and devoutly and earnestly hoping it may *go off well* – a sentiment in which his Publisher cordially concurs.<sup>30</sup>

He extends the analogy for some lines, attaching a car to the pilot balloon that will carry him, George Cruikshank as illustrator, and 'all his hopes of future fame, and all his chances of future success.'<sup>31</sup> There is a pronounced sense of hopeful confidence in his own abilities as he labours the initial simile into an overarching analogy. Dickens later commented negatively on the *Sketches* in the preface to the first Cheap Edition in 1850: 'I am conscious of their often being extremely crude and ill-considered, and bearing obvious marks of haste and inexperience.'<sup>32</sup> However, in *Dickens at Work*, John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson contrast this with the earlier preface to show that the younger Dickens is hopeful of the popular appeal of his writings.<sup>33</sup> Butt and Tillotson comment extensively on the care with which Dickens revised the original sketches for re-publication in the *First* and *Second Series* of *Sketches by 'Boz.'* This is further evidence of Dickens's taking ownership of his work and his awareness of the public's response to his writing style. In their commentary on the sketches, Butt and Tillotson give more examples of Dickens's revisions of his similitic language than of other individual stylistic

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<sup>30</sup> Dickens, I, p. xxxix.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xli.

<sup>33</sup> John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work*, (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 36.

changes. They explain that Dickens ‘made extensive cuts’ or ‘rewrote whole paragraphs,’ occasionally providing sections that were removed from the original pieces; they also provide details of name-changes and the removal of politically allusive language or topicalities; but similes are quoted several times to show some of the ‘innumerable minute changes both of substance and style,’<sup>34</sup> which indicates Dickens’s awareness of this stylistic feature of his writing.

An example of one deleted simile from Dickens’s first sketch, ‘A Dinner at Poplar Walk,’ is when Mr Minns tries to smile but ‘looked as merry as a farthing rushlight in a fog.’<sup>35</sup> Butt and Tillotson regret the removal of this simile, while Devries complains that Dickens left in several other similes, calling them ‘extravagant, even grotesque figures of speech.’<sup>36</sup> One can only speculate why Dickens might have deleted some similes and kept others. Dickens may have considered the ‘farthing rushlight’ comparison unoriginal, indicating a common impression of the effect of a London fog. An earlier anonymous contribution to the *Monthly Magazine*, for example, describes the typical London fog as:

[...] a ‘palpable obscure’ which not only turns day into night, but threatens to extinguish the lamps and lanthorns, with which the poor street wanderers strive to illumine their darkness, dimming and paling ‘ineffectual fires,’ until the volume of gas at a shop door cuts no better figure than a hedge glow-worm, and a duchess’s flambeau would veil its glories to a Will-‘o-the-wisp.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 39, 46-8.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘A Dinner at Poplar Walk’, *Monthly Magazine, or British Register, Feb. 1800-June 1836*, December 1833, 617–24 (p. 618) <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/historical-periodicals/dinner-at-poplar-walk/docview/4531907/se-2?accountid=14511>> [accessed 9 December 2019], later revised as ‘Mr Minns and his Cousin’ for the second series of *Sketches by Boz* in 1836. A rushlight was a lighted reed that was used to lead the way in the fog.

<sup>36</sup> Drew, p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Village Sketches: No. IX: The Bird-Catcher’, *Monthly Magazine, or British Register*, 5.26 (1828), p. 130; the reference of ‘palpable obscure’ is from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Bk 2; the ‘ineffectual fires’ and glow-worm references are from *Hamlet*, I.5.89-90: ‘The glow-worm shows the matin to be near, / And gins to pale his uneffectual fire.’

Both the classical figurative allusions and the more homely comparisons to a ‘glow-worm’ and a ‘Will-o-the-wisp’ demonstrate the common experience of dim lights in a fog. Mr Minns’s dismal ‘farthing rushlight’ smile is perhaps not unusual enough for Dickens; while Devries is thankful that such a ‘grotesque’ comparison has been removed, Dickens may have considered it not grotesque enough. In their appraisal of the early sketches, Butt and Tillotson are kinder than both Devries and Dickens himself in his own later opinion of the sketches, mentioned above, and they regret that Dickens removes some ‘exuberance of simile’ or ‘humorous similes’ from ‘The Boarding House’ for its republication.<sup>38</sup> The description of Mr Simpson, for example, who is ‘as empty-headed as the great bell of St. Paul’s,’ is missing the original additional clause, ‘and had about as long a tongue.’<sup>39</sup> Mrs Bloss’s stoutness is no longer compared to ‘a pincushion on castors,’<sup>40</sup> although she still has a voice ‘like a man who had been playing a set of Pan’s pipes for a fortnight without leaving off.’<sup>41</sup> The above examples are small but intentional revisions, since they target specific similes rather than revise an entire passage. Some self-consciousness is evident in the removal of the punning extension to the original comparison of Mr Simpson to the great bell of St Paul’s; but the original simile remains, using (not for the last time) the solemnity of St. Paul’s as an incongruous and satirical source for someone’s ridiculous demeanour.

Even in sketches that are substantially revised, some of the original figurative descriptions are included where other descriptions are deleted. ‘A Parliamentary Sketch’

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<sup>38</sup> Butt and Tillotson, pp. 56, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘The Boarding-House (I)’, *Monthly Magazine, or British Register, Feb. 1800-June 1836*, May 1834, 481–93 (p. 481) <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/historical-periodicals/boarding-house/docview/4545833/se-2?accountid=14511>> [accessed 8 December 2019].

<sup>40</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘The Boarding-House (II)’, *Monthly Magazine, or British Register, Feb. 1800-June 1836*, August 1834, 177–92 (p. 185) <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/historical-periodicals/boarding-house-no-ii/docview/4539136/se-2?accountid=14511>> [accessed 8 December 2019].

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

is an amalgamation of two earlier sketches ('The House' and 'Bellamy's'<sup>42</sup>) and Butt and Tillotson mention how individual portraits of some members of the House are edited substantially, mainly to hide the original identities. However, the figurative description of one of the members is allowed to remain:

[He is a] ferocious-looking gentleman, with a complexion almost as sallow as his linen, and whose large black moustache would give him the appearance of a figure in a hairdresser's window, if his countenance possessed the thought which is communicated to those waxen caricatures of the human face divine.<sup>43</sup>

This similitude language is an example of Dickens's own 'brand' of figurative analogy. The circuitous language used in the comparison to a wax figure undermines the clarifying nature of a typical simile: the moustache *would* give him that appearance, *if* his countenance, etc. It is a kind of anti-simile that could imply either that the member of the House has less 'thought' (intellect) than the wax figure, or more, depending on one's interpretation of the irony in the passage.<sup>44</sup> Another example of Dickensian simile in the description of the ferocious member is when the narrator asks, rhetorically: 'Can anything be more exquisitely absurd than the burlesque grandeur of his air, as he strides up to the lobby, his eyes rolling like those of a Turk's head in a cheap Dutch clock?'<sup>45</sup> The comparison is meant to show a real, if exaggerated physical resemblance, and thus it fulfils the typical function of a simile; however, Dickens himself uses the adjective

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Dickens, 'The House', *Evening Chronicle* (London, 7 March 1835), p. 3, British Newspaper Archive; Charles Dickens, 'Bellamy's', *Evening Chronicle* (London, 11 April 1835), p. 3, British Newspaper Archive.

<sup>43</sup> Dickens, I, p. 154; 'A Parliamentary Sketch,' amalgam of 'The House,' *Evening Chronicle*, 7 March 1835, and 'Bellamy's,' *Evening Chronicle*, 11 April 1835.

The passage also includes an acknowledged quotation from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Bk 3, where the poet laments his blindness:

...Thus with the Year  
Seasons return, but not to me returns  
Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,  
Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summers Rose,  
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine. (ll.40-44)

<sup>45</sup> Dickens, I, p. 154.



‘absurd’ to qualify this image. The Dickensian brand of analogy here lies in the effect of mechanising or de-humanising the character to ridicule his ‘burlesque grandeur.’

Moreover, the source of a clock for comparison, and specifically a Dutch clock, is often repeated in Dickens’s fiction. A Dutch clock, also known as a cuckoo clock, is a mechanical clock with little figures that come out on the hour and dance. Some clock faces had paintings of animal or human faces with moveable eyes.<sup>46</sup> In the earlier sketch ‘The Boarding House,’ Mr Tibbs, in his nervous bobbing up and down, is described ‘like a figure in a Dutch clock, with a powerful spring in the middle of his body’<sup>47</sup>; in *The Pickwick Papers*, Sam Weller tells Joe, ‘the Fat Boy,’ an admonitory tale about an old gentleman of immense size who used to laugh until his ‘pig-tail vibrated like the penderlum of a Dutch clock’ (Ch. 28). Comparisons of animate beings to clocks and other familiar everyday objects create similarly uncanny effects of objectification, as will be seen throughout the thesis.

Butt and Tillotson argue that readers lose an understanding of ‘the very nature of the original sketches’ when only the revised versions are read,<sup>48</sup> and the ‘very nature’ of the sketches includes that ‘exuberance of simile’ that is hard to ignore. Dickens himself targets this similitic language when preparing the sketches for republication, showing a self-conscious awareness of his prolific flair for unusual comparisons that leads to their removal in several instances. If Devries is relieved by their deletion, Butt and Tillotson would argue that some of the freshness of the original sketches is lost as a result. What remains clear is that in terms of descriptive language, Dickens’s sketch-writing is

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<sup>46</sup> According to Julie S. Porter, ‘Dutch’ was a popular corruption of ‘Deutsche’ (German), and a ‘Dutch clock’ was a black forest shield clock, also known as a cuckoo clock: Julie S. Porter, ‘Clocks, Watches, Dickens’, *British Horological Institute*, 142.1 (2000), 20–21 <<https://delectra.com/CWD/CWD.html>> [accessed 15 October 2023].

<sup>47</sup> Dickens, ‘The Boarding-House (I)’, p. 485.

<sup>48</sup> Butt and Tillotson, pp. 59, 61.

distinct from his early journalism in its use of simile. However much his journalistic training influenced other aspects of his style, Dickensian simile developed mainly in the context of this sketch-writing.

ii. 'Impossible to describe': Journalese into Simile

From another angle, there is one way that Dickens's training in journalism in this period may have led to his similitic tendency. In the reporting of the period, a standard journalistic stratagem, likely to avoid lengthy description, is to say that something is 'impossible to describe' or that it is 'easier to be imagined than described.' This section considers how such phraseology is recycled in Dickens's fictional work and how it is often linked to figurative comparison. As a sketch-writer, he can make figurative use of what as a reporter he would use as an evasive tactic. 'Boz' turns what is 'impossible to describe' in ordinary terms into an exercise in extraordinary simile. Dickens himself draws attention to this journalistic style of writing in the sketch 'Horatio Sparkins.' Mr Malderton is anxious to prevent his tradesman brother-in-law from speaking about his business in the presence of the supposedly aristocratic Horatio:

Mr Malderton, who, knowing the propensity of his brother-in-law, Mr Barton, endured that sort of agony which the newspapers inform us is experienced by the surrounding neighbourhood when a pot-boy hangs himself in a hay-loft, and which is 'much easier to be imagined than described.'<sup>49</sup>

Dickens indicates the typical 'journalese' with quotation marks. Whereas the journalist does not attempt to describe the agony of the 'surrounding neighbourhood,' Dickens uses the newspaper scene itself as the figurative source for describing Mr Malderton,

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<sup>49</sup> Dickens, I, p. 353; originally published in *Monthly Magazine*, Feb 1834.

thereby mocking the hyperbolic impossibility of description with a drawn-out comparison. The comparison is humorously superfluous, since it folds in on itself: the agony of Mr Malderton is like the agony of the ‘surrounding neighbourhood,’ which is in fact ‘much easier to be imagined than described.’ Dickens indicates his own relationship with that journalistic style by both undermining and emphasising its evasive nature.

In his frequent reporting of political speeches and election meetings, Dickens could give ‘to-the-minute’ observations of a scene, as in one report where he describes the interrupting downpour in a lengthy passage, of which the following is an abridged version:

At this period of the business there came on a tremendous shower of rain, which made the multitude fly in all directions, and which made its way through the hustings, and the temporary shelter provided for the reporters. [...] [T]he rain came through the hustings in water-spouts in all directions, leaving no sort of shelter for anyone. The storm continued with inveterate force for half an hour, by which time those on and under the hustings were completely drenched. [...] As to taking notes of the speeches, that was almost wholly out of the question, for as fast as any attempts were made to take notes the torrents were nearly sure to ‘swamp’ them. [...] It rained incessantly [...] and the steam rose in clouds from the saturated clothes of the dense mass in front of the hustings.<sup>50</sup>

The force of the rain, its exact duration, and the description of the vapour rising from the crowd are all details that make the scene come alive for the reader. However, Dickens refrains from giving a detailed description at other times, writing in one report, ‘To describe the bustle and animation and beauty of the city would be impossible.’<sup>51</sup> The real constraints of time are likely the motive for curtailing lengthy description; yet, Dickens seems perfectly capable of giving several and even superfluous details in many of his reports, as seen above in the parenthetical description of the individual laughing

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<sup>50</sup> Dickens, ‘Express from Exeter’.

<sup>51</sup> Dickens, ‘Report from Edinburgh’.

about the ‘wretched remnant’ during an election speech. In a negative sense then, exaggerated impossibility suggests that Dickens, the detail-oriented reporter, can find no *ordinary* language to describe something that strikes his fancy. It will require a ‘new language’ – as in *The Old Curiosity Shop* when Quilp reads the warning letter from Sally Brass: ‘To describe the changes that passed over Quilp’s face [...] would require some new language: such, for power of expression, as was never written, read, or spoken’ (Ch. 67). That ‘new language’ is Dickensian simile, which rarely makes its way into Dickens’s early journalism. Whereas Dickens will write a long passage describing a rainstorm in the hustings, he stops short at other details that are ‘impossible to describe’; and if they are ‘easier to be *imagined* than described,’ they may be easier to be described in figurative rather than non-figurative terms.

Hyperbolic impossibility is a stylistic feature in Dickens’s fictional works throughout his career. Using the CLiC concordance, a search for *\*possibl\**<sup>52</sup> yields results for phrases with *impossible*, and also *possible* and *possibly* in structures as *as x as possible* or *the most x that possibly*. The frequency per 10 000 words of *\*possibl\** is 3.8 over 17 books; the frequency of *impossible* alone is 1.01.<sup>53</sup> To give a better sense of the word’s salience, *impossible* is ranked 924 out of 37 888 word types in AntConc’s frequency rating. The word *wonderful*, in comparison, still characteristic of Dickens’s ebullient language, has a frequency of 0.62, ranking 1471 out of 37 888 word types. The frequent use of *impossible* indicates a propensity to hyperbole, which supports what has been noted as a prominent feature of Dickens’s style.<sup>54</sup> The word *impossible* also serves

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<sup>52</sup> [As noted in the Introduction](#), the asterisks are used so that the search will yield words containing *-possibl-* with different affixes.

<sup>53</sup> The 17 books include Dickens’s 15 novels, *Sketches by ‘Boz,’* and *A Christmas Carol*.

<sup>54</sup> Malcolm Andrews, among many other critics who have noted Dickens’s hyperbolic style, associates hyperbole with humour in *Dickensian Laughter: Essays on Dickens and Humour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): As Dickens ‘unfolds his written narratives with comical exaggeration, we as readers become aware of a heightened and hyperbolic manner of delivery creeping into his style’ (p. 160).

as one more cue for simile in Dickens: it is often ‘impossible to describe’ *x* without using figurative language. Using CLiC Dickens, a search for the phrase *impossible to* yielded 200 hits over all 17 books (a frequency of 0.49). The search revealed how often Dickens links the phrase with figurative description. The following image of search results in alphabetical order conveniently shows examples from both *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and *Bleak House* (1852-3), providing a useful glimpse at novels written in different periods in his career:

in the court. The effects of which movement it is	impossible to	calculate. I shouldn't wonder if it might have already given	BH
tained such possession of his whole nature that it was	impossible to	place any consideration before him which he did not, with	BH
for what purpose, or of what material, it would be	impossible to	say. They look, in colour and in substance, like a	BH
genuine as she looks," rejoined my guardian, "and it is	impossible to	say more for her." ¶ "She's Colour-Sergeant of the Nonpareil battalio	BH
as if her mouth closed with a spring. It is	impossible to	describe how Mr. Bucket gets her out, but he accomplishes	BH
monster with a series of undisguisable yawns. Finding it	impossible to	suppress those yawns by any other process than conversation, she	BH
into your confidence, don't you?" ¶ I think it would be	impossible to	make an admission with more ill will and a worse	BH
much, and never can help thinking of,' and it is	impossible to	describe the use he made of his eyes when he	BR
l the sparkling expectation of that accursed party. It is	impossible to	tell how Joe hated that party wherever it was, and	BR
fter Dolly, such an unaccountable practical joke. It was	impossible to	talk. It couldn't be done. He had nothing left for	BR
ose Barnaby is privy to these circumstances?' ¶ 'Quite	impossible to	say, sir,' returned the locksmith, shaking his head again: 'and	BR
ed the locksmith, shaking his head again: 'and next to	impossible to	find out from him. If what you suppose is really	BR
s pockets when they were not otherwise engaged, it is	impossible to	say what he might have done with them. But the	BR
bystander, and was so suddenly withdrawn that it was	impossible to	tell from whom it came; nor could he see in	BR
had so much impressed him out of doors. It was	impossible to	discard a sense that something serious was going on, and	BR
any one with whom he had talked before; it was	impossible to	tell. She tried every means to discover, but in vain	BR
to the very doors of the gallery, whence it was	impossible to	retreat, even if they had been so inclined, by reason	BR
locks of hair, tags of staylaces, and strings of it's	impossible to	say what; panting for breath, clasping her hands, turning her	BR

Figure 9: Results of search for ‘impossible to *x*’ in CLiC concordance.

When viewed in full, these results show the characteristically hyperbolic ‘impossibility’ of description. The results show that Dickens uses *impossible* sometimes literally, as in the 17<sup>th</sup> example when the rioters are storming the parliament buildings in *Barnaby Rudge*: ‘it was impossible to retreat, even if they had been so inclined’ (Ch.

49). The word is also used idiomatically, as in the fourth example when Mr Jarndyce praises Mrs Bagnet in *Bleak House*: ““Then she is as honest and genuine as she looks,” rejoined my guardian, “and it is impossible to say more for her”” (Ch. 52). The third example, from *Bleak House*, shows how similitic language is triggered by the phrase *it would be impossible to say*. Alan Woodcourt sees the streetsweeper Jo walking through Tom-all-Alone’s, with ‘shapeless clothes hanging in shreds’: ‘Clothes made for what purpose, or of what material, it would be impossible to say. They look, in colour and in substance, like a bundle of rank leaves of swampy growth that rotted long ago’ (Ch. 46). Dickens expresses an inability to describe something while at the same time describing it. However, the figurative description of the clothes as leaves that have ‘rotted long ago’ still indicates that their substance is in fact unrecognisable. The simile thus extends the hyperbolic inability to describe. While it subverts the clarifying nature of simile, the comparison is nonetheless appropriate, since it emphasises that the clothes are completely ragged and undistinguishable as clothing. Dickensian impossibility can also be the impossibility of seeing something in any other way than how Dickens describes it, as in this description from ‘The Boarding House’:

[Mr Calton] used to say of himself that although his features were not regularly handsome, they were striking. They certainly were. It was impossible to look at his face without being reminded of a chubby street-door knocker, half-lion half-monkey; and the comparison might be extended to his whole character and conversation.<sup>55</sup>

It is not so much impossible to describe Mr Calton as it is impossible *not* to describe him as a door knocker. The comparison only ‘*might* be extended’ to the rest of his characterisation; yet it forcibly *is*, as when Mr Calton ‘followed up what everybody said, with continuous double knocks.’<sup>56</sup> The pun on ‘striking’ and the embedded figurative

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<sup>55</sup> Dickens, ‘The Boarding-House (I)’, p. 484.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 487.

language that extends the initial comparison are also ways that Dickens enforces the comparison of Mr Calton to a door knocker. Dickens does not always use ‘impossible’ as a springboard to similitic language, but when he does it serves to emphasise the inadequacy of any *ordinary* description.

This extraordinary language is not normally found in his early reports and reviews where Dickens largely refrains from figurative comparison. In a review of the preparations underway for the opening of the ‘Colosseum’ (July 1835). Dickens writes, ‘the imperfect state in which we saw them last night, renders it impossible even to describe one half of the numerous interesting objects which force themselves, in rapid succession, on the spectator’s attention.’<sup>57</sup> This ‘non-description’ captures the bewildering chaos of the scene: there is too much of everything and everything is indistinct. The journalistic tactic of leaving the scene to the imagination of the reader is effective. While Dickens does not attempt to describe the objects, there is a sense that, if he were to do so, they would ‘forcibly’ remind him of specific sources for comparisons, as in another report from 1835. Satirizing the appearance of the Tories marching in parade, Dickens describes how they come walking with ‘a Crown elevated on a long pole, the general appearance of which forcibly reminded one of May-day.’<sup>58</sup> Dickens seems to relinquish responsibility for a comparison that has been ‘forced’ upon his imagination, hiding his facetiousness behind what might appear as an inevitable resemblance. He uses that ‘objective’ quality of writing in his fiction as a strategy to emphasise the strangeness of an image. In his sketch ‘Astley’s,’ one of the riding masters is described as always wearing ‘a military uniform with a table-cloth inside the

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<sup>57</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘Colosseum’, *Morning Chronicle*, 8 July 1835, p. 3, British Newspaper Archive; listed in Slater as ‘The Colosseum.’

<sup>58</sup> Dickens, II, p. 14; originally published ‘Tory Victory at Colchester,’ *Morning Chronicle*, 10 Jan 1835.

breast of the coat, in which costume he forcibly reminds one of a fowl trussed for roasting.’<sup>59</sup> The ‘table-cloth’ as the cheekily embedded replacement for the riding master’s neckcloth makes it impossible to see him as anything other than a trussed fowl. The image is not forced on Dickens but is rather forced on the reader by Dickens. In effect, what is ‘impossible to describe’ can quickly become, with Dickensian simile, something that is impossible to see in any other way.

### *iii.* Simile as a Popular Trend

The similes in the *Sketches* are seeds of the Dickensian simile that continued to develop throughout his career. Dickens’s sketch-writing in this early period can be seen as an apprenticeship in a certain similitic style that sold for its entertainment value. Other contributors of sketches to magazines in this period also frequently used simile to express irony or comic exaggeration. The sketches consulted for this section in the *Monthly Magazine* and *The Library of Fiction* from the period of Dickens’s earliest writings contain abundant similitic language. After first considering how Dickens’s own similitic style was like these other writings, further comparison with these contemporary sketches shows that his own brand of simile differed in its perplexing or idiosyncratic quality. If simile was used for its entertainment value, Dickens’s own special flair for simile would have heightened his own popular appeal.

In one tale from the *Monthly Magazine*, ‘Matrimony and Moonshine,’ the anonymous writer uses similes to show an ironic contrast between romantic emotions and a prosaic reality. The protagonist, Drost, is madly in love with the beautiful Julia,

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<sup>59</sup> Dickens, I, p. 109; originally published ‘Sketches of London No. 11,’ *Evening Chronicle*, 9 May 1835.



and going to call on her, ‘His blood rushed impetuously through his veins, and the wild animal he rode shot like an arrow by the house.’<sup>60</sup> While they are on their way to live in the rustic cottage that Julia will find suffocatingly boring, ‘Drost looked first at the scenery, then at Julia; their fingers were entwined in each other, like the tender twigs of the forest.’<sup>61</sup> The exaggerated emotions, the ‘wild animal’ (his horse), and the ‘tender twigs’ that reflect Drost’s excitement at the surrounding scenery are comically contrasted with Julia’s disappointment with country life, the ridiculous appearance of their only near neighbours, and their return to city life where they resume the routine of banal social activities. A similar sense of mock-exaggeration is found in the contribution ‘Some Passages in the Life of Francis Loosefish, Esq’ from *The Library of Fiction*.<sup>62</sup>

The first-person narrator Francis Loosefish describes his worn-out clothes as:

[...] a shirt which had stuck to me through good and evil report, with more adhesive attachment than did the shirt of Nessus, the Centaur, to the limbs of Hercules – and two pair of old, exceeding old stockings, such as, to judge them by their appearance, might have been knitted by Mary Queen of Scots, for her husband Darnley.<sup>63</sup>

The classical and historical allusions are comically incongruous comparisons for ordinary items of clothing. Dickens also uses similitic language to show irony or exaggeration and his facetious use of classical or historical sources creates a similar comic effect, as in the sketch ‘Early Coaches’ where porters ‘looking like so many Atlases, keep rushing in and out, with large packages on their shoulders’ and one clerk ‘is standing in front of the fire, like a full-length portrait of Napoleon.’<sup>64</sup> However,

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Matrimony and Moonshine: A Fragment of German Philosophy’, *Monthly Magazine, or British Register*, 7.97 (1834), 32–40 (p. 32).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Dickens published two sketches in *The Library of Fiction* in 1836: ‘The Tuggses of Ramsgate’ and ‘A Little Talk about Spring and the Sweeps.’

<sup>63</sup> ‘Some Passages in the Life of Francis Loosefish, Esq.’, in *The Library of Fiction, or Family Story-Teller; Consisting of Original Tales, Essays, and Sketches of Character* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1836), 1, 57–73 (p. 57).

<sup>64</sup> Dickens, 1, p. 135; originally published ‘Sketches of London No. 3,’ *Evening Chronicle*, 19 Feb 1835.

Dickensian simile will more often take an everyday source for a comparison and distort it. In ‘The Tuggses at Ramsgate,’ for example (also published in *The Library of Fiction*), as the family is looking out for high-society acquaintances at the beach, Captain Waters points out one young lady in the water ‘who, in her bathing costume, looked as if she was enveloped in a patent Mackintosh, of scanty dimensions.’<sup>65</sup> Dickens defamiliarises the typically voluminous raincoat by making it of ‘scanty dimensions.’ The shape of the bathing costume may be similar to the Mackintosh, but the verb ‘enveloped’ is purposefully inadequate here. Whereas the adhesiveness of Francis’s ‘shirt of Nessus’ is clarified by the classical allusion, here the Mackintosh source does not elucidate our understanding of a bathing costume of ‘scanty dimensions’ since the function of a Mackintosh is to completely protect the whole person. A key aspect of Dickensian simile, then, is a sense of the absurd occasioned by distorting what might otherwise be a familiar source of comparison. This greatly distinguishes his similitic style from that of the contemporary sketch-writing of the time.

In the tale of ‘Peter Goff, the Man with his Mouth Open’ from the *Monthly Magazine*, there is an ‘exuberance of simile,’ as Butt and Tillotson might say,<sup>66</sup> that seems to rival Dickens’s. The landlord ‘Yankee’ narrator enjoys accumulating similes in the following passage:

It was terrible cold, as I said before, and Peter would have froze to death if he had not been as tough as a pine-knot. [...] [I]n less than half an hour he found every rag of clothes about him as hard as horn, – in short, he had frozen to the horse’s back, and could not move a limb, any more than if he had been hewed out of a block of stone! – There he sat as stiff as a poker.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Dickens, 1, p. 337; originally published in *The Library of Fiction*, 31 March 1836.

<sup>66</sup> Butt and Tillotson, p. 56; see [Section 1](#).

<sup>67</sup> ‘Peter Goff, the Man with His Mouth Open: A Tale of a Yankee Landlord’, *Monthly Magazine, New Series*, 1.2 (1835), 190–97 (p. 193).

The idiomatic similes reflect the landlord's conversational 'Yankee' style and a popular story-telling mode that people will employ even today. Dickens's own exuberance of simile plays to this colloquial effect, but he favours bizarre or otherwise distorted similes over idiomatic or commonplace ones. In Dickens's sketch 'Hackney Coach Stands,' there are several examples of such unusual figurative comparisons. He describes a coach as being a 'dingy yellow colour (like a bilious brunette).' To compare the yellowing coach to a brown-haired person with liver trouble takes us into a new category of 'dingy yellow'; it is in fact a personification of the coach to which the bad-tempered or spiteful meaning of 'bilious' can easily be attached. It is one of the first instances of Dickens animating an object through a quick similitude qualification that leads to a kind of alternate reality: the coach is not only alive, but out of humour or ill. Then, on the sides of the coach, there is a 'faded coat of arms, in shape something like a dissected bat.'<sup>68</sup> The similitude structure leads to a false clarification, seemingly comparing the unknown target to a more familiar source. The Dickensian simile tricks the reader into feeling that they ought to know what a dissected bat looks like and what 'shape' it is meant to have.

Only one of the pieces consulted in the *Monthly Magazine* and *The Library of Fiction* might compare, at first glance, with Dickens's bizarre similitude style. In this anonymous tale of 1828, the description of the main character, 'the Major,' is as follows:

His face was like the ingenious apex of a carved walking-stick; his arms, like grappling irons. Then his legs seemed attached to his body by way of special favour – extra appendages, borrowed "by the hour;" and the feet belonging to these legs looked like continuations of the same at right angles, or as though Nature had doubled them down, to mark where she had left off.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Dickens, I, p. 85; originally published 'Sketches of London No. 1,' *Evening Chronicle*, 31 Jan 1835.

<sup>69</sup> 'The Major and Myself', *Monthly Magazine, or British Register*, 5.25 (1828), 17–24 (p. 18).

The Major is reified by the similitic language, as are many characters in Dickens. The Major's face is like one of the carved figures atop a walking stick – to show his wooden equanimity – his arms hang down heavily to show his hard but gangly frame. He has been left unfinished by Nature. Upon closer inspection, though, the strange description of the Major is not so strange. It was not uncommon in prose to personify Nature as the fashioner of a character. Dickens implies this in *Oliver Twist*, when saying that the face of one of the old hags in the workhouse, 'distorted into a mumbling leer, resembled more the grotesque shaping of some wild pencil, than the work of Nature's hand' (Ch. 24) – 'Nature's hand' being clearly the more accepted instrument to design the human figure. The 1828 piece is similar to Dickens's playful style in that it makes something more than usual out of the common personification of Nature, presenting her like any bookkeeper or clerk, 'doubling down' the Major's legs 'to mark where she had left off.' The difference between the style of this piece and Dickens's is that while the Major is imagined statically as an object put together haphazardly with borrowed appendages, Dickens tends to 'adverbialise' the objectification of his characters, mingling it with their manner of being, doing, or speaking. Sometimes he does this literally, as when he describes a character in the sketch 'Sentiment': 'Miss Brook Dingwall was one of that numerous class of young ladies who, like adverbs, may be known by their answering to a commonplace question, and doing nothing else.'<sup>70</sup> This might be called 'abstractification' more than objectification, since Dickens's punning comparison of Miss Dingwall is to a grammatical category rather than something concrete. Even when the characterisation could also be described as more static, or adjectival – describing only the appearance of the character – the sources of comparison are often distorted or

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<sup>70</sup> Dickens, I, pp. 318–19; originally published in *Bell's Weekly Magazine*, 7 June 1834.

bizarre, as when Mrs Tibbs thinks that Mrs Bloss ‘looked like a pincushion on castors’ in ‘The Boarding House.’<sup>71</sup>

Writers of the time, including Dickens himself, were aware of the similitic trend. In a story called ‘Miss Smith “At Home;” or, More Smiths!’ (1836), W. H. Wills (later to be Dickens’s collaborator with *Household Words*) describes his character Mr Unit Smith:

[He was] wedged into a recess upon his easy chair, like a half recumbent statue in the niche of a cathedral, – though his well-stuffed footstool, flannel-bound feet, and dissatisfied looks, gave him a much greater similitude to a cross old gentleman troubled with the gout.<sup>72</sup>

By turning the simile into a literal description, the author mocks the need to insert some kind of spontaneously amusing simile. Dickens’s own self-conscious reference to figurative comparisons in his early writings show how he was aware of capitalizing on this popular stylistic trend, as in ‘A Passage in the Life of Mr Watkins Tottle’ where Dickens draws attention to the act of making a comparison:

[Mr Watkins Tottle] lived on an annuity, which was well adapted to the individual who received it, in one respect—it was rather small. He received it in periodical payments on every alternate Monday; but he ran himself out, about a day after the expiration of the first week, as regularly as an eight-day clock; and then, to make the comparison complete, his landlady wound him up, and he went on with a regular tick.<sup>73</sup>

Sometimes Dickens emphasises his similitic language in this way with clever turns of phrase or playing on words; other times, the emphasis is achieved purely through the surreal effect of animation. Commenting on a passage in the sketch, ‘The Steam Excursion,’ where ‘the pigeon-pies looked as if the birds, whose legs were stuck outside,

<sup>71</sup> Dickens, ‘The Boarding-House (II)’, p. 185; see [Section i](#).

<sup>72</sup> W. H. Wills, ‘Miss Smith “At Home;” or, More Smiths!’, in *The Library of Fiction, or Family Story-Teller; Consisting of Original Tales, Essays, and Sketches of Character* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1836), I, 359–73 (pp. 361–62).

<sup>73</sup> Dickens, I, p. 415; originally published in *Monthly Magazine*, 2 January 1835.

were trying to get them in,'<sup>74</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst considers it among the 'key moments in Dickens's development as a writer, as he discovers how to make the most ordinary parts of life seem magically strange.'<sup>75</sup> This 'magically strange' quality of Dickens's writing, which continued to develop throughout his career, is often rooted in unusual similitic description. Dickens's 'exuberance of simile' in his early writings, and his evident awareness of this exuberance in his editing or emphasis of comparisons, is ultimately a result of his struggle to resist anonymity by taking advantage of a popular stylistic trend.

#### iv. The 'Streaky Bacon' Dichotomy: Sentimental Simile

The dichotomy between Dickens's early journalistic and sketch-writing styles is noticeable in his copious use of simile in his fiction. Once he begins to produce his early novels, there is another dichotomy that emerges within that same similitic style. In his first three novels, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*, the exuberant quality of Dickensian simile is rarely found in passages intended to be serious, sad, or sentimental. Just as Dickens adapted his style to the expectations of journalism or to the popular trend of entertaining simile in his sketch-writing, he also adapted his sentimental writing to the expectations associated with the heightened sentimentalism of this period, greatly influenced by the genre of melodrama. This section shows how Dickens's use of simile is evidence of his conflicted attitude towards melodrama. While some of his analogies parody the melodramatic mode, other analogies give his writing a melodramatic flavour through their predictable or emotive quality. This conflict between

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 385; originally published in *Monthly Magazine*, Oct 1834.

<sup>75</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 130.

parody and a serious engagement with the form is captured in Dickens's half-farcical defence of melodrama in *Oliver Twist*. As the narrative shifts from Oliver's miserable plight (upon being re-captured by Fagin's gang) to the comical scene of Mr Bumble's initial wooing of Mrs Mann, the narrator tells us in the infamous 'streaky bacon' manifesto, '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' (Ch. 17). The facetious tone of the passage makes it unclear whether Dickens is subscribing to or satirizing melodrama. The phrases 'all good, murderous melodramas' and the homely comparison to 'streaky, well-cured bacon' appear to mock the genre.

However, the rest of the passage from *Oliver Twist*, not so often quoted, certainly shows that the narrator is in earnest about melodrama as an analogy for life:

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 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. (Ch. 17)

This narrative commentary argues that life alternates between joyful and sad scenes just as quickly as in a melodrama. While the actors in a melodrama will not truly feel these 'violent transitions' and make them seem 'outrageous and preposterous,' the readers, as actors of their own lives, will experience all the changes with authentic feeling.

Moreover, he argues that a novelistic depiction of life ought to capture these stark transitions just as authentically. Inasmuch as his style shows the contrast of 'violent transitions' in feeling, as will be discussed below, Dickens appears to draw on the powers of melodrama as a genre and thus caters to the expectations of readers of the period. Nevertheless, his critical attitude towards melodrama's 'stock' characterisation

shows that he is trying to capture authentic feeling in these alternations between sadness and joy. Ironically, by adhering to the melodramatic contrast between ‘the tragic and the comic scenes,’ Dickens makes use of stock comparisons in his sentimental passages and loses some of the ‘authenticity’ or individuality of his own similitic signature.

Nevertheless, Dickens is clearly critical of melodramatic cliché. In one theatre review (29 September 1835) he writes, ‘None of the other parts require particular notice; they are of the ordinary melodramatic quality, and were performed in the usual manner.’<sup>76</sup> The ‘ordinary melodramatic quality’ indicates a standard type of performance that audiences could expect. Dickens later showed his disapproval of melodramatic cliché in a letter to John Overs, critiquing the latter’s play: ‘The father is such a dolt, and the villain *such* a villain, the girl so especially credulous and the means used to deceive them so very slight and transparent, that the reader *cannot* sympathise with their distresses.’<sup>77</sup> Dickens emphasises the ‘ordinary melodramatic quality’ of the characters that necessitates exaggerated gestures or a lack of authentic feeling. Looking at his own description of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, written a year earlier than his letter to Overs,<sup>78</sup> Dickens might have offered himself the same critique: ‘[Fagin] cast back a dark look, and a threatening motion of the hand, towards the spot where he had left [Sikes]’ (Ch. 44). Fagin seems ‘*such* a villain’ in this description with that typical gesture of shaking his fist. Dickens’s language in this passage from *Oliver Twist* seems to imitate what he had ridiculed earlier in the *Sketches*. In ‘Private Theatres’ (1835), he gives this mock advice to a would-be villain (Richard the Third) when he recites the line, ‘So much for Bu-u-u-uckingham!’: ‘Lay the emphasis on the “uck;” get yourself gradually

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<sup>76</sup> Dickens, ‘Adelphi’.

<sup>77</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 1; ‘To John Overs,’ 27 Sep 1839. John Overs (1805-1843) was a cabinet-maker who asked Dickens for help with his writing.

<sup>78</sup> While this episode appears in the December 1838 number of *Bentley’s Miscellany*, it was likely written August or September 1838, judging by the publication of *Oliver Twist* in novel form on 9 Nov 1838.



into a corner, and work with your right hand, while you're saying it, as if you were feeling your way, and it's sure to do.'<sup>79</sup> In his own depiction of Fagin, Dickens may be attempting an internalisation of feeling that is lacking in the melodramatic performance of Richard the Third. After his threatening gesture, Fagin goes his way, 'busying his bony hands in the folds of his tattered garment, which he wrenched tightly in his grasp, as though there were a hated enemy crushed with every motion of his fingers' (Ch. 44). The use of *as though* is meant to reflect what Fagin is really feeling, vs. the purely external gesture of moving a hand 'as if you were feeling your way.' However, both the facetious and the serious descriptions convey a similar exaggerated external gesture, if with different adverbial qualifications.

The conflict between authentic feeling and melodramatic flourish in Dickens is found in Victorian drama itself. Emily Allen writes about the complex relationship that existed between Victorian novelists and the theatre, showing how writers were influenced by the great variety of both 'realistic' and melodramatic performances emerging throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the 1830s in London, there was a legal distinction between the major theatres which could stage 'legitimate' drama, or spoken dialogue, and the minor theatres which could stage only 'illegitimate' drama, or drama with music: *mélo-drame* (from the French coinage meaning a 'play with music'). In practical terms, however, the theatres produced a mix of both styles, and the major theatres began producing melodramas to attract more audiences, 'thus remaining financially afloat in a world that increasingly favoured the melodramatic and spectacular.'<sup>80</sup> Melodrama as an accepted theatrical genre thus developed out of popular

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<sup>79</sup> Dickens, I, p. 122; originally published 'Sketches of London No. 19,' *Evening Chronicle*, 11 August 1835.

<sup>80</sup> Emily Allen, 'The Victorian Novel and Theatre', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1–19 (p. 2) <<https://doi-org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199533145.013.0028>> [accessed 20 May 2020].

so-called illegitimate spectacle, such as pantomime, where spoken dialogue was not permitted and song, dance, and exaggerated gestures were used to communicate plot and character. Types of characters in these earlier spectacles were easily recognisable precisely to fulfil audience expectations of standard plots. True to its origins, Victorian melodrama also evolved around sentimental stories of good vs. evil shown through stock villains and heroes, and contrived plots.<sup>81</sup>

The literary culture of the period also shows the influence of melodrama, and Dickens's work is no exception. Melodrama is literally the source of several figurative comparisons in Dickens's first novels. In *The Pickwick Papers*, while hiding in the garden of a ladies' boarding house in an attempt to foil one of Jingle's nefarious plots, Mr Pickwick is almost discovered by a servant-girl, and 'drew in his head again, with the swiftness displayed by that admirable melodramatic performer, Punch, when he lies in wait for the flat-headed comedian with the tin box of music' (Ch 16). This simile may have been the subconscious reason that Douglas-Fairhurst calls Mr Pickwick 'a refugee from the world of pantomime' whose shortness makes him look like a slapstick clown.<sup>82</sup> The 'Punch' puppet shows and pantomime both have their origins in Italian 'Commedia dell'arte,' and although they developed separately, the puppet shows with their typical cast of characters and their slapstick comedy were pantomimic in style. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, moreover, characters perform on and off the stage, aware of their melodramatic presence. Some figurative descriptions take on a meta-theatrical sense, as when Mrs Crummles introduces herself to Nicholas and Smike, and walks towards them 'as tragic actresses cross when they obey a stage direction' (Ch. 23). The simile shows

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<sup>81</sup> Rohan McWilliam, 'Melodrama', in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), pp. 54–66 (pp. 56–57) <<https://doi-org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/10.1002/9781444342239.ch4>> [accessed 20 May 2020].

<sup>82</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 195.

Mrs Crummles's awareness of her own melodramatic presence. Nevertheless, even before we meet the Crummeles and their theatrical troupe, we see Nicholas and John Browdie exchange with each other 'that peculiarly expressive scowl with which the cut-and-thrust counts, in melodramatic performances, inform each other they will meet again' (Ch. 9). The 'cut-and-thrust counts' refer to stock characters in the melodrama, and the theatrical encounter parodies the emotional situation created by Fanny Squeers and her friend, 'Tilda Price. Nicholas finds himself a rival with Browdie for Miss Price simply because Fanny's unfounded jealousy has made him one: like an actor's gesture in a melodrama, his 'expressive scowl' is purely externalised emotion.

*Oliver Twist* contains no similes that are directly sourced from the theatre, except for the elaborate analogy of the 'streaky bacon.' As noted above, the analogy itself may be mocking the genre; but melodrama itself is never used as a parodying source of comparison. Nonetheless, Paul Schlicke has commented that *Oliver Twist* is the 'most melodramatic of Dickens's novels':

In language, characterisation, and action *Oliver Twist* is by far the most melodramatic of Dickens's novels, even after revisions to reduce its excess, and Dickens's deep familiarity with the theatre is everywhere in evidence: the rhetorical flourish of speeches, accompanied by violent gestures, the moral polarisation of characters, and improbable plot by which the story's resolution is achieved. [...] Theatricality is the source at once of the artistic limitations of *Oliver Twist* and of its supreme power.<sup>83</sup>

The same melodramatic elements are also present in *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, but parodied because of the auto-referential theatrical nature of the comparisons used. *Oliver Twist*'s theatricality, meanwhile, is entrenched in the melodramatic mode. The style adapts to the alternating 'tragic and comic scenes' without obvious commentary. Schlicke does not clarify what he means by the 'supreme

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<sup>83</sup> Paul Schlicke, *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 440.

power' of *Oliver Twist*'s theatricality, unless it be that there have been more dramatisations of *Oliver Twist* than of any other novel of Dickens<sup>84</sup>; but theatricality – and specifically melodrama – is the source of a certain artistic limitation not only in *Oliver Twist* but in *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* as well. The commitment to the melodramatic mode leads to a lack of Dickensian simile in Dickens's more serious or sentimental passages.

As noted in [Section iii](#), Dickens's 'apprenticeship' in the sketch-writing trade influenced the development of Dickensian simile in the context of a comic style of the period. The use of simile in the melodramatic style of the period influenced Dickens's writing as well. Several of the serious or sentimental stories by other writers from the *Monthly Magazine* and *The Library of Fiction* in this early period use conventional or stock comparisons. In 'The Guerilla' by James Sheridan Knowles, for example, the cold face of 'the Senor' [sic] is described: 'There was no effort, no struggle, no more than in a rock upon which water breaks, leaving it as it found it.'<sup>85</sup> There is nothing obviously unusual in this depiction of the villainous 'Senor.' Throughout the story, the similes are never used as entertaining asides: the focus is on plot and character, both of which are of the 'ordinary melodramatic quality.' Dickens demonstrates a similarly serious commitment in *Oliver Twist* to Fagin's role as the villain:

As [Fagin] glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal. (Ch. 19)

Even if the comparison is elaborate, the reptilian source used for the simile is not strange in the same way as a 'pincushion on castors' is strange. No unusual or absurd simile is

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 441.

<sup>85</sup> Sheridan Knowles, 'The Guerilla', in *The Library of Fiction, or Family Story-Teller; Consisting of Original Tales, Essays, and Sketches of Character* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1837), II, 57–75 (p. 67).

allowed to undermine the depiction of Fagin, suffusing him with as much ‘ordinary melodramatic quality’ as any villain on the stage.

In his study of Dickens as ‘Linguistic Innovator,’ Knud Sørensen notes that, ‘except when he is overpowered by his own pathos, Dickens has an uncannily fine ear for language.’<sup>86</sup> Sørensen does not elaborate on Dickens’s lack of linguistic innovation when he is thus ‘overpowered,’ but certainly Dickens’s first three novels are not the last to show a stylistic difference between his comic vs. sentimental passages. Nevertheless, it is especially in Dickens’s earlier work that Dickensian simile practically disappears when he is immersed in his sentimental scenes: there is a distinct contrast between his use of simile in ‘the tragic and the comic scenes.’ In this way, Dickens holds to the streaky bacon alternation of his own metaphor. The different digressions in *The Pickwick Papers* often accentuate the alternation of styles in the ‘tragic and comic scenes.’ The chapter with the inserted ‘Madman’s Manuscript,’ for example, is a parody of antiquarian discoveries where Pickwick and his friends celebrate the ‘strange and curious inscription of unquestionable antiquity’ that they find on a stone outside a cottage. The manuscript itself, meanwhile, is not parodic. If heightened in tone, the similitic language conveys a serious attempt to represent madness. The madman declares what a fine thing it is to be mad, ‘to be peeped at like a wild lion through the iron bars’; madness gleamed from his eyes ‘like fire’; and he could have snapped an iron bar ‘like a twig’ (Ch. 11). There is nothing extraordinary about these similes. Dickens himself might label these similes of ‘ordinary melodramatic quality’ for their expected effect in the narrative. However, there is no sense that Dickens is purposefully using such clichés

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<sup>86</sup> Knud Sørensen, ‘Charles Dickens: Linguistic Innovator’, *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*, 65.3, 237–47 (p. 238).

to parody them as such. Rather, by refraining from unusual language, Dickens does not distract from the intended emotional impact of the inserted tale.

Notwithstanding the ‘Madman’s Manuscript’ and other sombre digressions in the novel, George J. Worth calls *The Pickwick Papers* a ‘mock melodrama,’ arguing that the novel subverts the tragic elements of melodrama by viewing the world ‘in predominantly comic and optimistic terms.’<sup>87</sup> Worth notes that only four of the nine inserted tales in *The Pickwick Papers* are more ‘sombre’ in tone, and that they are not melodramatic in the sense that there are no dramatic scenes or speeches; yet in the scene he quotes from ‘The Convict’s Return,’ the figurative language used is of the ‘ordinary melodramatic quality’: ‘The old man uttered a loud yell which rang through the lonely fields like the howl of an evil spirit. His face turned black: the gore rushed from his mouth and nose, and dyed the grass a deep dark red, as he staggered and fell’ (Ch. 6). Worth argues that the scene is ‘too short and crude to be genuinely melodramatic’ and that ‘the scene is over before much feeling can be aroused in the reader.’<sup>88</sup> Besides the fact that it is difficult to ascertain in any case how much feeling can be aroused in readers, the simile of ‘the howl of an evil spirit’ does indicate a tactic to incite feelings of horror. The similitic language itself is unremarkable. He is not trying to perform something outside of the expectations of the genre. Worth downplays any potentially tragic turns in the novel, such as when Pickwick leaves prison with a new and troubled understanding of humanity (Ch. 45). Worth argues that Pickwick immediately enters new comic scenes that erase the effect of the sad passages.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> George J. Worth, *Dickensian Melodrama: A Reading of the Novels* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas, 1978), p. 38.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

Even if *The Pickwick Papers* is predominantly comic, the more sombre passages do show a marked difference in style. Dickens's use of simile is an enormous clue, for where he might use an unusually fanciful comparison, he chooses to use something typical. In the Fleet prison, for example, the dying prisoner asks the window to be opened, and the different sounds of the street are compared to the 'breaking of the billows of the restless sea of life that rolled heavily on' – almost as heavily as the language used here. When the man dies, 'he had grown so like death in life, that they knew not when he died' (Ch. 44). The tone is never modified by any of Dickens's more idiosyncratic comparisons. When Pickwick immediately bounces into new comic adventures, it is because the tone has switched to the comic mode. Douglas-Fairhurst approaches a similar idea of contrasts in *The Pickwick Papers* when he argues that 'Dickens's comedy is repeatedly interrupted' by the different digressions and that these changes of discourse 'come close to transforming the Pickwick Club's rambles into a style.'<sup>90</sup> However, he does not focus on how those changes of discourse come about, seeing them less as alternating styles than as a means to develop one style through maturing themes and characterisation. He argues:

[Dickens begins moving] away from a world of farce, in which characters simply bounced from incident to incident like balls on a pinball machine, and into a literary environment where breadth of experience also produced depth of understanding. Turning the pages of *Pickwick* would involve peeling away thick layers of personality until each character's heart was fully exposed to view.<sup>91</sup>

Douglas-Fairhurst's own figurative analogies here show how contagious is Dickens's similitic prose.

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<sup>90</sup> Douglas-Fairhurst, p. 211.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Neither Worth's insistence on the comic mode nor Douglas-Fairhurst's preference for serious character development allows for the possibility that Dickens's similitic style changes according to the alternating 'tragic and comic scenes' in the novel, wherever these occur. Although Douglas-Fairhurst favours the move 'away from a world of farce,' the more farcical passages of *The Pickwick Papers*, rather than the scenes producing 'depth of understanding' (as in the prison), reveal the Dickensian simile that will become a distinctive stylistic feature in his work. This is unsurprising when we consider how, as discussed above, his similitic flair developed in competition with a certain style of comic writing in the sketch-writing of the period. The following examples show the exaggerated or absurd style of this similitic language. At the cricket match of the All-Muggletonians vs. the Dingley Dellers, Mr Pickwick is greeted by a couple of cricketers: the appearance of the first gentleman, 'whose body and legs looked like half a gigantic roll of flannel, elevated on a couple of inflated pillow-cases' is completed by the second gentleman, 'who strongly resembled the other half of the roll of flannel aforesaid' (Ch. 7). Like the Mackintosh-bathing-costume comparison, there is a weird physical resemblance of the cricketers' outfits to rolls of flannel and pillow-cases; but the need to imagine a 'gigantic' roll of flannel somehow suspended on top of two pillow-cases manipulates the source to fit the comparison. To describe one cricketer in this way is comical. When the next cricketer to speak is then the 'other half of the roll of flannel,' what might have seemed an absurd but tangential comparison is extended to create a strange impression that all the cricketers are rolls of flannel walking about. Sometimes the source of the comparison is not only unusual but even unintelligible. One example is when Pickwick sees Lady Snuphanuph coming towards him at her evening party with 'two other ladies of an ancient and whist-like appearance' (Ch. 35). It is difficult to imagine what it means that the ladies look 'whist-like'; except that from their



faces and appearance, Pickwick understands with trepidation that their intention is to play whist. The simple affixing of *-like* encapsulates the intention and the threat. It is not a literal comparison; but it is not an obvious simile, either. It is a humorous source of comparison that only works by unpacking it to process that the reference of *whist-like* is not immediate and concrete but abstract and situational. This kind of Dickensian simile is only found in the comic passages in *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens does not yet integrate this aspect of his style into his more serious commentary.

*Oliver Twist*, containing as it does the passage of Dickens's streaky bacon manifesto, may be expected to show a greater distinction between 'the tragic and comic scenes.' This may be true for much of the novel, but is not necessarily the case in the opening chapters, as the narrator's satirical tone lends some dark humour to the sad beginning of Oliver's tale. The details surrounding his mother's death are related in a facetious tone, including the 'consolatory perspective' on life of the grotesque nurse, who comments that the dying woman's sorrow at leaving Oliver orphaned is disproportionate: 'when she has lived as long as I have [...] and had thirteen children of her own, and all on 'em dead except two [...] she'll know better than to take on in that way' (Ch. 1). The narrator also comments with mock approval on the laws for poor relief:

[The system of poor relief was] rather expensive at first, in consequence of the undertaker's bill, and the necessity of taking in the clothes of all the paupers, which fluttered loosely on their wasted, shrunken forms, after a week or two's gruel. But the number of workhouse inmates got thin as well as the paupers; and the board were in ecstasies. (Ch. 2)

The last punning comparison of thinning numbers to thinning paupers is a taste of the satirical humour in these first chapters. The facetious tone is probably the result of *Oliver Twist's* evolution in *Bentley's Miscellany*. Oliver is born in the town of Mudfog, which is described as a comic landscape in the satirical paper written before the first

chapter of *Oliver Twist*: the ‘Public Life of Mr Tulrumble, Once Mayor of Mudfog.’ Mudfog abounds with Dickens’s exuberant similitic description. The mayor’s triumphal arrival at Mudfog Hall is completely deflated by his reception: ‘A cracked trumpet from the front garden of Mudfog Hall produced a feeble flourish, as if some asthmatic person had coughed into it accidentally.’<sup>92</sup> That accidental cough encapsulates the town’s indifferent or nonplussed attitude towards Tulrumble’s accession as mayor. This is further illustrated by the fog rising on the day of the mayoral procession ‘with a sleepy, sluggish obstinacy, which bade defiance to the sun, who had got up very blood-shot about the eyes, as if he had been at a drinking-party over-night, and was doing his day’s work with the worst possible grace.’<sup>93</sup> The *as if* phrase gives the fanciful reason for the sun’s redness through the fog and also reflects the state, no doubt, of some of Mudfog’s inhabitants.

Mudfog as the immediate context of *Oliver Twist*’s literal birthplace is a place where Dickens uses this abundant and transformative similitic description; but Dickensian simile seems confined to the borders of Mudfog, which ceases to be mentioned as *Oliver Twist* progresses. While the satirical tone does continue into the first chapters, Dickens’s style adapts to the pathos in Oliver’s narrative. After Oliver has been forcibly returned to Fagin’s den, and falls asleep at the end of the chapter, he is described as being so pale that he ‘looked like death.’ The facile simile, also used for the [prisoner in \*The Pickwick Papers\*](#), might pass unnoticed if it were not extended to reflect on Oliver’s innocence:

[...] not death as it shews [sic] in shroud and coffin, but in the guise it wears when life has just departed; when a young and gentle spirit has, but an instant, fled to Heaven: and the gross air of the world has not had time to breathe upon the changing dust it hallowed. (Ch. 19)

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<sup>92</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘Public Life of Mr. Tulrumble, Once Mayor of Mudfog’, *Bentley’s Miscellany*, 1837-1868, January 1837, 48–63 (p. 56) <<https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/historical-periodicals/public-life-mr-tulrumble-once-mayor-mudfog/docview/6395185/se-2?accountid=14511>> [accessed 3 March 2020].

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

This description might also be called Dickens's typical 'exuberance of simile' in that it extends the initial simile unnecessarily; yet the purpose is not to relish any unusual image but to manipulate an emotive response. This depiction of Oliver's innocence, and the death of the prisoner in *The Pickwick Papers*, were written after the death of Dickens's beloved sister-in-law Mary Hogarth in May 1837. The analogies capture the reality of Dickens's experience of her passing. In a letter written around this time, he describes a visit to Mary's grave in this way: 'the grass around was as green and the flowers as bright, as if nothing of the earth in which they grew could ever wither or fade.'<sup>94</sup> Like Oliver's spirit, Mary's also hallows the earth where her body is laid. Thus, the extended simile *like death* is Dickens's attempt to convey the authentic feeling involved in one of life's 'violent transitions' from joy to sadness. That authenticity of feeling is nevertheless making use of expected tropes. In this way, Dickens is less authentically 'Dickensian' when he is trying to be authentically sentimental.

Similarly, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, when Nicholas compares Madeline's room to heaven and Madeline herself to an angel, the passage contains an abundance of simile, but not of the Dickensian kind:

He felt as though the smile of Heaven were on the little chamber; as though the beautiful devotion of so young and weak a creature had shed a ray of its own on the inanimate things around, and made them beautiful as itself; as though the halo with which old painters surround the bright angels of a sinless world played about a being akin in spirit to them, and its light were visibly before him. (Ch. 59)

It is possible that Dickens is gently mocking the exaggerated devotion of Nicholas – and the accumulation of similes with *as though ... as though* suggests purposeful amplification – but the tone is not exaggeration for exaggeration's sake. The over-

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<sup>94</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 1; 'To Unknown Correspondent,' 8 June 1837.

extension of the simile, as in the example from *Oliver Twist*, does show a Dickensian habit of hyperbolic sentimentality or even ‘too-much-ness,’ which will be explored in the following chapter. The underlying analogy itself, nonetheless, is a conventional comparison of someone being ‘like an angel’; in this way, Dickens’s similitic style adapts to the ‘tragic’ mode of melodrama to arouse pathos. Even the contemporary sensibility, at least on one occasion, was opposed to Dickens’s sentimental language. In the *Bentley’s Miscellany* version of chapter four, when Oliver pleads with Mr Bumble, he puts his hand on his heart and says, ‘Oh! sir, don’t be cross to me. I feel as if I had been cut here, sir, and it was all bleeding away.’<sup>95</sup> Kathleen Tillotson suggests that the lines were removed in response to G. H. Lewes’s complaint about the ‘incongruity’ and ‘absurdity’ of Oliver’s use of rhetorical flourish.<sup>96</sup> Dickens may also have seen the incongruity of the simile himself in a chapter that still employs an overarching facetious tone and focuses on the absurdity of Mr Bumble’s self-importance. If retained, Oliver’s desperate analogy would lead to inconsistency in the melodramatic alternation of styles, since the ‘clown,’ Bumble, has not yet left the stage.

Bumble the clown is himself always ready with the ‘perfect’ simile. If Mr Peggotty, quoted at the [beginning of the Introduction](#), cannot find a ‘sufficiently approving’ simile for Mrs Gummidge in *David Copperfield*, Mr Bumble does not bother with the appropriateness of his own comparisons in *Oliver Twist*. Asking Mr Sowerberry if he knows anyone who wants a boy, he describes Oliver as ‘a dead-weight; a millstone, as I may say; round the parochial throat’ (Ch. 4). The irony of Bumble’s pompous biblical reference is that it comes from a passage where Christ warns that ‘if anyone

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<sup>95</sup> Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p. 23. Lewes responded to this number of *Bentley’s Miscellany* in a *National Magazine* piece (Dec 1837). Tillotson notes the deleted passage from the original text in *Bentley’s Miscellany*.

<sup>96</sup> Tillotson, ‘Introduction’, p. xxxvi.

causes one of these little ones [...] to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea' (Matthew 18.6). Bumble, careless of what may happen to Oliver after he is sold off, is self-righteously unaware of condemning himself with Christ's words through misusing the analogy. At other times Bumble's similes are woefully inadequate, as when he tells Mrs Mann: 'That's the way with these people, ma'am; give 'em a apron full of coals to-day: and they'll come back for another, the day after to-morrow, as brazen as alabaster'; and 'The matron expressed her entire concurrence in this intelligible simile' (Ch. 23). The simile is *unintelligible*, of course, alabaster and brass being practically opposite substances. Dickens creates humour by making a parody of the natural tendency to use similes as emphasis, making Bumble literally bumble the idiomatic expression *as bold as brass*. These linguistic jokes strictly belong to the 'comic scenes,' bound up as they are in the speech of a buffoonish character. Even when this character physically enters the melodramatic setting of the scene with Monks in Ch. 37, the jokes are still mainly confined to his natural comedic environment. Bumble is allowed only 'one stroke of facetiousness' during the conversation with Monks. Mrs Bumble wants to ask Monks 'two questions' during their interview: "'You may ask,'" said Monks, with some show of surprise; "but whether I answer or not is another question." / "'-Which makes three,'" observed Mr. Bumble, essaying a stroke of facetiousness' (Ch. 38).

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens uses the dialogue of absurd characters to parody more common types of similitic expressions. Mr Mantalini's unctuousness and extravagance are echoed in his unnecessarily profuse language. He describes his wife as 'a pure angelic rattlesnake,' juxtaposing two opposites, like brass and alabaster. When he attempts to make another comparison, he trails off: 'as quiet and comfortable as-as-as demnition.' The narrator explains that he is 'rather at a loss for a simile' (Ch. 34). The

brief narratorial interjection emphasises one aspect of the comic business of Mantalini's character, which is his gregarious habit of trying to find figurative comparisons for everything. Mr Witterly is another ridiculously posturing character in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Showing his delight upon welcoming Sir Mulberry, he warns Mrs Witterly not to become too excited, explaining:

Mrs Witterly is of a most excitable nature, Sir Mulberry. The snuff of a candle, the wick of a lamp, the bloom on a peach, the down on a butterfly. You might blow her away, my lord; you might blow her away. (Ch. 27)

In Mr Witterly's obvious relishing of this poetic extravagance, Dickens parodies such typical sources of figurative comparison. The narrative further satirises Witterly's poetic disclaimer with the commentary: 'Sir Mulberry seemed to think that it would be a great convenience if the lady could be blown away' (Ch. 27). The Witterlys are of the 'ordinary melodramatic quality' in their incapacity for original thought and their over-acting. It is not a coincidence that immediately after Mr Witterly's poetical outburst, Mrs Witterly declares 'with a faint smile' that she takes 'such an interest in the drama' (Ch. 27); and when Kate first meets her, she is found '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' (Ch 21). The irony of Mrs Witterly's obviously studied 'unstudied attitude' associates her with the stock characterisation of melodrama, and this in turn is associated with Mr Witterly's cliché comparisons.

Dickens thus mocks typical comparisons of 'ordinary quality' in his comic mode of writing, but he freely uses the same kinds of cliché in his own 'tragic scenes.' In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Ralph Nickleby leaves the city, 'slinking off like a thief; groping with his hands, when first he got into the street, as if he were a blind man.' This, even more than Fagin's 'threatening gesture' in *Oliver Twist*, is an echo of the early sketch

‘Private Theatres,’ [quoted above](#). Unlike the explicit theatricality of the sketch of ‘working with your right hand [...] as if you are feeling your way,’ Ralph’s blind groping is meant to be taken seriously; but the external gesture is the same as that of the absurd representation of Richard the Third. Dickensian simile is absent from the scene. Dark clouds follow Ralph, ‘coming mournfully and slowly up, like a shadowy funeral train’ (Ch 62); the figurative foreshadowing of his death in the pathetic fallacy is clear. There is nothing unnaturally distorted about the source of the comparison that would render it unusual or incongruent. In an earlier theatre review, Dickens ridicules the acting of another Ralph, a character in J. B. Buckstone’s *The Dream at Sea*: ‘Ralph, who has fallen off a rock, and damaged himself irreparably, then confesses his share in the affair, and dies melo-dramatically [sic].’<sup>97</sup> The use of ‘damaged’ as if Ralph is an inanimate object that is broken ‘irreparably’ highlights the external posturing and lack of genuine feeling in melodramatic acting. However, in Dickens’s representation of his own Ralph, the similes, as typical tropes, also fulfil the expectations of melodramatic tragedy.

#### v. Conclusion: The ‘Limitations and Power’ of Dickensian Dichotomies

Referring to the quotation from Paul Schlicke [discussed above](#), that ‘theatricality is the source at once of the artistic limitations of *Oliver Twist* and of its supreme power,’<sup>98</sup> this chapter will close by discussing the limitations and power of Dickens’s dichotomies of style in his early writings. The limitations caused by Dickens’s adherence to the

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<sup>97</sup> Dickens, II, p. 21; ‘Review of J. B. Buckstone’s *The Dream at Sea*, *Morning Chronicle*, 24 November 1835.

<sup>98</sup> Schlicke, p. 440.

melodramatic mode are clear. Dickensian simile is almost completely limited to the ‘comic scenes’ of these early novels and the similitic language in the ‘tragic scenes’ fulfils the expectations associated with arousing pathos or horror. Nevertheless, as noted above, Dickens’s use of typical comparisons and manipulation of expected emotions conflicts with his own satirising of the same at other moments. In *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination*, Tore Rem neatly summarises this conflict:

It is partly because of the potential for ambivalence in all parody, but most of all because of the general quality of Dickens’s humour, that this embracing of both the ‘preposterous’ melodrama and the parodies of the same mode takes place. On a level of modalities, the parody [...] is neither absolute negation nor absolute affirmation, as it opens up and creates space for ambiguity [...]. By singling out the traits of melodrama in his parody, Dickens targets the mode in general, and this engenders a complicated interplay between the serious and parodic modalities that he employs.<sup>99</sup>

This ‘complicated interplay’ is shown when Dickens both caters to the popular appeal of melodramatic sentiment and then parodies melodrama by ‘singling out’ the same traits. As Rem comments, Dickens creates ‘space for ambiguity’ through his parodic representation of melodramatic traits: there is always the potential in his more serious scenes for parodic undertones – as will be illustrated below. This kind of ambiguity is the ‘supreme power’ of Dickens that begins to emerge from the dichotomy of styles in the melodramatic mode.

This ambiguity or incongruity of style begins to appear more in *Oliver Twist* than in *The Pickwick Papers*. As *The Pickwick Papers* is more predominantly comic in tone, its digressions into the melodramatic ‘tragic’ mode are more obviously distinct in style. On the other hand, the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist* are intermittently both serious and comic in style, as noted above, and the similitic language reflects this. As the novel progresses, the sad or sentimental scenes are clearly distinguished from lighter, comedic

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<sup>99</sup> Rem Tore, *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination* (New York: AMS Press, 2002), p. 37.



passages; but in the opening chapters, Dickensian simile introduces an incongruous note into what would otherwise be a sombre scene. In the example [mentioned in the Introduction](#), the frightened Oliver sees the coffins in the undertaker's shop as 'gloomy and deathlike,' and then, in a rapid shift of tone, the coffin-lids are described as looking 'like high-shouldered ghosts with their hands in their breeches-pockets' (Ch. 5). Harvey Sucksmith says, 'the macabre description of Oliver's first night among the coffins at the undertaker's is carefully related from Oliver's viewpoint.'<sup>100</sup> However, Sucksmith does not remark that it is only the odd comparison to 'high-shouldered ghosts' that gives evidence of a child's innocent perspective. As in *Great Expectations*, which will be discussed in Chapter Six, Dickens shows how childish impressions can associate horror with the most commonplace and even ludicrous objects. By this token, the adjectives 'gloomy and deathlike' describing the coffins are less likely to be associated with the child Oliver's viewpoint and show an inconsistency of style in one passage. Nevertheless, that serio-comic comparison foreshadows the style of figurative descriptions in Dickens's later works.

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, the similitude styles normally remain distinct between the sentimental and the comedic scenes. However, in the depiction of the Squeerses and Dotheboys Hall, there is a tragi-comic mixture of figurative comparison that demonstrates the 'potential for ambivalence' mentioned above. The depiction of the Squeerses generally belongs to the comic writing style; but, as in the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist*, the satirical and even ludicrous humour contrasts with the overarching themes of child abuse and corruption. From the first description of Mr Squeers, he is a

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<sup>100</sup> Harvey Peter Sucksmith, *The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 101.

paradox of comical villainy: his one-eyed and ‘sinister’ expression is contrasted with his ill-fitting suit:

[...] he wore a white neckerchief with long ends, and a suit of scholastic black; but his coat sleeves being a great deal too long, and his trousers a great deal too short, he appeared ill at ease in his clothes, and as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable. (Ch. 4)

Squeers’s disguise is not a disguise at all. He is transparently a villain; and the irony of the *as if* phrase is that Squeers, and his co-conspirators in the shape of righteous step-fathers, etc., can never really be fooled by his false respectability. Once in Dotheboys Hall, however, Nicholas’s first introduction to the mistreated pupils is their appearance as ‘vicious-faced boys, brooding, with leaden eyes, like malefactors in a jail.’ This is not meant as a comical aside but to show the wretched transformation through mistreatment of innocent children into felons. That tone suddenly changes when Mrs Squeers begins to serve the ‘brown composition’ of their food, ‘which looked like diluted pincushions without the covers, and was called porridge’ (Ch. 8). As with the image of the dissected bat [discussed above](#), the similitude structure prepares the reader for a clarifying image; but it is not easy to imagine what a diluted pincushion without its cover is meant to look like. As when Jo’s rags in *Bleak House* are compared to leaves that have ‘rotted long ago’ (Ch. 46), the comparison undermines its own source as in fact unrecognisable. The image of the pincushion porridge stands out as a weirdly unintelligible simile; and if it does not quite render the horrible scene as completely ludicrous it at least adds entertainment value to what really should not be an entertaining spectacle. Such Dickensian simile contrasts noticeably with the similes of ‘ordinary melodramatic quality’ in other sad or sentimental passages and leads to an incongruous enjoyment of a distressing scene that becomes a characteristic aspect of Dickens’s later writing.

Most critics will associate Dickensian melodrama with the theatricality of speeches and gestures in the novels. However, analysing Dickens's similitic language reveals the difference in style between his comic and more serious or sentimental passages. This linguistic dichotomy demonstrates his adherence to the melodramatic streaky bacon manifesto in *Oliver Twist*. Even if Dickens satirises and criticises melodramatic conventions, advocating genuine emotions in his comparison of real life to melodrama or pantomime,<sup>101</sup> in his attempt to depict truthful emotions, he ironically uses stock figurative descriptions of the 'ordinary melodramatic quality.' He resorts in a way to the journalistic evasion of saying that something is 'more easily imagined than described,' for there is the same unwillingness to launch into a fanciful image that is out of keeping with the expectations of the genre. Dickens the reporter is aware of the figurative possibilities implicit in something that is otherwise 'impossible to describe': that early dichotomy between his journalistic and sketch-writing styles is resolved by pursuing the popular appeal of his fictional writing and becoming 'Boz.' The second dichotomy that emerges within his fictional writing is less easily resolved, for Dickens caters to another kind of popular style when he switches suddenly between 'the tragic and the comic scenes.' Just as he capitalises on the entertainment value of simile, so he capitalises on its melodramatic value. It is when Dickens loses the inhibitions of genre – journalistic or melodramatic – that he is at his most 'Dickensian,' demonstrated by the flashes of incongruous humour in his use of figurative comparison. Melodramatic cliché will continue to influence Dickens's style in his later work; however, his distinctive similitic language will become more consistently integrated within the narrative of his novels.

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<sup>101</sup> Dickens, I, pp. 500-507; Dickens uses pantomime as another analogy for life in one of his 'Stray Chapters by Boz' in *Bentley's Miscellany*: 'The Pantomime of Life' (1837).

### Chapter Three: Dickens's Narrator-Persona (1840-44)

#### *i.* 'One Might Fancy': The Narrator of the *Notes*

In his earliest writings, Dickens played with a common tendency to use simile for entertainment, and he also employed the typically melodramatic similes that characterised sentimental literature of the period. As he became a more established author in the 1840s, Dickens continued to experiment with different genres of writing; however, an individual narratorial voice began to emerge from the variety of narrative styles. Especially in his travelogues of 1842 and 1846, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy*, Dickens created a 'narrator-persona' that was closely associated with himself. Chapter Four will discuss *American Notes and Pictures From Italy* further in relation to the persona Dickens created for himself in his letters; this chapter, meanwhile, will focus on the relationship between the first travelogue, *American Notes*, and the texts of the first half of the decade: *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4). The first section of this chapter demonstrates how the voice of 'Dickens' as the narrator of the *American Notes* is linked through a self-conscious use of similitic language to the voice of the narrator in his other works of this period (1840-44). Some of these texts have more instances than others of what I have called Dickensian simile – unusual, absurd, or exaggerated figurative analogy – but whenever the narrative deliberately indulges in such similitic language, the style of a unique narrator-persona is revealed. An almost self-indulgent style of comparison becomes a characteristic trait of a narrator-persona whom Dickens invites the reader to associate with himself. Dickens *seems* to dissociate himself

from his more fanciful imagery with the excuse that he is only passively responding to his ‘fancy’ – a concept that seems related to Coleridge’s distinction between the Fancy and the Imagination.<sup>1</sup> However, this tactic only attracts more attention to Dickens’s unusual figurative comparisons. The round-about phrasing or ‘periphrasis’ surrounding some comparisons further emphasises the self-conscious style of Dickens’s analogies: extravagant or convoluted language attracts attention to the act of comparison.

The development in the 1840s of a narrator-persona directly associated with himself has much to do with Dickens’s recognisable authorial voice, which readers had already come to expect by that time. In the *American Notes*, Dickens wrote purposefully as ‘himself’ (by now a literary celebrity), transmitting the observations made during his trip to the United States and Canada in 1842. It was the first time he traded on his name and reputation in this way; yet it is something he could afford to do, for his reputation was well established by the time of his American tour. *The Pickwick Papers* had earned him immediate popularity from its serialisation 1836-37, but he was still officially ‘Boz’ until the first publication of *Oliver Twist* in novel form (November 1838), when Dickens did not want the pseudonym to appear on the title page as initially planned. ‘Boz’ was finally replaced by ‘Charles Dickens, author of “The Pickwick Papers”’ on the title page and in the advertisements for the novel.<sup>2</sup> ‘Charles Dickens’ was already a household name by 25 June 1841, when the first of many well-attended public dinners in his honour was held in Edinburgh. At that dinner, *Blackwood Magazine*’s principal writer, John Wilson (whose pseudonym was Christopher North), declared him to be ‘perhaps the most popular writer now alive.’<sup>3</sup> Even if the publishing of the *Notes* themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Tillotson, p. xxiv.

<sup>3</sup> Schlicke, p. 503.

afterwards lost him popularity with his American public for what some considered an attack on their people and culture, the enthusiastic reception of the writer upon his arrival in Boston in January 1842 demonstrates his international reputation, as this news item shows:

The arrival in the United States of this celebrated delineator of character has called forth a powerful sensation in the circles of literature and taste; and the host of his admirers are displaying the greatest alacrity in their praiseworthy endeavours to do him honour and to give him welcome. From the moment in which it was announced that Mr Dickens intended to visit these shores, plans and propositions have been on foot for the purpose of testifying the public sense of his merits as a writer.<sup>4</sup>

The popular appeal of Dickens's writing was certainly not limited to his use of simile, which will be explored as a key aspect of his narrative style in this chapter; nonetheless, contemporary critiques of Dickens's figurative comparisons, discussed below, prove that his similitude flair did not pass unnoticed. Several responses to his work in this period associate his use of simile with a 'vulgar' style. The second section of the chapter will examine these contemporary responses as well as studies around what has been called 'Victorian vulgarity' to show how Dickens's similitude language might have been considered vulgar because of its exaggeration or graphic embodiment.<sup>5</sup> Dickens's attitude towards such prescriptivist texts as Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* shows how Dickens's figurative flair might have been meant to contravene certain standards of 'good taste' and to create a unique voice for himself – and for his narrator-persona.<sup>6</sup>

To begin with an analysis of the narrator-persona of *American Notes*, Dickens presents the *Notes* as his personal observations, the first of which describes his 'comical

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<sup>4</sup> 'Charles Dickens, Esq. Boz', *The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature (1822-1876)*, 1.5 (1842), 55 <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/charles-dickens-esq-boz/docview/89497805/se-2>> [accessed 23 May 2023].

<sup>5</sup> *Victorian Vulgarity: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture*, ed. by Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Lindley Murray, *English Grammar: Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners* (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795; Menston: Scholar Press Ltd, 1968).

astonishment' upon seeing his state-room aboard the *Britannia*. It had been 'specially engaged for "Charles Dickens, Esquire, and Lady"' who had both imagined it to be much bigger than it is. Their portmanteaus could 'no more be got in at the door, not to say stowed away, than a giraffe could be persuaded or forced into a flower-pot' (Ch. 1). This absurd negative analogy of *no more x than y* is the first instance of many such similitude descriptions in the *Notes*. The self-conscious figurative style is noticeably connected to 'Charles Dickens, Esquire.' For the sake of clarity, I will call the narrator of the *Notes* 'Dickens,' with the understanding that this is Dickens as the implied author, representing not necessarily the genuine voice of Dickens but that of a narrator-persona that he has created.<sup>7</sup> In the *Notes*, readers would find an abundance of the characteristic figurative description they had come to associate with Dickens's previous work. Dickens even makes the authorial connection with *Barnaby Rudge* explicit in the *Notes*.

Describing his strangely lethargic kind of seasickness on the voyage to America, Dickens writes:

If I may be allowed to illustrate my state of mind by such an example, I should say that I was exactly in the condition of the elder Mr Willet, after the incursion of the rioters into his bar at Chigwell. (Ch. 2)

He does not go on to explain the parallel, as if expecting that his readers will know exactly what he is referring to. That kind of assumption reveals the insincerity of the apologetic tone of the roundabout phrase 'If I may be allowed to illustrate': in fact, he deliberately takes advantage of his popularity by referencing his own work.

The comparison to Willet could be called 'meta-comparison,' for in *Barnaby Rudge* Willet's state of mind is also described figuratively: Willet finds himself 'sitting down in an arm-chair, and watching the destruction of his property, as if it were some

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<sup>7</sup> See [Figure 4](#) in the Introduction.

queer play or entertainment, of an astonishing and stupefying nature, but having no reference to himself – that he could make out – at all’ (Ch. 54). Dickens in his seasickness also watches things happen around him with no interest and as if it were a disembodied experience. Although he does not directly quote *Barnaby Rudge*, the description of his attitude is similar even in the phrasal structure to that of Willet’s. In *Barnaby Rudge*, Willet’s stupefaction in front of the wreck of the Maypole Inn is such that ‘If a train of heavy artillery could have come up and commenced ball practice outside the window, it would have been all the same to him. He was a long way beyond surprise. A ghost couldn’t have overtaken him’ (Ch. 55).<sup>8</sup> This figurative language is fancifully amplified in the *Notes*, when Dickens declares that ‘If [...] a goblin postman, with a scarlet coat and bell [...] had handed me a letter [...] I am certain I should not have felt one atom of astonishment’; and further, ‘If Neptune himself had walked in, with a toasted shark on his trident, I should have looked upon the event as one of the very commonest everyday occurrences’ (Ch 2). The conditional-hypothetical structure of *if x had y* mirrors the phrase in *Barnaby Rudge*; yet the weird combination of images noticeably enhances the original figurative description of Willet’s lethargic state of mind. Dickens references his own work in a kind of meta-comparison and then essentially echoes the voice of the narrator in *Barnaby Rudge* to create a series of fantastical images to describe his seasickness. The narrator’s voice in *Barnaby Rudge* is thus directly associated with Dickens’s voice in *American Notes* and linked to even more extravagant figurativeness.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘A ghost couldn’t have overtaken him’: meaning, he wouldn’t be taken aback by anything, even a ghost. At this very moment in the narrative a ‘ghost’ does enter the bar as the supposedly dead Rudge walks in. Willet is placidly uncommunicative, even though he is aware of the identity of the ‘ghost’ as is revealed later in his dialogue with Haredale and Solomon Daisy.



Dickens had frequently used first-person narratorial asides in his previous work – as in *The Pickwick Papers* when he facetiously states that ‘the editor of these papers feels the highest pleasure in laying before his readers’ the transactions of the Pickwick club (Ch. 1). Especially in the early stages of his career, Dickens’s narrators imitate the entertaining interjections of such personable narrators as are found in the literary tradition leading up to this period. Dickens admired many of the authors, such as Henry Fielding, who used this narrative technique. In Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, the narrator offers an elaborate analogy of his proposed tale to a public bill of fare to be sure that readers know the kind of ‘meal’ they are paying for. Fielding ends the opening paragraphs of *Tom Jones* with the statement: ‘Having premised thus much, we will now detain those who like our bill of fare no longer from their diet, and shall proceed directly to serve up the first course of our history for their entertainment’ (Ch. 1). However, the connection that Dickens establishes in the *Notes* by comparing his own person with a fictional character in his last-published novel – John Willet – is unusually explicit and mirrors the figurative description of his own previous work. Dickens’s narrator-persona in the *Notes* thus links two distinct styles of writing – a travelogue and a historical novel – with the use of similitic description. The same narrator-persona’s voice is also heard in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and *A Christmas Carol*, as will be shown throughout this chapter. The first-person or self-referential interjections become more obviously associated with Dickens himself through his use of similitic language. When the narrator of *A Christmas Carol* says, for example, that the ghost is standing as close to Scrooge ‘as I am now to you, and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow’ (Stave II), he not only speaks in first-person, but does so through a self-referential comparison.

Even while Dickens associates himself with the narrator-persona of his fictional work, he pretends to dissociate himself from his own figurative description by

presenting himself as the victim of his ‘wandering fancy.’ In *American Notes*, walking about the ship’s deck at night, Dickens describes how even the most familiar objects begin to take on other appearances, surprising him with their likenesses to other ‘streets, houses, rooms’ that he has left behind. It is difficult to hold these familiar objects ‘to their proper shapes and forms. They change with the wandering fancy.’ The ‘fancy’ is something separate from him, bringing to his mind other figures with a startlingly real quality ‘which far exceeded, as it seemed to me, all power of mine to conjure up the absent’ (Ch. 2). He implies that he is being influenced by a separate power; yet the phrase *as it seemed to me* emphasises his own subjectivity. While he appears to shift attention from the creative mind to a mysterious fancy working on its own, in fact he draws attention to his own capacity to make bizarre associations between diverse objects. This strategy is apparent when he describes in the *Notes* the images presented by tree-stumps flashing by his train window, from a ‘Grecian urn’ to ‘a very commonplace old gentleman in a white waistcoat, with a thumb thrust into each arm-hole of his coat.’ Such illusions ‘were often as entertaining to me as so many glasses in a magic lantern, and never took their shapes at my bidding, but seemed to force themselves upon me, whether I would or no’ (Ch. 14). Again, the word ‘seemed’ is the subtle clue that undermines the power of these independent illusions. They ‘*seemed* to force themselves upon’ him, but, in fact, Dickens is the one performing the magic lantern display.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the strange images that Dickens creates can appear unavoidable – the only valid interpretations. For example, from the sketch ‘The Boarding House,’ it is ‘impossible’ to imagine Mr Calton as anything other than a

‘chubby street-door knocker.’<sup>9</sup> By pleading a passive response to a forceful fancy in the *Notes*, Dickens also tricks the reader into accepting the weird alternate reality created by his imagination. It is not a real attempt at dissociating himself from his creative figurativeness, for the same strategy is used by the narrator-persona in his other texts of this period. Thus, ironically, an obvious attempt at dissociation would be associated with Dickens’s style. One of Dickens’s more overt reflections on the passive fancy appears in the first chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. This is the first novel where Dickens adopts an explicitly first-person perspective in his fiction, although the experiment is abandoned after the first chapter. In the brief introduction of this first-person narrator, there is a foreshadowing of Dickens’s own reflections on fancy in *American Notes*. The narrator cannot help thinking about Little Nell amid the strange objects in the curiosity shop and considers: ‘If these helps to my fancy had all been wanting [...] it is very probable that I should have been less impressed with her strange and solitary state.’ Like Dickens, this first-person narrator seems to relinquish responsibility for his ‘curious speculation’ about Little Nell and the objects in the shop that make him see her ‘in her future life, holding her solitary way among a crowd of wild grotesque companions – the only pure, fresh, youthful object in the throng’ (Ch. 1). Apparently, the grotesque objects in the shop alone have given rise to his idea that Little Nell ‘seemed to exist in a kind of allegory’ (Ch. 1). The allegory is of the narrator’s own making – as is shown by the subjectively worded ‘*seemed* to exist in a kind of allegory’; however, the narrator is at pains to emphasise his passive role in front of external impressions.

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<sup>9</sup> Dickens, ‘The Boarding-House (I)’, p. 484.

When indicating the passive role of the fancy, Dickens may have had in mind Coleridge's definition of the Fancy.<sup>10</sup> David Lodge has compared Dickens's use of fancy in *Hard Times* to 'Fancy in the Coleridgean sense'<sup>11</sup>; David A. Reibel considers Coleridge's definition a clue to the preference to allusive language in Dickens and George Eliot<sup>12</sup>; and Anthony O'Keeffe sees a parallel between the language of fancy and imagination in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Coleridge's distinction between Imagination and Fancy in the *Biographia Literaria*.<sup>13</sup> In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge outlines the 'general law of association' from Aristotle, asserting that making connections between external realities is 'the universal law of the *passive* fancy and *mechanical* memory; that which supplies to all other faculties their objects, to all thought the elements of its materials.'<sup>14</sup> The creative transcendent power of the Imagination will move beyond these associations and external inputs; but 'the Fancy [...] has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites.' It is a mode of memory blended with choice, which dwells upon various external impressions.<sup>15</sup> In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the first-person narrator's miniature discourse does seem to reference Coleridge's ideas. He needs the 'heaps of fantastic things' in the shop to keep Little Nell's image palpably before him 'without any effort of imagination.' The fancy is thus impressionable and passive in the way that it needs the external input, and the 'imagination' would

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<sup>10</sup> Although there is no evidence that Dickens read the *Biographia Literaria*, he was at least familiar with Coleridge's poetry, for a copy of Coleridge's *Poetical Works* was included in the 1844 catalogue of Dickens's Devonshire Terrace library: Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 4; 'Appendix C.: Inventory of Contents of 1 Devonshire Terrace, May 1854 [sic].' The date is incorrect as this inventory was drawn up 27 May 1844 when Dickens let the Devonshire Terrace house during his trip to Italy.

<sup>11</sup> Lodge, p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> David A. Reibel, 'Acts of Imagination: George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Lindley Murray and His "English Grammar"; A "Divertissement" on Literature and Language', *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies*, 56/57, 2009, 61–91 (p. 70) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/42827859>> [accessed 24 November 2020].

<sup>13</sup> Anthony O'Keeffe, "'The Old Curiosity Shop': Fancy, Imagination, and Death', *South Atlantic Review*, 53.4 (1988), 39–55 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3200670>> [accessed 27 October 2020].

<sup>14</sup> Coleridge, p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

otherwise need to create what was lacking in external aids. Furthermore, the narrator muses that we often allow ourselves to be influenced by external objects to form impressions ‘which should be produced *by reflection alone*, but which, *without such visible aids*, often escape us’ (Ch. 1; emphasis added). The narrator hints at Coleridge’s transcendent notion of the Imagination when he seems momentarily troubled that he cannot create images ‘by reflection alone.’ Coleridge says of the Imagination: ‘It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; [...] it struggles to idealise and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead’ (Ch. 13).<sup>16</sup>

Dickens seems to differentiate the terms *fancy* and *imagination* in the first-person narrator’s reflection in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. However, he uses the terms indiscriminately elsewhere in the novel and in his writing in general. Both terms are used to make associations between ‘fixities and definites’ and to indicate a creative faculty, as the following search results from the CLiC concordance demonstrate:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 205-6: Strictly speaking, this definition belongs to Coleridge’s notion of the secondary Imagination: ‘The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.’

his hearers a notion of indefinite space, and leaving their	imaginings	to wander through long suites of lofty halls, at pleasure	<a href="#">OCS</a>
it with great relish, he proposed a toast to an	imaginary	company. ¶ 'Gentlemen, I'll give you, if you please, Success to	<a href="#">OCS</a>
came, to listen for the bell and respond to the	imaginary	summons which had roused her from her slumber. ¶ One night	<a href="#">OCS</a>
restore him to a state of moderate tranquillity. His disordered	imagination	represented to him a crowd of persons stealing towards them	<a href="#">OCS</a>
but she tortured herself--she could not help it--with	imagining	a resemblance, in some one or other of their death-like	<a href="#">OCS</a>
hour, and the somnolent habits of Mrs Jarley, and to	imagine	the state of consternation in which they would certainly throw	<a href="#">OCS</a>
her previous thoughts to lead to it, she should have	imagined	this figure so very distinctly. She was still wondering and	<a href="#">OCS</a>
and now the door was slowly opening. It was but	imagination,	yet imagination had all the terrors of reality; nay, it	<a href="#">OCS</a>
the door was slowly opening. It was but imagination, yet	imagination	had all the terrors of reality; nay, it was worse	<a href="#">OCS</a>
have come and gone, and there an end, but in	imagination	it was always coming, and never went away. ¶ The feeling	<a href="#">OCS</a>
resumed, even in the dimmest and remotest distance of her	imagination,	to conjure up the degrading picture, 'I am a'most inclined	<a href="#">OCS</a>
in her upper lip certain reddish demonstrations, which, if the	imagination	had been assisted by her attire, might have been mistaken	<a href="#">OCS</a>
which he gave a description more remarkable for brilliancy of	imagination	than a strict adherence to truth; declaring, with many strong	<a href="#">OCS</a>
playfellows on the shoulder, and to carry them off to	imaginary	sponging-houses, with a correctness of imitation which was the surp	<a href="#">OCS</a>
she was going, and the people she was with; and	imagination	suggesting remarks and questions which sounded so plainly in her	<a href="#">OCS</a>
lately put upon his countenance by twisting it into all	imaginable	varieties of ugliness, Mr Quilp, rocking himself to and fro	<a href="#">OCS</a>
extensive one, as it comprehended the most opposite articles	imaginable.	They all came, however, and came without loss of time	<a href="#">OCS</a>
his pen. ¶ 'Kit,' said Mr Brass, in the pleasantest way	imaginable,	'how do you do?' ¶ Kit, being rather shy of his	<a href="#">OCS</a>

Figure 10: Search results for 'imagin\*' in The Old Curiosity Shop

I could plainly see. Though much altered by age, I	fancied	I could recognize in his spare and slender form something	<a href="#">OCS</a>
suites of lofty halls, at pleasure. ¶ In this flight of	fancy,	Mr Swiveller was assisted by a deceptive piece of furniture	<a href="#">OCS</a>
t. ¶ 'Sophy Wackles,' said Dick. ¶ 'Who's she?' ¶ 'She's all my	fancy	painted her, sir, that's what she is,' said Mr Swiveller	<a href="#">OCS</a>
as those who watch and wait; at these times, mournful	fancies	came flocking on her mind, in crowds. ¶ She would take	<a href="#">OCS</a>
roofs, in which, by often looking at them, she had	fancied	ugly faces that were frowning over at her and trying	<a href="#">OCS</a>
the precipitation with which he as often returned, when a	fancied	noise or the changing and imperfect light induced him to	<a href="#">OCS</a>
some far-off figure imperfectly seen in the clear distance, her	fancy	traced a likeness to honest Kit. But although she would	<a href="#">OCS</a>
Dick, 'that was the object of the present expedition. I	fancied	it possible--but let us go ring fancy's knell. I'll	<a href="#">OCS</a>
expedition. I fancied it possible--but let us go ring	fancy's	knell. I'll begin it.' ¶ 'You seem disappointed,' observed Quilp. ¶ 'A	<a href="#">OCS</a>
old suit of black, he looked pale and meagre. They	fancied,	too, a lonely air about him and his house, but	<a href="#">OCS</a>
other of their death-like faces, to the dwarf, and this	fancy	would sometimes so gain upon her that she would almost	<a href="#">OCS</a>
the room where they had passed the evening, when she	fancied	she saw a figure just gliding in at the door	<a href="#">OCS</a>
absent. 'No,' he said, 'nobody.' ¶ It must have been her	fancy	then; and yet it was strange, that, without anything in	<a href="#">OCS</a>
for the moment, to reflect upon-- than anything her wildest	fancy	could have suggested. If he should return--there was no	<a href="#">OCS</a>
they are concerned; and the work means painting on velvet,	fancy	needle-work, or embroidery. In such cases as these,' pointing to	<a href="#">OCS</a>
their sorrows, and found mutual consolation. It was a weak	fancy	perhaps, the childish fancy of a young and lonely creature	<a href="#">OCS</a>
mutual consolation. It was a weak fancy perhaps, the childish	fancy	of a young and lonely creature; but night after night	<a href="#">OCS</a>
speakers are scarce in this part of the world, I	fancy	plain dealers are still scarcer. If my speaking should offend	<a href="#">OCS</a>

Figure 11: Search results for 'fanc\*' from The Old Curiosity Shop

Both terms are used to mean the creation of images. In the fourth example from Figure 10, Little Nell's grandfather's 'distorted imagination represented to him a crowd of persons stealing towards them beneath the cover of the bushes, lurking in every ditch, and peeping from the boughs of every rustling tree' (Ch. 24). In the fourteenth example from Figure 11, Little Nell is horrified by seeing her grandfather 'gliding like a ghost into her room and acting the thief while he supposed her fast asleep' and the vision is 'far more dreadful, for the moment, to reflect upon – than anything her wildest fancy could have suggested' (Ch. 31). Both 'imagine' and 'fancy' are also used to compare 'fixities and definites,' as is shown in a sentence that contains both terms (the fifth example from Figure 10 and the 11<sup>th</sup> from Figure 11): Little Nell is haunted by the dwarf Quilp's 'ugly face and stunted figure' and whenever she goes to sleep in Mrs Jarley's place, she finds a resemblance to Quilp in the wax-work figures beside her:

[...] she tortured herself – she could not help it – with imagining a resemblance, in some one or other of their death-like faces, to the dwarf, and this fancy would sometimes so gain upon her that she would almost believe he had removed the figure and stood within the clothes. (Ch. 29)

Little Nell is not inventing anything new so much as comparing the figures to the dwarf's appearance: here, *imagining* and *fancy* seem to be used synonymously.

Dickens uses *fancy* 1.4 times more than *imagine* in all his novels, and in *The Old Curiosity Shop* alone he uses *fancy* 1.8 times more than *imagine*. The terms are used indiscriminately; but the favoured word *fancy*, even if unrelated to Coleridge's definition, hints at Dickens's preferred mode of figurative language: playing with 'fixities and definites,' and making associations and analogies rather than reaching for a transcendent, unifying ideal. O'Keeffe argues that the characters in *The Old Curiosity Shop* function according to Coleridge's distinction between the Fancy and the

Imagination, moving along a spectrum of the ‘passively fanciful’ to the ‘actively imaginative.’<sup>17</sup> However, in his analysis of the characters’ individual perspectives, O’Keeffe does not consider Dickens’s own use of figurative language. For example, Dick Swiveller is ‘definitively imaginative,’ according to O’Keeffe; yet Dickens’s descriptions of Swiveller are typically what Coleridge would call *fanciful*, in that they work principally through association. On one occasion, when Swiveller is drinking, or ‘moistening his clay, as the phrase goes,’ Dickens describes his drunken state in this way:

But as clay in the abstract, when too much moistened, becomes of a weak and uncertain consistency, breaking down in unexpected places, retaining impressions but faintly, and preserving no strength or steadiness of character, so Mr Swiveller’s clay, having imbibed a considerable quantity of moisture, was in a very loose and slippery state, insomuch that the various ideas impressed upon it were fast losing their distinctive character, and running into each other. (Ch. 48)

Dickens develops the idiomatic phrase into a comically concrete analogy of Swiveller’s mental state to moist ‘clay in the abstract.’ This example complicates Dickens’s relationship, if there is any, with Coleridgean notions, as he seems to be mocking both the ‘abstract’ ideas that belong to the Imagination – rendering the ‘clay in the abstract’ a very tangible source of comparison – and the passive reception of ideas that belongs to the Fancy. Certainly, the external input to the Fancy will be useless if one is in a drunken state; but there is also the implication that the Fancy needs the right kind of receptive mind to make something of the external impressions.

Dickens implies that his own mind, at least, is the right kind to receive such impressions. He writes in a letter to his close friend W. H. Wills about how he ‘made a

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<sup>17</sup> O’Keeffe, p. 41.



little fanciful photograph in my mind of Pit-Country' as he walked from Durham to Sunderland in the north of England:

I couldn't help looking upon my mind as I was doing it, as a sort of capitally prepared and highly sensitive plate. And I said, without the least conceit [...] 'it really is a pleasure to work with you, you receive the impression so nicely.'<sup>18</sup>

There are echoes in this passage of Coleridge's statement that when we receive impressions 'we seem to ourselves merely passive to an external power, whether as a mirror reflecting the landscape, or as a blank canvas on which some unknown hand paints it.'<sup>19</sup> Dickens's mind as a 'highly sensitive' photographic plate can passively receive external impressions even more perfectly than a mirror or a painter's canvas; but it is Dickens's mind that creates the 'fanciful photograph' in the first place. Indeed, he implies in this letter that his passive fancy plays an intrinsic role in his work of composing – *imagining* – a fanciful photograph. Indeed, there is nothing passive about the impressions that his mind receives. With Dickens's special kind of associative fancy, there is an effort to 'dissolve, diffuse, dissipate, in order to re-create' which is proper to Coleridge's Imagination. Whereas Dickens's associations and comparisons do not normally seek an ideal and transcendent unity – focusing rather on the concrete similarities or differences – his associations are indeed vital, often literally bringing 'fixed and dead' objects to life. In this way, Dickens transforms rather than transcends concrete realities. With the above description of Swiveller, Dickens 'dissolves' in a manner of speaking the 'fixed' idiom of 'moistening his clay' by taking it as a literal source of comparison for Swiveller's drunken state; he 'diffuses' the clay's various qualities by listing them individually: 'weak and uncertain consistency,' 'breaking down

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<sup>18</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 8, 'To W. H. Wills,' 24 September 1858. William Henry Wills (1810–1880) became Dickens's secretary and was the assistant editor of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*.

<sup>19</sup> Coleridge, p. 67.

in unexpected places,' 'preserving no strength or steadiness of character'; and finally, he 'dissipates' the 'clay in the abstract' by uniting it intrinsically with Swiveller's 'loose and slippery state.' Dickens's associative fancy is indeed transformative in its ability to re-create.

The essential difference between Dickens's fancy and Coleridge's fancy is that, while Dickens may pretend to be unavoidably influenced by the passive fancy, this is in fact a self-conscious strategy that emphasises the idiosyncratic creativity of his figurative comparisons. This is especially clear when Dickens uses *fancy* as a trigger for similitude language. In *American Notes*, Dickens remarks on the 'vast designs' of Washington City that seem strangely frustrated by a lack of population. Commenting on the 'Spacious avenues, that begin in nothing, and lead nowhere; streets, mile-long, that only want houses, roads and inhabitants; public buildings that need but a public to be complete,' he declares: 'One might fancy the season over, and most of the houses gone out of town for ever with their masters' (Ch. 8). This anonymous phrasing of *one might fancy* seems to indicate the passive impressions that anyone might receive from all of Washington's 'vast designs'; however, it begs the question: *who* might fancy? It is Dickens's fancy that creates a story around the empty city, humanising (non-existent) houses as the servants of the absent public. The fanciful personification of buildings is a favourite device of Dickens, frequently achieved through simile. In *Barnaby Rudge*, from a passage that has been [quoted in the Introduction](#), 'it needs no great stretch of the fancy' to see the Maypole Inn as a drowsy old man; but Dickens's detailed similes create that personification for us: the bricks 'had grown yellow and discoloured like an old man's skin; the sturdy timbers had decayed like teeth,' etc. (Ch. 1). The similitude cue of the phrase *it needs no great stretch of the fancy* draws attention to the series of fantastical comparisons that follow. Indeed, without Dickens's figurative description of

the house, the fancy would indeed need a ‘great stretch’ to see what he sees. Similarly, in *A Christmas Carol*, describing Scrooge’s residence, the narrator says that it is located ‘where it had so little business to be, that one could scarcely help fancying it must have run there when it was a young house, playing at hide-and-seek with other houses, and have forgotten the way out again’ (Stave I). By pretending that *one could scarcely help fancying* this strange way of describing an out-of-the-way building, Dickens manipulates the reader’s fancy. This fanciful image is emphasised in another way, as well; for we know that Scrooge ‘had as little of what is called fancy about him as any man in the City of London’ (Stave I). Thus, the narrator supplies this lack of fancy for Scrooge and ‘any man in the City of London,’ or indeed any of his readers. By pretending to give fancy an independent power that anyone can easily access, Dickens draws attention to the contradiction that it is his own purposeful description that creates the imagery. What could seem like a ploy to disassociate his narrator’s voice from the imagery only re-focuses the attention on that voice and the craftsman behind it.

*ii.* Periphrastic ‘Too-muchness’

The self-conscious artifice of many of Dickens’s similes is further emphasised when he uses roundabout, or what I call periphrastic, language that directly or indirectly comments on the act of comparison. Dickens’s periphrastic style has been noted before. Critiquing a contemporary effusive style, Dickens and other Victorian writers used ‘circumlocutive’ phraseology to achieve a mock-elaborate tone.<sup>20</sup> This circumlocutory

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<sup>20</sup> Brook, pp. 16, 22. Brook comments on the ‘polysyllabic humour of the Victorians’: ‘The form that it usually takes is the use of grandiloquent language to describe trivial events, thus emphasizing their triviality and causing the reader to smile at the incongruity between the language and the occasion’ (p. 16).

writing is inherently self-conscious in its parodic intent; combined with Dickens's distinctive use of simile, such language draws even more attention to itself. Dickens either uses narratorial asides that directly comment on the comparison itself, or, in a more indirect fashion, he highlights the act of comparison by elaborating the simile or accumulating related similes. In both the direct asides and the excessive language, this self-conscious 'too-muchness' in Dickens's works of this period demonstrates the distinctive voice of the narrator-persona which Dickens associates with himself in *American Notes*.

Dickens frequently uses narratorial asides that directly comment on the comparison being made. One example of this in the *Notes* is when Dickens visits 'Looking-Glass Prairie,' renowned for the apparent smoothness of its surface. He finds a 'flatness and extent, which left nothing to the imagination.' The best he can do in terms of imaginative language is to say, 'There it lay, a tranquil sea or lake without water, if such a simile be admissible' (Ch. 13).<sup>21</sup> The direct commentary shows Dickens's hyper-awareness of the comparison he employs. The aside moreover invites an evaluation of the comparison's appropriateness, and indeed, seems to emphasise the comparison's *inappropriateness* in the contradiction of a 'lake without water.' The contradictory phrase blends the realities of source (lake) and target (a prairie without water) to produce a disconcerting mixture of figurative and non-figurative elements. By suggesting the 'unsuitability' of his own imagery, Dickens challenges the reader to re-evaluate a comparison which then evades necessary categories. The 'flatness and extent' of the prairie has apparently 'left nothing to the imagination'; yet, in a brief aside, Dickens succeeds in playing with the figurative categories that govern his readers' imaginations:

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<sup>21</sup> [Section iv](#) of this chapter will consider the incorrect use that Dickens makes of 'simile,' since the comparison does not use an explicit similitic marker for direct comparison.

for what does a lake without water look like? The suitability of a comparison is something that seems to preoccupy Dickens's narrator-persona; however, the self-reflexive commentary serves to highlight Dickensian properties of the comparison. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, when Mary Graham is being pursued by Mr Pecksniff, she tries to free herself from his embrace, 'but might as well have tried to free herself from the embrace of an affectionate boa-constrictor: if anything so wily may be brought into comparison with Pecksniff' (Ch. 30). The *if* clause seems to question the appropriateness of the comparison, echoing the aside in the *Notes*. On closer inspection, however, this commentary in *Martin Chuzzlewit* does not put the comparison into question at all, but rather draws attention to the hypocrisy of Mr Pecksniff's show of innocence. As with the 'lake without water' in the *Notes*, there is a contradictory juxtaposition in the phrase an 'affectionate boa-constrictor.' One might expect that the *if* clause would explain this contradiction: 'if a boa-constrictor can be called affectionate,' for example. However, the *if* clause is a ruse that is not meant to clarify anything. The seemingly unnecessary parenthesis emphasises the 'affectionate boa-constrictor' as the perfect image for Pecksniff's smiling duplicity.

Other instances of brief but pointedly unnecessary asides in *Martin Chuzzlewit* serve to dwell self-consciously on Dickens's use of figurative language. In one description of Miss Cherry Pecksniff, her nose has

[...] a scraped and frosty look, as if it had been rasped; while a similar phenomenon developed itself in her humour, which was then observed to be of a sharp and acid quality, as though an extra lemon (figuratively speaking) had been squeezed into the nectar of her disposition, and had rather damaged its flavour. (Ch. 6)

The parenthesis of '(figuratively speaking)' is ludicrously gratuitous. As will be mentioned throughout the thesis, Dickens's parentheses are meant to be anything but parenthetical. As part of Dickens's self-conscious periphrasis, parentheses often become

the focal point of a passage simply because they are so obviously unnecessary. Even if Dickens had not used the *as if/as though* similitude structure, the abstract nature of the description of Cherry's humour is obviously figurative. The narrator thus highlights his own comparison through his serio-comic concern that there is a possibility that the 'extra lemon' in Cherry's disposition be understood literally. Sometimes, a periphrastic narratorial commentary will seem to add nothing to the original comparison except to extend it *ad absurdum*, as in the following passage from *Barnaby Rudge*:

Mr Edward Chester was descried through the glass door, standing among the rusty locks and keys, like love among the roses – for which apt comparison the historian may by no means take any credit to himself, the same being the invention, in a sentimental mood, of the chaste and modest Miggs, who, beholding him from the doorsteps she was then cleaning, did, in her maiden meditation, give utterance to the simile. (Ch. 19)

The deliberately elevated tone of the passage is comical considering the homely setting of the locksmith's 'rusty locks and keys' and the doorsteps in the process of being cleaned. The magnanimous tone of the narrator 'historian' as he gives credit for the 'apt comparison' to the 'chaste and modest Miggs' is also comically contrasted with Miggs's spiteful and pusillanimous nature. Coming as it does from the words of a popular song,<sup>22</sup> the simile itself is not original to Miggs: she cannot in fact be given credit for it. The mock-elaborate narratorial commentary around the simile *like love among the roses* is thus unnecessary, except as a way to ridicule Miggs's own ostentatious style of speech.<sup>23</sup> Dickens will sometimes use characters to voice clichés or even inappropriate similes, as seen with Mr Bumble in the previous chapter. In this passage, however, even if the

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<sup>22</sup> In the notes to the text we read that a contemporary ballad by J. C. Doyle contains these words (author unknown): 'Young Love flew to the Paphian bower .../ The Graces there were cutting posies, / And found young Love among the roses.'

<sup>23</sup> An example of Miggs's elevated prose is when Simon Tappertit beseeches her to let him back in the house at night (after she has craftily blocked the keyhole to shut him out and make him require her assistance): she responds that she 'dursn't' open the window for him, "And to come down in the dead of night, when the house is wrapped in slumbers and veiled in obscurity." And there she stopped and shivered, for her modesty caught cold at the very thought' (Ch. 9).

narrator tells us that Miggs ‘did, in her maiden meditation, give utterance to the simile,’ Miggs’s voice is not explicitly heard. The narrator uses an elaborate disavowal to show that the simile is Miggs’s own observation, but the utterance in fact belongs to the narrator. The roundabout commentary serves to characterise the narrator-persona’s voice.

An even more circumlocutory commentary in *A Christmas Carol*, which has appeared briefly in the [Introduction](#), characterises the narrator from the beginning of the story when we read that ‘Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail’:

Mind! I don’t mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country’s done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail. (Stave 1)

The self-conscious inroads are many and deliberate, separated parenthetically by commas: ‘I don’t mean to say that I know, *of my own knowledge*’; ‘I might have been inclined, *myself*’; ‘You will therefore permit me to repeat, *emphatically*.’ Moreover, the parenthetical inroads are completely redundant. The phrase ‘of my own knowledge’ simply repeats ‘I know’; ‘myself’ repeats the ‘I’ of ‘I might have been inclined’; and ‘to repeat, emphatically’ is to repeat oneself. In this way, perhaps more than Dickens’s other works, his Christmas books tend to present the narrator as another character in the scene: Dickens takes pains to use first-person commentary and even to directly hint that he, Charles Dickens, is the narrator. In *The Battle of Life* (1848), the closing passage has a direct reference to Dickens in terms of the age of the narrator: ‘TIME – from whom I had the latter portion of this story, and with whom I have the pleasure of a personal acquaintance of some five-and-thirty years’ duration – informed me [...] that Michael Warden never went away again’ (Part III). This obvious reference to himself also serves

to establish Dickens's ownership of the unique genre that he created in the Christmas books.

In the first of the Christmas books, that narrator-persona takes centre stage in the above-quoted opening passage of *A Christmas Carol*. While the tone is almost apologetic – again, as if querying the suitability of the comparison – the purpose of the periphrasis is to highlight rather than challenge the original idiomatic expression of *dead as a door-nail*. He repeats the idiom, ‘emphatically,’ at the end of the passage to make it clear that he endorses the simile. Dickens is not simply exaggerating a cliché, as in the passage from *Barnaby Rudge*. Rather, he is demonstrating that the idiomatic *as dead as a door-nail*, a commonplace simile that is taken for granted, is in fact strangely inappropriate: why should a door-nail be considered the epitome of things that are dead? By highlighting the nonsensical aspect of the phrase, Dickens anticipates the analysis that Israel, Harding, and Tobin conduct in their article ‘On Simile’ around such *as x as y* patterns. What they call the ‘Superlative Source Constraint’ (SSC) is when the source of the simile becomes a ‘paragon’ for the target reality. In the phrase ‘her argument was *as clear as glass*,’ for example, glass is the clearest object that can be sourced, and the effect is to exaggerate the clarity of the target argument. Moreover, Israel, Harding, and Tobin argue that because of this structure of the SSC ‘it often makes little difference what source concept is used: whatever it is, the effect is the same – the target is understood as an extreme instance of the relevant sort.’ The SSC can thus be violated and still transmit the idea of amplifying the target. Israel, Harding, and Tobin suggest that violation of the Superlative Source Constraint explains why ‘poetic considerations’ of alliteration, rhyming, etc. will give rise to such idiomatic expressions as *cool as a*



*cucumber, fine as wine, and dead as a door-nail.*<sup>24</sup> The point of each of these comparisons is not the source, but the exaggeration of the first term of the comparison. There is some conceptual relation, but none of the sources could be considered the epitome of *coolness, fineness, or deadness*. Intuiting its hyperbolic potential, Dickens enjoys playing with the *as x as y* structure. In his facetious analysis of *as dead as a door-nail*, he calls attention to the hyperbolic *deadness* of Jacob Marley. Marley's subsequent appearance in Scrooge's chambers is consequently doubly effective.

Israel, Harding, and Tobin also explain that the SSC can be deliberately misused to create anomalous similes. The corresponding 'anti-simile' to the preceding example of 'her argument was *as clear as glass*' would be 'her argument was *as clear as mud*' where *mud* is used as an 'antiparagon' to exaggerate the obscurity of the argument.<sup>25</sup> This kind of anti-simile is a favourite structure of Dickens, as has been briefly discussed [in the Introduction](#). Dickens's mischievous exploration of the anti-similic possibilities of the SSC is also evident in the *Notes*. He appears to be comparing Washington positively to parts of London, but the elaborate comparison is self-defeated at the end of a long passage:

Take the worst parts of the City Road and Pentonville [...] where the houses are smallest, preserving all their oddities, but especially the small shops and dwellings, occupied in Pentonville (but not in Washington) by furniture-brokers, keepers of poor eating-houses, and fanciers of birds. Burn the whole down; build it up again in wood and plaster; widen it a little; throw in part of St. John's Wood; put green blinds outside all the private houses, with a red curtain and a white one in every window; plough up all the roads; plant a great deal of coarse turf in every place where it ought *not* to be; [...] make it scorching hot in the morning, and freezing cold in the afternoon, with an occasional tornado of wind and dust; leave a brick-field without the bricks, in all central places where a street may naturally be expected; and that's Washington. (Ch. 8)

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<sup>24</sup> Israel, Harding, and Tobin, pp. 126–27.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

The implicit SSC in the idea that Washington is like certain parts of London is manifested in the structure *take x and that's y*. The structure makes it seem that Dickens is showing the reader how similar Washington is to London in certain respects. However, the subtle parenthesis '(but not in Washington)' and the entire insertion beginning with 'Burn the whole down' reveals that Washington is as entirely unlike the City Road and Pentonville as it could possibly be. The expected meaning of the direct comparison of 'Take the worst parts of the City Road and Pentonville ... and that's Washington' is completely deconstructed by all the description that comes between the source and the target. The narrator-persona's 'too-muchness' is evident in the roundabout manner of stating that *x* is in fact *unlike y*.

With a similar effect, Dickens satirises the opinion of some that Pittsburgh in America is like Birmingham in England: 'Setting aside the streets, the shops, the houses, waggons, factories, public buildings, and population, perhaps it may be' (Ch. 10). He concedes nothing with that 'perhaps it may be,' since he has already removed any basis for a resemblance between the two cities. This passage builds on what Dickens wrote to John Forster at the time: 'Pittsburgh is like Birmingham – at least its townfolks say so; and I didn't contradict them. It is, in one respect. There is a great deal of smoke in it.'<sup>26</sup> When this observation is transferred to the *Notes*, Dickens does not even grant the cities that one similarity of the 'great deal of smoke.' Thus, the initial observation in the letter has been crafted into a deliberate use of humorous anti-simile. The mischievous anti-simile can be found in Dickens's fictional works of this period and can be seen as another characteristic of the narrator-persona. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dick Swiveller, doing his round of duties as clerk in the Brass establishment, 'receives and

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<sup>26</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 3, 'To John Foster,' 1-4 April, 1842. Forster was a historian and writer who was a close friend and biographer of Dickens.

dismisses' legal errand boys 'with about as professional a manner, and as correct and comprehensive an understanding of their business, as would have been shown by a clown in a pantomime under similar circumstances' (Ch. 34). Thus, Swiveller's manner is clearly not professional and his understanding of the errand boys' business is clearly not correct or comprehensive. The deliberate misuse of the Superlative Source Constraint makes this evident, as a 'clown in a pantomime' is presumably going to put on an inauthentic but entertaining show of knowledge. Dickens plays with the structural and conceptual layers of understanding in the *as x as y* structure with its potential to misuse the SSC as an antiparagon for the simile. In doing so, he draws attention to the very act of comparison. In this way, Dickens's similes lend a sense of exhibitionism to these works of the early 40s.

Unusual turns of phrase not only emphasise his own artifice, but they also reveal Dickens's peculiar associative vision. This can be seen when several comparisons are accumulated in one passage. In *American Notes*, on one of his steamboat journeys, Dickens observes his 'dismal' fellow-travellers at meal-times: 'you might suppose the whole male portion of the company to be the melancholy ghosts of departed book-keepers, who had fallen dead at the desk: such is their weary air of business and calculation.' Dickens immediately introduces more comparisons following on the 'departed' nature of these 'melancholy ghosts': 'Undertakers on duty would be sprightly beside them; and a collation of funeral baked-meats, in comparison with these meals, would be a sparkling festivity' (Ch. 11). The accumulation of lively (or rather *deadly*) comparisons of the passengers to departed book-keepers, undertakers, and (indirectly) mourners at a funeral seems a natural progression; Dickens gives the impression that he can continue adding on comparisons indefinitely. The accumulation of imagery highlights not only this ability, but also the idiosyncrasy of each comparison. The

changing structure also helps to highlight each example. The initial macabre image of book-keepers falling dead at their desks (literally ‘bored to death’) is a positive comparative structure: *you might suppose x to be y*; whereas the final two images work with the contraries *sprightly vs. undertakers* and *festive vs. funerals* to create negative similes with the structure: *x would be y in comparison to z*.

This hyperbolic foregrounding of his own comparisons is echoed by the narrator of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Poll Sweedlepipe cohabitates with many different species of birds in a house that is described as ‘one great bird’s nest.’ An initial comparison of Poll to a bird is almost aggressively emphasised through a series of comparisons to different types of birds:

Poll had something of the bird in his nature; not of the hawk or eagle, but of the sparrow, that builds in chimney-stacks, and inclines to human company. He was not quarrelsome, though, like the sparrow; but peaceful, like the dove. In his walk he strutted; and, in this respect, he bore a faint resemblance to the pigeon, as well as in a certain prosiness of speech, which might, in its monotony, be likened to the cooing of that bird. He was very inquisitive; and when he stood at his shop-door in the evening-tide, watching the neighbours, with his head on one side, and his eye cocked knowingly, there was a dash of the raven in him. Yet there was no more wickedness in Poll than in a robin. Happily, too, when any of his ornithological properties were on the verge of going too far, they were quenched, dissolved, melted down, and neutralised in the barber; just as his bald head – otherwise, as the head of a shaved magpie – lost itself in a wig of curly black ringlets, parted on one side, and cut away almost to the crown, to indicate immense capacity of intellect. (Ch. 26)

Dickens’s ability to ‘diffuse’<sup>27</sup> the source of the comparison is evident as he separates Poll’s ‘bird-like’ nature into characteristics belonging (or not) to several different species: hawk, eagle, sparrow, dove, pigeon, raven, robin, and magpie. He compares Poll to these birds sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, but always progressing from one comparison to another; and there is a seemingly endless

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<sup>27</sup> See Coleridge’s [definition of the Imagination](#).

accumulation of similes. The narrator appears conscious of this effect at the end of the passage: he recognises that he is ‘on the verge of going too far’ in the listing of Poll’s ‘ornithological properties.’ He cannot resist adding just one more as a parenthesis between dashes, comparing Poll’s bald head to ‘the head of a shaved magpie.’ This is not the only or the last use of bird-imagery in the novel. The Honourable Elijah Pogram eats ‘great blocks of everything he could get hold of, like a raven’ (Ch. 34); Mark Tapley unflatteringly compares the American people to many kinds of birds (Ch. 34); and Mr Pecksniff is ironically compared to a dove (Ch. 4) and is described as having the appearance of ‘so much innocence that he only wanted feathers and wings to be a bird’ (Ch. 30). The accumulation of the bird-like comparisons in the case of Poll Sweedlepipe thus highlights a favourite ‘ornithological’ source of comparison for Dickens, which will appear throughout the thesis. As with the humanisation of buildings discussed in the previous section, when Dickens ‘*birdifies*’ humans, so to speak, he reveals a distinctive flavour of his narrator-persona’s style of figurative comparison.

### *iii.* ‘Any puppy that smokes his cigar’: The Vulgarity of Simile

The excess and the self-conscious exhibitionism of Dickens’s similitic language would have been considered ‘vulgar’ by some of his contemporaries. Some of the immediate responses to Dickens’s works of this period show how Dickens’s similitic language became a source of contention, as it received both praise and disapproval. It is evident from these contemporary responses that Dickens’s similitic language was thought a salient aspect of his style. One review of *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845) criticised various similes, among them the description of Caleb Plummer’s house being ‘no better

than a pimple on the prominent red brick nose of Gruff and Tackleton' (Chirp the First). The author of the review comments, 'Any puppy that smokes his cigar, and wears his hat on the side of his head, can weary you to death with stuff of this sort.'<sup>28</sup> This review and other contemporary responses, discussed below, associated the 'too-muchness' of Dickens's similitic style with an uncultivated taste. The reference to 'any puppy that smokes his cigar' points disparagingly to the Cockney labouring class, [discussed below](#), and 'stuff of this sort' points to the hack-writing prevalent at the time, where material was readily plagiarised and circulated widely and cheaply. Ironically, Dickens himself was imitated by these literary hacks rather than vice versa: his work was frequently plagiarised and the copies or parodies 'enjoyed sales which rivalled and probably outnumbered that of Dickens's originals.'<sup>29</sup> Perhaps Dickens's work was plagiarised so often precisely because of its colloquial flavour. This section will consider how the qualities of grotesque exaggeration and graphic embodiment in Dickensian simile are linked with 'vulgarity.'

Reviews of *American Notes* more than of Dickens's other works in this period highlighted his use of simile. Indeed, the frequency (per 10,000 words) of similitic expressions in the *Notes* is mainly greater in comparison with his other works of this period: 46.21, vs. 31.60 in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 25.70 in *Barnaby Rudge*, and 31.78 in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Only *A Christmas Carol*, written a year later, surpasses the *Notes* with a frequency of 56.75. From what has been discussed above regarding the narrator-persona of the Christmas books, whom Dickens closely associates with himself, this

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<sup>28</sup> 'Unsigned review of *The Cricket on the Hearth*', *Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal*, Feb 1846, i., pp. 71-5, qtd. in Collins, *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 175-6.

<sup>29</sup> Schlicke, p. 457.

prolific similitude style in both *A Christmas Carol* and in the *Notes*, where Dickens writes ‘as himself,’ becomes naturally associated with his authorial voice in any of his works.

Samuel Warren’s review of the *Notes* in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (Dec 1842) gives a sense of how Dickens’s figurative comparisons were received by some critics at the time. Warren declares:

[The] eternal recurrence of such comparisons as that of a bed on shipboard to ‘a surgical plaster spread on [a] most inaccessible *shelf* [...] and of such illustrations as ‘portmanteaus no more capable of being got in at the door, *than a giraffe could be persuaded or forced into a flower-pot,*’ may provoke a loud laugh from readers of uncultivated taste [... but ...] to persons of superior education and refinement they are puerile and tiresome indeed. Let Mr Dickens but keep a little check on his wayward fancy.<sup>30</sup>

Warren does not explain why these descriptions should offend the sensibilities of ‘persons of superior education and refinement,’ but his added emphasis in the quotations provides a clue. The emphasis on the giraffe and the flower-pot in the second simile underlines the exaggeration and incongruity of the image. In the first simile, the emphasis that Warren places on *shelf* may indicate that his main criticism is of an image that is repeated a few times in the *Notes*. This ‘tiresome’ image recurs, for example, on one of Dickens’s steamboat journeys in America:

[...] going below, I found suspended on either side of the cabin, three long tiers of hanging bookshelves, designed apparently for volumes of the small octavo size. Looking with greater attention at these contrivances (wondering to find such literary preparations in such a place), I descried on each shelf a sort of microscopic sheet and blanket; then I began dimly to comprehend that the passengers were the library, and that they were to be arranged, edge-wise, on these shelves, till morning. (Ch. 10)

Besides the exaggeration or absurdity of the images, Dickens’s use of homely or familiar objects like plasters and flower-pots renders the comparisons graphically

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<sup>30</sup> Samuel Warren, ‘Dickens’s American Notes for General Circulation’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 52.326 (1842), 783–801 (p. 800) <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/dickenss-american-notes-general-circulation/docview/6518043/se-2>> [accessed 27 November 2022]; the quotation is taken from Ch. 1 (emphasis added by Warren). The review is written by ‘Q. Q. Q.’ but in *The Critical Heritage*, Philip Collins identifies Samuel Warren as the author (p. 120).

concrete. With the tangibility of a surgical plaster, for example, Dickens's description of the bed transforms the smallness of the stateroom into something much smaller and more uncomfortable. The smallness is made physically tangible to the reader. In their Introduction to *Victorian Vulgarity*, Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie comment that Friedrich Schiller associates 'the vulgar' with the accentuation of the material or physical vs. the mental or intellectual.<sup>31</sup> [As discussed above](#), Coleridge considered the Fancy as lower than the Imagination because it has 'no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites.' If the Victorian view of vulgarity inherited even vestiges of an outlook shared by some Romantic thinkers, Dickens's own 'wayward fancy' would be considered vulgar for its noticeable preoccupation with material associations. Even if his fancy is in many ways as creative as Coleridge's concept of the Imagination, it is more transformative than transcendent of the physical realities being observed.

The above passage from the *Notes* is the result of several experimentally hyperbolic and graphic descriptions that appear in Dickens's letters to friends and family written on the same day (3 January 1841). All of the descriptions seek to transform the smallness of the state-room into something much smaller. To his brother Frederick, he writes: 'Our cabin is something immensely smaller than you can possibly picture to yourself. Neither of the portmanteaus could by any mechanical contrivance be got into it.' To Daniel Maclise,<sup>32</sup> he writes:

I don't know what to compare [our cabin] with. A small box at a coffee room is much too big. So is a hackney coach. So is a chariot cab. It is more like one of those cabs where you get in at the back.

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<sup>31</sup> Bernstein and Michie, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Maclise (1806-70) was a history and portrait painter.



Finally, to Thomas Mitton,<sup>33</sup> he writes:

Anything so utterly and monstrously absurd as the size of our cabin, no gentleman of England who lives at home at ease, can for a moment imagine. A water closet of that size would be something too ridiculous to think of. *Neither of the Portmanteaus would go into it.* – There!<sup>34</sup>

There is an obsessive need to associate the size of the state-room with his own embodied experience: a small box at a coffee room, a hackney coach, a water closet etc. There is no question that Warren would find fault with the exaggeration and the graphic nature of these comparisons. The comparison with a water closet would be the height of vulgarity.

Warren pointedly suggests in his review of the *Notes* that before Dickens's next publication the author should read David Hume's essay 'On Simplicity and Refinement in Writing':

If he will, after reading it, turn to pages 1, 2, 4, 7, 12, 19, 24, 25, 30, 31, 146, 173, 184, 187, 280 [of the *Notes*], (we could have cited *at least* a hundred others,) he will find instances of such strained, and whimsical, and far-fetched images and comparisons, as very greatly impair the character and general effect of his composition.<sup>35</sup>

The specific page references given by Warren from the original 1842 edition of *American Notes* all contain examples of similitude language that are noticeable for their exaggerated or fanciful nature – among them, on pages 1 and 2, are the examples discussed above of the surgical plaster and the giraffe.<sup>36</sup> Dickens had possibly read Hume's 1767 essay 'On Simplicity and Refinement' by the time of Warren's review, for an 1825 edition of Hume's essays is included in the 1844 catalogue of Dickens's Devonshire Terrace library.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps Dickens purchased the copy after reading

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas Mitton (1812-78) was a solicitor and one of Dickens's earliest friends, acting as Dickens's solicitor from 1838 to 1858.

<sup>34</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 2, 'To Frederick Dickens,' 'To Daniel Maclise,' and 'To Thomas Mitton,' 3 Jan 1841.

<sup>35</sup> Warren, p. 800.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842), British Library 19th Century Collection.

<sup>37</sup> See the reference to this inventory [above](#).

Warren's comments. It may be that Dickens is targeting such prescriptivist texts as Hume's essay by not following the 'rules' therein. In any event, the above examples and many more from Dickens's works of this period would have warranted Hume's criticism: 'Too much ornament is a fault in every kind of production. Uncommon expressions, strong flashes of wit, pointed similies [sic] [...] especially when they recur too frequently, are a disfigurement, rather than any embellishment of discourse.' Hume would have found fault with Dickens's frequent recourse to 'similies' in the *Notes*. Especially with respect to Dickens's more fanciful descriptions, Hume would have complained that the 'justness of the representation is lost, and the mind is displeased to find a picture, which bears no resemblance to any original.'<sup>38</sup> One of the page references in Warren's list, page 184, is Dickens's anti-similic description of an American steamboat:

[...] to an English eye it was infinitely less like a steamboat than a huge floating-bath. I could hardly persuade myself, indeed, but that the bathing establishment off Westminster Bridge, which I left a baby, had suddenly grown to an enormous size; run away from home; and set up in foreign parts as a steamer. (Ch. 5)

The description of the steamboat leaves the reader with no real understanding of what it looks like, for even the source of comparison is distorted. Besides being personified as a baby that has grown up and run away from home, the 'bathing establishment off Westminster Bridge' is also greatly exaggerated in size so that it does not serve properly as a source of comparison.

Certainly not all of Dickens's readers would have censured the comparison quoted above: most readers would probably be amused rather than 'displeased' at a

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<sup>38</sup> David Hume, 'Essay on Simplicity and Refinement in Writing', *The British Magazine, or, Monthly Repository for Gentlemen and Ladies*, 8 (1767), 65–68 (p. 65)  
 <<https://www.proquest.com/docview/5262690/38D8AEE688145A6PQ/1?accountid=14511&imgSeq=1>>  
 [accessed 20 November 2022].

description that takes pains to ‘bear no resemblance to the original.’ Dickens contravenes rules of ‘simplicity and refinement’ for the sake of entertainment. Indeed, some contemporary responses to the *Notes* appreciated Dickens’s figurative comparisons precisely for the way they did not follow the general rule. One of Dickens’s American friends, C. C. Felton,<sup>39</sup> introduced his review of the *Notes* by writing positively of Dickens’s ‘graphic touches, good feeling and pleasant observation’: ‘Strange but striking comparisons, a sudden bringing together of opposite ideas, [...] and pleasant exaggeration, are the materials out of which he has woven ten thousand witty passages, which will be read with delight, as long as wit is understood.’<sup>40</sup> Felton praises the very characteristics of exaggeration and strangeness in Dickens’s descriptions that were designated as vulgar by others. Felton’s friendship with Dickens may have biased him in favour of these ‘witty passages’; his admiration is sometimes too effusive, as when he says,

His style is original, almost beyond that of any writer of English in this age. It is formed, not by the study of classical models, not by consuming the midnight oil in laboriously mastering the learning of books; but it is caught from the lips of men, speaking under the influence of the passions in daily life. It is formed from the commonest materials, selected with an instinctive tact, and used with singular directness and force.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout his review, Felton tries to depict Dickens’s style as sublime and transcendental; yet Felton’s choice of words in this passage barely disguises that Dickens depends not on any ‘cultivated’ learning but on the commonplace, the ordinary, and his immediate surroundings for the material of his observations.

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<sup>39</sup> Cornelius Conway Felton (1807-62) was an American lecturer and President of Harvard University (1860-62) who became Dickens’s closest American friend.

<sup>40</sup> Cornelius C. Felton, ‘Art. X. - American Notes for General Circulation’, *The North American Review*, 56.118 (1843), 212 <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/art-x-american-notes-general-circulation/docview/137055315/se-2>> [accessed 29 November 2022].

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

The graphic transformation rather than transcendence of the commonplace is what gives Dickens's comparisons their originality. The author of a piece in the *Examiner* (Oct 1842) selected several of these comparisons from *American Notes* to comment on, saying,

We had made a collection of its graphic, grotesque, and laughter-moving similes, when necessity brought our last week's notice to a close. They are a prominent part of the good-humour and hearty enjoyment of the book. The truth and life of the writer's fancy are in them all, and they animate the dullest things with their quaint vivacity.<sup>42</sup>

The selection of the similes includes many of the 'at least a hundred' other examples not cited above in the excerpt from Warren's piece. One of the 'laughter-moving' examples demonstrates a favourite Dickensian expression and source of comparison, as noted in the previous chapter: the impossibility of describing something without figurative language and the comparison to St Paul's as an absurdly solemn image. Describing how it feels to ride over a corduroy road in America (a road made of logs), Dickens writes:

*It would be impossible to experience a similar set of sensations, in any other circumstances, unless perhaps in attempting to go up to the top of St. Paul's in an omnibus. Never, never once, that day, was the coach in any position, attitude, or kind of motion to which we are accustomed in coaches. Never did it make the smallest approach to one's experience of the proceedings of any sort of vehicle that goes on wheels. (Ch. 14; emphasis added)*

The hyperbolic repetition of *never* and *any* as well as the 'graphic' but incomprehensible idea of riding an omnibus to the top of St Paul's is typical of the 'grotesque' exaggeration that gives a unique flavour to Dickens's narrator's voice. The review indicates that these comparisons were designed to provoke amusement, which shows the inherently comic nature of early Dickensian simile, as discussed in the previous chapter.

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<sup>42</sup> 'American Notes', ed. by Leigh Hunt, Albany William Fonblanque, and John Forster, *Examiner*, 1813, 1842, 692 <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/american-notes/docview/8572351/se-2>> [accessed 5 December 2022].

Chapter Six, as mentioned, will discuss how in his later works Dickens uses ‘laughter-moving’ similes in unexpectedly inappropriate moments of horror or sadness.

Another review of the *Notes* provides negative criticism of the same:

Though it contains nothing intrinsically new, every thing [sic] is made to wear a new face from the way in which it is painted, and patched, and frizzed, and powdered, before it is brought upon the stage. Every thing is made to wear Boz’s peculiar colours, and is stamped with his idiosyncrasy [sic].<sup>43</sup>

The writer of the review quotes another ‘authority’ who has written positively of the ‘grotesque similes scattered throughout [Mr] Dickens’s descriptions’ but he himself says, ‘We confess we think these grotesque similes are not in the best taste in an author’s own mouth, and that they might better have been reserved for the lips of some new Sam Weller.’<sup>44</sup> The reviewer associates the fanciful distortion of Dickens’s similes with the popular entertainment of the stage and with one of Dickens’s own Cockney characters: Sam Weller from *The Pickwick Papers*. The implied Cockneyism of Dickens’s descriptions here is meant as a slur, the reviewer evidently considering that Dickens’s figurative language belongs to a lower class in its popular appeal. As he scornfully says, it is received with ‘glee [...] by the obedient multitude.’ Cockneyism was an object of contemporary satire, as it had been since the early modern period for the ‘characteristic combination of ignorance and self-conceit’ that marked the Cockney as a ‘metropolitan provincial’ and special comical offshoot of modern urbanisation.<sup>45</sup> Gregory Dart comments on Sam Weller’s vulgar speech in his work on *Cockney Adventures*: ‘Clever and cocky as he is, Sam’s speech fixes him in the realm of the

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Dickens’s American Notes’, *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country*, 26.155 (1842), 617–29 (p. 621) <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/dickenss-american-notes/docview/2611667/se-2>> [accessed 5 December 2022].

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622.

<sup>45</sup> Gregory Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810-1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 5-6.

London labouring class [...]. His Wellerisms are the metropolitan equivalent of rural proverbs, an odd mixture of the sagacious and the streetwise.’<sup>46</sup> The term ‘Wellerisms’ refers to the short and ludicrous analogies that Sam and his father use to illustrate their meaning on several occasions. When Sam and Mr Pickwick have been hoodwinked by Alfred Jingle and Job Trotter, for example, Sam tells his father, ‘It’s over, and can’t be helped, and that’s one consolation, as they always says in Turkey, ven they cuts the wrong man’s head off’ (Ch. 23). This wise ‘saying’ is Dickens’s parodic imitation of what Warren might call ‘mere vulgar Cockney colloquialisms.’<sup>47</sup>

Hume would have agreed with the above review’s criticism of Dickens’s vulgar similes, for in his essay ‘On Simplicity and Refinement,’ it states that only ‘Ordinary readers are mightily struck’ by such ‘a blaze of wit and conceit’: and for this reason, such ‘agreeable faults’ are ‘the more dangerous, and the more apt to pervert the taste of the young and inconsiderate.’<sup>48</sup> To appeal to the sensibilities of ‘ordinary readers’ is synonymous with vulgarity. John Kucich notes that the Victorian notion of ‘vulgarity’ was equivalent, among many other disagreeable attributes, to being ‘ordinary.’<sup>49</sup> The main fault that some of Dickens’s contemporaries find with his figurative comparisons is that they exaggerate the ordinary: they take something that in itself is not ‘intrinsically new’ and give it a different, often distorted appearance. An anonymous 1842 imitation of the *Notes* called *Current American Notes* by ‘Buz!’<sup>50</sup> parodies the exaggeration of the

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<sup>46</sup> Dart, p. 243.

<sup>47</sup> Warren, p. 800.

<sup>48</sup> Hume, p. 67.

<sup>49</sup> John Kucich, ‘How Victorian Was Vulgarity?’, in *Victorian Vulgarity: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture*, ed. by Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 241–51 (p. 241). Kucich comments on the variety of definitions of vulgarity and how ‘vulgar’ can be ‘synonymous with ordinary, ignorant, unfashionable, repulsive, dirty, obscene, self-interested, non-spiritual, commercial, ostentatious, and affected.’

<sup>50</sup> Anonymous, *Current American Notes, by ‘Buz!’* (London: Pierce, 1842), British Library 19th Century Collection.

ordinary found in Dickens's similes. In this short work, only the first chapter and some isolated observations of prisons and cities in America come close to the original *Notes*; the other sections are made up of rambling anecdotes and inserted stories. In the parts that are closest to the original, it is mainly the similitic language that is parodied. The comparison of the mattress to a surgical plaster on an inaccessible shelf, for example, becomes a 'very thin mattress, spread like the butter on a piece of bread which some spoilt child had neglected for breakfast, and placed on a high shelf to be eaten for his dinner.'<sup>51</sup> The exaggeration of the original phrase is highlighted by this nonsensical simile that purposefully misses the point of Dickens's comparison. It is no longer about the smallness of the room or the bed but about the 'spoilt child' doing whatever he likes with his food, much as Dickens is doing whatever he likes with his figurative descriptions. The parody ridicules Dickens's far-fetched and 'low-brow' style. The narrator repeatedly calls himself 'Charles Stretch, Esq.' and professes his pride in being a 'Cockney': 'For myself I must confess, that I am a Cockney, and, more than that, I am proud of that denomination.'<sup>52</sup> The parody mocks the self-referential style of the narrator of Dickens's *Notes* and moreover links his exhibitionism to Cockneyism.

In another instance, rather than exaggerating an original simile, the parody by 'Buz' deflates one of Dickens's hyperbolic comparisons. In Dickens's *Notes* (p. 24 in Warren's list) he describes the motions of the ship through the stormy sea: 'Now every plank and timber creaked, as if the ship were made of wicker-work; and now crackled, like an enormous fire of the driest possible twigs.' In the parody, this description is rendered: 'the ship creaked and groaned; and then there was a crackling noise like a

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

bundle of twigs over a fire.’<sup>53</sup> The superlative or overly-fanciful language is stripped away: it is not ‘every plank’ that creaks, the fire is not ‘enormous’ and the twigs are not the ‘driest possible’; the ‘crackling noise’ is not associated at all with the image of the ship being made of wicker-work. By giving us the bare bones of the figurative comparison, as it were, the parody indicates that Dickens is making ‘too much’ of ordinary, familiar realities.

Writing as ‘Charles Dickens, Esq.’ in the *Notes*, Dickens’s exaggeration of ordinary realities through similitude language becomes critically linked with his personal authorial style. The manifestations of graphically homely figurative comparisons in his other works of this period are thus recognisably his voice, or at least the voice that he has curated with his similitude style. It is a voice that readers had come to expect, featuring comparisons that would dwell unnecessarily on the all-too-familiar things in life and so bring them into fresh focus – sometimes in disconcerting ways. For example, pimples and the bodily discomfort they cause are a favourite source of comparison for Dickens. In *Barnaby Rudge*, the narrator conjectures whether Mrs Varden’s disposition, which has become unpleasant in prosperity, might become more amiable if she were to meet with some misfortune: ‘certain it is that minds, like bodies, will often fall into a pimpled ill-conditioned state from mere excess of comfort, and like them, are often successfully cured by remedies in themselves very nauseous and unpalatable’ (Ch. 7). The analogy, although elegantly expressed, is disgusting in its materialisation of the mind as a pimpled body. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, at the meeting of the Chuzzlewit family, the description of George Chuzzlewit is even more disturbing:

[...] he had such an obvious disposition to pimples, that the bright spots on his cravat, the rich pattern on his waistcoat, and even his glittering

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 5.



trinkets, seemed to have broken out on him, and not to have come into existence comfortably. (Ch. 4)

George's actual pimples are the target of the figurative language, but they become a weird source of fanciful comparison by the end of the passage. George's face and clothes merge to become an embodied pimple.

An over-specification of detail can also cause Dickens's comparisons to appear vulgar. In *A Christmas Carol*, when Scrooge is taking part unobserved in his nephew's Christmas games, and making excellent guesses, the narrator says, 'the sharpest needle, best Whitechapel, warranted not to cut in the eye, was not sharper than Scrooge' (Stave III). The description might almost be a hidden advertisement for needles manufactured in Whitechapel, reputed to be the best area for needles in London. The needle as the source of the comparison becomes the focus rather than Scrooge as the target. The over-specification indicates a working-class mentality for its advertisement-like quality, and it certainly contains lower-class overtones by pointing so explicitly to Whitechapel, one of the poorest areas of London at the time. The same comparison has occurred before, in *Barnaby Rudge*, when Miggs pretends to have been terrified by the hangman Dennis's gaze upon her: 'she sat, as she afterwards remarked, on pins and needles of the sharpest Whitechapel kind' (Ch. 70). Such facetious over-specification could have a homely effect, as in *The Old Curiosity Shop* when Abel Garland and his wife celebrate the occasion of their son's articling by offering 'a nosegay resembling in shape and dimensions a full-sized warming-pan with the handle cut short off' (Ch. 14). The measurements of a 'full-sized warming-pan' would be familiar to many readers as something belonging to the intimacy of the bed-chamber. With its handle cut off, a warming pan would be about a foot in diameter. There is no reason to describe the nosegay in such a strangely specific way and with a comparison sourced from a

conceptual domain<sup>54</sup> that has nothing to do with nosegays. This kind of over-specificity thus contributes a sense of exhibitionism to some of Dickens's comparisons, and is part of his similitude style.

Specific details in his comparisons reflect Dickens's personal embodied experience which he has made public for the sake of entertainment. In *American Notes*, Dickens describes how the steamboat bound to New York 'was so crowded with passengers that the upper deck was like the box lobby of a theatre between the pieces, and the lower one like Tottenham Court Road on a Saturday night' (Ch. 15). The specificity of the comparisons, especially 'Tottenham Court Road on a Saturday night,' indicates that the comparisons are sourced from Dickens's personal experience. The description would resonate as well with readers of all social classes: the upper classes who would be seated in the boxes at theatres, and the lower to middle-classes who would jostle among crowds in an 'unfashionable' quarter of London.<sup>55</sup> Dickens humorously sources 'ordinary' embodied experiences that he and his reading public – at least of London – can both share. The same comparison appears again in *Martin Chuzzlewit* when Martin Chuzzlewit (the younger) is also journeying by steamboat in America: 'The Honourable Elijah Pogram and Martin found themselves, after a severe struggle, side by side, as they might have come together in the pit of a London theatre' (Ch. 34). The obvious connection of the American steamboat is enough to link the two comparisons in the minds of the readers. Moreover, the description targets members of the working class, who would typically be seated in the pit of the theatre. The appeal to the experience of 'ordinary' people further strengthens the bond between himself and his

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<sup>54</sup> From [Figure 4](#): a conceptual domain can be defined as 'A mental representation of a segment of human experience (i.e. everything belonging to or related to the idea of "love").'

<sup>55</sup> Edward Walford, 'Tottenham Court Road', in *Old and New London* (London, 1878), IV, 467–80 <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/old-new-london/vol4/pp467-480>> [accessed 9 December 2022].

readers. Furthermore, repeating the self-referential comparison from the *Notes* cements the relationship between his own person and the narrator-persona of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The congenial narrator of his other works in this period, in other words, is meant to be the ‘Dickens’ of *American Notes*.

#### iv. Dickens’s Anti-Prescriptivism and Lindley Murray’s *Grammar*

A legacy of the rise of prescriptivism in the previous century in England were the various etiquette manuals that circulated widely in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>56</sup> These often associated vulgarity with the improper use of language and style.<sup>57</sup> As noted above, Dickens was aware at least by 1844 of Hume’s 1767 essay on ‘Simplicity and Refinement in Writing.’ Also included in Dickens’s Devonshire Terrace library catalogue is a copy of the 1810 or 1812 edition of Vicesimus Knox’s *Elegant Extracts in Prose, Verse, and Epistles*,<sup>58</sup> which also promotes simplicity and clarity in figures of speech. In a letter to John Macrone<sup>59</sup> in 1836, Dickens asked for Charles William Day’s *Hints on Etiquette and the Usages of Society*,<sup>60</sup> which briefly comments on the proper use of language. One of the most familiar prescriptivist texts of the day, Lindley

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<sup>56</sup> C.f. *Eighteenth-Century English: Ideology and Change*, ed. by Raymond Hickey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Beth Newman, ‘The Vulgarity of Elegance: Social Mobility, Middle-Class Diction, and the Victorian Novel’, in *Victorian Vulgarity: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture*, ed. by Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 17–33.

<sup>58</sup> Vicesimus Knox, *Elegant Extracts of Prose, Verse, and Epistles (18 Volumes)*, 10th edn (London: J. Sharpe and H. Mclean, 1810), II <<http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/319977677.html>> [accessed 15 November 2021].

<sup>59</sup> John Macrone (1809–37) published *Sketches by ‘Boz.’* Dickens and Macrone were friends until they argued about the terms for Dickens’s novel *Barnaby Rudge* (originally going to be called *Gabriel Vardon*).

<sup>60</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 1, ‘To John Macrone,’ 27 April 1836.

Murray's *English Grammar* (1795),<sup>61</sup> features in several of Dickens's writings. Lindley Murray (1745-1826) was an American lawyer and writer whose *Grammar* was used in schools in both England and the United States. Much of the *Grammar* was material re-worked from *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) by Robert Lowth, commonly regarded as one of the fathers of prescriptivist grammar. Despite or perhaps *because* of his familiarity with these texts, which all aimed to set a standard of elegance in behaviour and writing, Dickens demonstrated an anti-prescriptivist attitude in his writings. The complexity of Dickens's attitude towards prescriptivism reveals another layer of Dickens's self-conscious narratorial style. On one hand, his narrator-persona is hyper-aware of the 'rules to be observed'; and on the other, he seems to disregard them with ease, to the chagrin of contemporary critics.

In his use of similitude language, as discussed above, some contemporary critics considered his style uncultivated or vulgar for its exaggeration or graphic nature. One review of *Martin Chuzzlewit* complains of such 'revolting details' as the description of the flies that Jonas Chuzzlewit imagines 'thickly sprinkled all over' Montague Tigg's corpse, 'like heaps of dried currants' (Ch. 51). This same review further complains of exaggerative language which 'is surely improper for an author of established reputation' to use; and by imitating some of his characters' speech in semi-free indirect discourse, Dickens 'offends grievously against the rules of grammar' and thereby 'offends the shade of Lindley Murray.'<sup>62</sup> Dickens is intimately acquainted with Murray's work and his offense against the 'shade of Murray' could be construed as deliberate if not explicit. Nevertheless, Dickens himself mocks the Victorian vulgarity that some etiquette

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<sup>61</sup> Lyda Fens-De Zeeuw, 'The HUGE Presence of Lindley Murray: An Illustration of the Scope of Lindley Murray's Authority on All Things Prescriptive', *English Today*, 34.4 (2018), 54–61.

<sup>62</sup> 'ART. III.-The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit', *The North British Review*, 3.5 (1845), 65–87 (p. 76) <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/art-iii-life-adventures-martin-chuzzlewit/docview/4277736/se-2>> [accessed 13 December 2022].

manuals condemned. Charles Day's *Hints on Etiquette*, although primarily about how to act in different social settings, makes a point of criticising an ornamental style of speech that betrays a certain social anxiety: 'bestowing high sounding titles upon very ordinary objects, – as calling a hackney-coach, "the carriage;" or speaking of [...] a miserable passage, three feet wide, as the "hall."' <sup>63</sup> Dickens makes fun of this ornamental style in his very first story, 'A Dinner at Poplar Walk,' when Mr Minns arrives at his cousin Bagshaw's house. <sup>64</sup> The butler leads him out of the front passage 'denominated by courtesy "The Hall"' and ushers him 'into a front drawing-room, commanding a very extensive view of the backs of the neighbouring houses.' <sup>65</sup> The elevated description of the drab property reflects the Bagshaws' social pretensions.

Dickens is evidently showcasing the Bagshaws' middle-class vulgarity – as a prescriptivist manual might do; yet he parodies prescriptivism as well in the Bagshaws' efforts to appear well versed in the standards of language usage. Mrs Bagshaw attempts to exhibit her son's knowledge of good grammar:

'Alick, what part of speech is *be*?'  
 'A verb.'  
 'That's a good boy,' said Mrs. Bagshaw, with all a mother's pride.  
 'Now, you know what a verb is?'  
 'A verb is a word which signifies to be, to do, or to suffer; as, I am  
 – I rule – I am ruled.' <sup>66</sup>

The definition is taken directly from Lindley Murray's *Grammar*: 'The Verb signifies to be, to do, or to suffer; as, I am, I rule, I am ruled.' <sup>67</sup> Alick has rendered the *Grammar* exactly and in fact demands a prize for his feat of memorisation. The definition appears

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<sup>63</sup> Charles William Day, *Hints on Etiquette and the Usages of Society* (London, 1834), p. 30.

<sup>64</sup> Bagshaw is changed to Budden in the revised version.

<sup>65</sup> Dickens, 'A Dinner at Poplar Walk', p. 621.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622.

<sup>67</sup> Murray, p. 20.

again in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, as George Leslie Brook has noted in *The Language of Dickens*,<sup>68</sup> when Mark Tapley says:

[...] a Verb is a word as signifies to be, to do, or to suffer (which is all the grammar, and enough too, as ever I was taught); and if there's a Verb alive, I'm it. For I'm always a-bein', sometimes a-doin', and continually a-sufferin'. (Ch. 48)

Dickens's attitude towards such a prescriptivist tool is shown by these humorous renditions of the *Grammar*'s precision and the kind of schoolboy rote memorisation that hardly proves any internalisation of the knowledge. Just as Day's etiquette manual has not been written 'for those *who do*, but for those who do *not know what is proper*,'<sup>69</sup> so grammars and other prescriptivist texts are to be followed slavishly by any who wish to advance in society and only vaguely remembered by someone like Mark Tapley who has no such desire. Dickens's knowledge of and ownership of prescriptivist texts in the period of 1840-44 may indicate his own social anxiety as he became an internationally renowned author. If so, it is an anxiety which he then hid by ridiculing both extremes of social-climbing and elitist attitudes.

In any event, Dickens shows an anti-prescriptivist mindset when he ridicules Murray's *Grammar* in his writings. As Alice Turner has noted, Dickens refers explicitly to Murray's *Grammar* in another of the *Sketches*. In 'The Boarding House,' Mrs Bloss speaks with, 'a supreme contempt for the memory of Lindley Murray.'<sup>70</sup> There is again some ambivalence as to whether Dickens is mainly mocking Mrs Bloss's ungrammatical speech or the *Grammar*. Mrs Bloss, like the Bagshaws, is worthy of ridicule in her social pretensions; yet the *Grammar* appears to be a deliberate source of humour, since Mrs Bloss can have no real contempt for something she is completely unaware of. If

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<sup>68</sup> Brook, p. 80.

<sup>69</sup> Day, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Dickens, 'The Boarding-House (II)', p. 183.

anything, the implication is that Lindley Murray would hold Mrs Bloss herself in ‘supreme contempt.’ Murray is clearly the object of ridicule when he is used as the source of one of Dickens’s amusing comparisons in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Mrs Jarley, the waxworks manager, ‘had been at great pains to conciliate’ her audiences ‘of a very superior description, including a great many young ladies’ boarding-schools’ ‘by altering the face and costume of Mr Grimaldi as clown to represent Mr Lindley Murray as he appeared when engaged in the composition of his English Grammar’ (Ch. 29). Turner argues that the changing of Grimaldi, one of Dickens’s childhood heroes, to Lindley Murray ‘cannot be viewed as a positive alteration.’<sup>71</sup> This is not the only negative inference. There is an obvious connection in the text between Murray’s *Grammar* and the ‘superior’ quality of the young ladies’ boarding-schools. Where ordinary ‘common’ audiences would be delighted with Grimaldi and another waxwork of a famous murderess, (which is equally changed to look like Mrs Hannah More<sup>72</sup>), the elite are favoured with likenesses that are considered ‘to be quite startling from their extreme correctness’ (Ch. 29). The ‘extreme correctness’ refers not only to the likenesses but also to the mentality of the originals of those likenesses.

There are several other examples from Dickens’s works that show his knowledge of Murray’s *Grammar*<sup>73</sup> – the majority of these presenting extracts from the *Grammar* in humorous ways, as shown above in ‘A Dinner’ and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Deborah

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<sup>71</sup> Alice Turner, ‘The Only Way Is Dickens: Representations of Cockney Speech and Cockney Characters in the Works of Charles Dickens’ (University of Leicester, 2020), p. 56.

<sup>72</sup> Hannah More (1745-1833) was known for her evangelical and moralistic writing. She worked for the better education of the poor with strict conservative and moral standards.

<sup>73</sup> Sørensen, p. 238; Reibel, pp. 70-74, 78-81; Sørensen shows the connection between the *Grammar* and *Dombey and Son* when Miss Tox brings in the ‘party’ of Toodles: ‘It then appeared that she had used the word, not in its legal or business acceptation, when it merely expresses an individual, but as a noun of multitude, or signifying many’ (Ch. 2). Reibel comments on Dickens’s use of the ‘Potential Mood’ with the same sequence of ‘might, could, would, should’ that is used in the *Grammar*, giving examples from *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), ‘The Poor Relation’s Story’ (1852), *A Child’s History of England* (1854), ‘Prince Bull. A Fairy Tale’ (1855), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-1), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5).

Aschkenes perhaps goes too far in attempting to show Dickens's thorough familiarity with Murray. Using *David Copperfield*, she argues that Dickens's work incorporates Murray's precise grammar of associationism.<sup>74</sup> However, specific references to Murray in Dickens's work are relegated to a footnote, which hides Dickens's ridicule of the *Grammar*. Even if Dickens subtly incorporated Murray's philosophy of language and perhaps used Murray as a guide for grammatical constructions, Dickens's explicit references to the *Grammar* demonstrate a mockery of and a certain rebellion against prescriptivist rules. Moreover, despite his knowledge of Murray's *Grammar*, Dickens makes what Murray would consider obvious mistakes in his use of figurative language. In an [above-quoted example](#) from *American Notes*, when Dickens describes a prairie as 'a tranquil sea or lake without water,' he adds, 'if such a simile be admissible' (Ch. 13). Dickens uses *simile* in the wrong sense, since 'A *Comparison* or *Simile*,' as Murray's *Grammar* shows with examples, 'is, when the resemblance between two objects is *expressed in form*,'<sup>75</sup> and Dickens's construction here is metaphorical – 'a comparison, expressed in an abridged form.'<sup>76</sup> Dickens disregards the precision of language advocated by Murray. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, on the other hand, he is comically overly precise. During the Chuzzlewit family conference, we read that 'there was such a skirmishing, and flouting, and snapping off of heads, in the metaphorical sense of that expression' (Ch. 4). The 'precision' of the narrator helps the reader avoid the impossible

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<sup>74</sup> Deborah Aschkenes, 'In the Mind's Eye: Associationism and Style in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel' (Columbia University, 2015), ProQuest LLC <<https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/minds-eye-associationism-style-nineteenth-century/docview/1680842489/se-2>>. Aschkenes defines 'associationism' as a set of theories in the Victorian period that attempted to show how sense-input was represented in the mind as well as connected or associated with other ideas. This association of ideas was considered the basis for one's reading experience as well as one's experience of the material world.

<sup>75</sup> Murray, p. 216; emphasis in original.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.



*literal* sense of that expression. Dickens thus ridicules the didacticism of precise categorisation.

Much of Dickens's similitic description blatantly disregards the advice contained in Murray's definition of a simile: 'The advantage of this figure arises from the illustration which the simile employed gives to the principal object; from the clearer view of it which it presents.' In such clear comparisons:

[...] the understanding is concerned much more than the fancy: and therefore the rules to be observed, with respect to them, are, that they be clear, and that they be useful; that they tend to render our conception of the principal object more distinct; and that they do not lead our view aside, and bewilder it with any false light.<sup>77</sup>

As mentioned in the previous section, even the so-called simile that Dickens uses of a 'lake without water' is purposefully unclear in its contradiction. Dickens's anti-similitic habit does not 'render our conception of the principal object more distinct' – [as noted above](#) when he describes Washington in *American Notes* like the 'worst parts of the City Road and Pentonville' and then proceeds to take away any resemblance between target and source (Ch. 8). Dickens seems much more concerned with the fancy than with the understanding; and his images can bewilder rather than enlighten the reader. When he accumulates similes, as when he describes Poll Sweedepipe's likeness to several species of birds in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (Ch. 26), Dickens is also ignoring Murray's caution in the *Grammar* against an excess of comparisons:

It is also to be observed, that a comparison which, in the principal circumstances, carries a sufficiently near resemblance, may become unnatural and obscure, if pushed too far. Nothing is more opposite to the design of this figure, than to hunt after a great number of coincidences in minute points, merely to shew how far the writer's ingenuity can stretch the resemblance.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

Murray would declare that a ‘sufficiently near resemblance’ of Poll to a bird is already achieved when the narrator of *Martin Chuzzlewit* says that ‘Poll had something of the bird in his nature’; and perhaps one illustration of this would suffice. When the narrator continues comparing Poll to different birds throughout a long passage, he himself is aware that Poll’s ‘ornithological properties were on the verge of going too far,’ as discussed in [Section ii](#). The accumulation of bird-imagery does not necessarily render Poll ‘more distinct’ as the ‘principal object’ of the comparison but rather shows Dickens’s ‘ingenuity in stretching the resemblance.’

Dickens may not have been deliberately contravening Murray’s advice, but the several references to Murray in his works, and especially the precision with which Murray is rendered in some passages, shows that Dickens was thoroughly familiar with the *English Grammar*, and thus knew when he was ignoring some of its rules. Moreover, similar strictures are found in Hume’s essay on ‘Simplicity and Refinement in Writing’ and in Vicesimus Knox’s *Elegant Extracts*, both of which are included in Dickens’s 1844 library. The following passage from the *Extracts* is comparable to what Murray says in his *Grammar* about ‘stretching a resemblance’: ‘It is the idle fancy of some poor brains, to run out perpetually into a course of similitudes, confounding their subject by the multitude of likenesses; and making it like so many things, that it is like nothing at all.’<sup>79</sup> Dickens does not always abide by the ‘rules to be observed’ in his use of figurative comparison, but this is not evidence of an ‘uncultivated’ author with a ‘poor brain.’ Rather, he is evidently aware of the rules, employing them in humorous ways in his writings. By disregarding certain conventions, Dickens purposefully moves away from restrictive stylistic standards to create a unique narratorial voice. The similitude

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<sup>79</sup> Knox, II, pp. 175–76.

language he employs may have been considered vulgar for its grotesque exaggeration or graphic depiction of the ‘ordinary’ things in life. However, his style is not the vulgar style of Mrs Bloss, who is unaware of the standards she is transgressing. It is not Mrs Bloss but Dickens who speaks with, ‘a supreme contempt for the memory of Lindley Murray.’<sup>80</sup>

#### v. Conclusion: Dickensian Exhibitionism

From Dickens’s earliest fictional writing, discussed in the previous chapter, it is difficult to determine whether he was aware of his similitic ‘signature and brand.’ However, in the works discussed in this chapter, as he became an internationally recognised author and himself associated his own persona of ‘Charles Dickens’ with that of the narrator of his works, the self-conscious and even self-referential artifice of his similitic language is too deliberate to be accidental. It becomes a means of exhibiting his authorial flair. James Buzard comments that ‘No account of “Victorian Vulgarities” would be complete’ without including Dickens, the ‘consummate narcissist’ and ‘self-promoter,’ linking vulgarity with exhibitionism.<sup>81</sup> Buzard does not discuss Dickens’s style as such, but there is an element of self-promotion in Dickens’s self-conscious use of similitic language. In the first chapter, Dickens’s similitic style was discussed as his way of catering to trends in melodramatic and comic writing and building on that popular appeal. In this period of 1840-44, Dickens’s writing was creating rather than subscribing

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<sup>80</sup> Dickens, ‘The Boarding-House (II)’, p. 183.

<sup>81</sup> James Buzard, ‘Vulgarity and Vitality: On Making a Spectacle of Oneself in *Pickwick Papers*’, in *Victorian Vulgarities: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture*, ed. by Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 35–53 (p. 35).

to popular expectations. Furthermore, he fulfilled these expectations by associating the self-conscious or self-referential similitude language with his own authorial person in *American Notes*. Writing ‘as Dickens’ in the *Notes*, a prolific and self-conscious use of simile becomes associated with his own ‘personal’ style. When this style is manifested in his other works, the reader recognises ‘Dickens’s’ voice in the different narratives – or at least the voice of the narrator-persona that he has associated with himself. This connection is evident when Dickens repeats similes, using favourite comparisons to clocks, or to St Pauls, or to bustling crowds in Tottenham Court Road. As in the above-quoted example from *A Christmas Carol* when the narrator is ‘standing in the spirit’ at the reader’s elbow (Stave II), explicit or implicit self-referential comparisons in *American Notes* create a congenial narrator-persona who can connect with his reader on an intimate level through the ‘ordinary’, or through what some would call the ‘vulgar’, things of life.

Indeed, some would consider this a vulgar, self-promoting move. In this period of his burgeoning fame, perhaps it was. However, Juliet John in her work on *Dickens and Mass Culture* argues that Dickens’s wide appeal ‘destabilised the familiar idea of a binary opposition between high and low culture.’<sup>82</sup> In fact he represents both worlds in his writings: even in this early period, he shows his awareness of both the ‘ordinary’ things of life and the standards of high culture. His transgressions of this last can be construed as deliberate. In this way, he both unmasks elite pretensions of ‘the rules to be observed’ and shows the ‘ordinary’ people that the fancy, with its ‘fixities and definites,’ can transform everyday ‘common’ reality into uncommon prose. In his review of *American Notes*, discussed above, Samuel Warren suggests that Dickens ‘keep a little

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<sup>82</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 39.

check on his wayward fancy' rather than try to push his genius into 'unnatural, excessive, and exhausting action.' In this way, his name will be remembered 'after nineteen-twentieths of his contemporaries shall have passed into eternal oblivion.'<sup>83</sup> This thesis, meanwhile, would not have been written if Dickens had restrained his 'wayward fancy.' It considers Dickens's 'unnatural, excessive, and exhausting' similes a large part of why Dickens remains relevant today.

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<sup>83</sup> Warren, p. 800.

## Chapter Four: Inimitable Simile in the Letters

### *i.* 'I find I am getting inimitable': Private Letters and Public Personality

Situated in the middle of the thesis, this chapter briefly interrupts the chronological survey of Dickens's works to examine the similitic style of Dickens's letters. Dickens's use of simile in his letters reveals the hyperbole and self-consciousness that have been examined in his earlier writings; it also shows the deliberate manipulation of imagery for characterisation and humour that will be examined in his later writings. Like any writer aware of his own fame, and conscious that his letters might be carefully preserved, Dickens was not unusual in the way he deliberately created a certain image of himself in his correspondence. However, Dickens is unusual in that his self-curating propensity and his self-acclaimed 'inimitability' is linked to his unique similitic description, as this first section of the chapter will show. The second section of this chapter shows the need to rehearse a particular image in the letters – to 'try it out,' as it were, on an audience. John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-4) revealed that many of the letters Forster received from Dickens were reproduced in *American Notes* (1842) and *Pictures From Italy* (1846), and since then it has been frequently noted that passages from his letters home served as a kind of 'rehearsal' for the observations in both books.<sup>1</sup> Passages from the letters reproduced in the travelogues normally contain some Dickensian simile. The second section will also demonstrate a hitherto unstudied connection between similes in Dickens's letters and his other fictional works. The chapter will end with a third section

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<sup>1</sup> John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872-74). Dickens wrote 932 letters to Forster from 1837 to 1870.

evaluating how Dickens's use of similitude language varies in letters to different correspondents.

The collection of the letters of Charles Dickens is still incomplete, as the ongoing Dickens Letters Project testifies.<sup>2</sup> Any analysis of his letter-writing style is necessarily limited by the number that has survived; but that is a significant number. More than 14,000 letters have been collected in 12 volumes in *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*, edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey. Some of the texts are based on secondary sources, for several manuscripts of the original letters have not survived. House and Storey explain that one quarter of the manuscripts of letters collected by Mary (Mamie) Dickens and Georgina Hogarth (Dickens's daughter and sister-in-law respectively) in their 1880 edition has not survived. The reason that these manuscripts, and possibly many other unquoted ones, were destroyed may be that the content was deemed too intimate and for the eyes of family and close friends alone. Hundreds of the manuscripts of letters to John Forster that Forster quotes in his *Life of Charles Dickens* have not survived. House and Storey presume that the longer letters which were pasted into the manuscript of *The Life* – most of the letters included in the second and third volumes – are 'more authentic than the shorter extracts which [Forster] copied out by hand, no doubt often "improving" them as he did so.'<sup>3</sup> Forster likely considered it his right to edit the letters as he saw fit as Dickens's 'future biographer' – a role for which he claims to have been chosen by Dickens himself:

The reader will forgive my quoting from a letter of the date of the 22nd April, 1848. 'I desire no better for my fame, when my personal dustiness shall be past the control of my love of order, than such a biographer and

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Litvak and others, Database, *Charles Dickens Letters Project*, 2023 <[www.dickensletters.com](http://www.dickensletters.com)> [accessed 12 January 2023].

<sup>3</sup> House and Storey, *Letters*, Vol. 1, xii-xiii.

such a critic.’ ‘You know me better,’ he wrote, resuming the same subject on the 6th of July, 1862, ‘than any other man does, or ever will.’<sup>4</sup>

If these extracts are not themselves greatly ‘improved’ upon, and Dickens did indeed intend Forster to be his future biographer, then many if not most of Dickens’s letters to Forster after April 1848 naturally include a layer of self-conscious authorship. Knowing that anything written to Forster might find its way into a future biography, Dickens would be careful and purposeful in the way he displayed himself. Thus, the letters to Forster before 1848 that Dickens appropriated for *American Notes and Pictures From Italy* and the letters after April 1848, by Forster’s own account of Dickens’s wishes, should be examined in light of Dickens’s sense of himself as a public personality. In 1865, Dickens complained to his friend William Macready about the ‘Daily [...] improper uses made of confidential letters, in the addressing of them to a public audience that has no business with them.’<sup>5</sup> However, as a famous public personality, especially towards the end of this career, Dickens must have known that his own ‘confidential’ letters would eventually be made available to a public audience. This chapter argues that Dickens’s use of simile in those letters demonstrates his desire to exercise and even show off his idiosyncratic style.

Previous studies of Dickens’s letters have also commented on Dickens’s letter-writing style, but not specifically with regards to his use of figurative comparison. They are helpful in that they underline how the letters exhibit ‘the sheer energy of being Dickens,’ as Jenny Hartley says in her introduction to her edition of selected letters.<sup>6</sup> David Paroissien’s chapter on ‘The Epistolary Art of the Inimitable’ describes the

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<sup>4</sup> Forster, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 11, ‘To William Macready,’ 1 March 1865. William Charles Macready (1793-1873) was an actor and stage manager and one of Dickens’s closest friends. Dickens wrote 223 letters to Macready from 1837 to 1870.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Jenny Hartley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xx.



unconventional character of Dickens's letters and comments generally on 'his linguistic inventiveness and the subtlety with which he fitted the content and style of his letters to different correspondents.'<sup>7</sup> While Paroissien does not comment greatly on Dickens's use of figurative language, Dickens certainly adapted his similitude style to different correspondents, as will be discussed below. Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *Knowing Dickens* uses the letters as the basis for a psychoanalytical reading of the novels.<sup>8</sup> I have found Bodenheimer's work useful when contextualising the novels in their composition timeframe, and it offers insight into Dickens's life and personality; however, this chapter is more concerned with analysing the language in the letters, specifically Dickens's use of simile, as evidence of Dickens's self-conscious authorial flair. I argue that the letters can be considered as literary artefacts precisely because Dickens used them to rehearse his style.

The evaluation of an earlier critic, George Bernard Shaw, as transmitted by Edgar Johnson in his *Heart of Charles Dickens*, dismisses any literary value the letters might have. Johnson writes:

Discussing the subject with me at Ayot St Lawrence in 1945, [Shaw] characterised them as 'roast beef and Yorkshire pudding letters,' explaining that what he meant by this was that they were all concerned with things done, places visited, what people looked like and how they acted, limited to the concrete, sensuous, and immediate, that Dickens had nothing to say about art, philosophy, sociology, religion – in short, no interest in what Shaw has elsewhere called 'the great synthetic ideals.'<sup>9</sup>

Shaw's criticism is reminiscent of the 'fixities and definites' of Dickens's fancy, discussed in Chapter Three. Although Dickens certainly has many things to say in his

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<sup>7</sup> David Paroissien, "'Faithfully Yours, Charles Dickens': The Epistolary Art of the Inimitable", in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by David Paroissien (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008), pp. 33–46 (p. 36).

<sup>8</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Heart of Charles Dickens: As Revealed in His Letters to Angela Burdett-Coutts, Selected and Edited from the Collection in the Pierpont Morgan Library, with a Critical and Biographical Introduction*, ed. by Edgar Johnson (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 22.

letters about art, philosophy, etc., it is true that in his use of simile, Dickens is mainly concerned with the ‘concrete, sensuous, and immediate’ – but these comparisons transform ordinary objects in an extraordinary way. In a letter to Forster in 1856, Dickens’s use of self-conscious exaggeration turns what might be a ‘roast beef and Yorkshire pudding’ letter into something much more entertaining. He speaks of seeing an actress’s performance: ‘I suppose it to be impossible to imagine anybody more unlike my preconceptions [...]. Just the kind of woman in appearance whom you might suppose to be the Queen’s monthly nurse.’ The approximations of *I suppose* and *you might suppose* show the self-conscious periphrasis that draws attention to the hyperbolic *impossible to imagine*. The comparison to the Queen’s monthly nurse is likely an allusion to the 1854 sensational murder of six children by their mother, Mary Ann Brough, who had been the wet nurse to Queen Victoria’s son, Prince Edward.<sup>10</sup>

Dickens’s comparison would then be a macabre joke that the actress appears more like a middle-aged murderer than anything else he expected. This is probably not the kind of ‘immediate’ description of ‘what people looked like and how they acted’ that Shaw had in mind.

Bodenheimer argues that Dickens creates a certain critical distance between himself and his letter-writing persona by ‘writing himself up as a sort of third-person comic hero called the Inimitable, the Sparkler, or Dick.’<sup>11</sup> Of these three names, Dickens uses the ‘inimitable’ the most.<sup>12</sup> As it is the title that draws most attention to his public

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Queen Victoria’s Chosen Wet Nurse Was a Murderer’, *Independent*, 15 October 2017 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/queen-victoria-wet-nurse-mary-ann-brough-murder-a8001971.html#comments-area>> [accessed 15 October 2023].

<sup>11</sup> Bodenheimer, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Dickens refers to himself as the ‘inimitable’ in 91 letters (1841-68) as opposed to the use of ‘sparkler’ in 13 letters (1849-57), mainly with reference to social activities, and the use of ‘Dick’ in 47 letters (1840-67), which is used often as a signature and also includes references to Dick Swiveller from *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Mr Dick from *David Copperfield*.

personality as an author, his use of it is a self-conscious reference to his own reputation.

In a letter to Forster in 1847 describing a visit to a morgue, Dickens shows his self-consciousness about his 'inimitable' style: 'It was just dusk when I went in; the place was empty; and he [the corpse] lay there, all alone, like an impersonation of the wintry eighteen hundred and forty-six. ... I find I am getting inimitable, so I'll stop.'<sup>13</sup>

Dickens's own ellipses and self-conscious comment, 'I find I am getting inimitable,' draw attention to his comparison of the corpse to the year that has just ended. Dickens is aware that his 'inimitability' is linked to this kind of extraordinary similitic description. So much so, that when he cannot find words to describe something, he facetiously declares the description to be impossible – if the Inimitable himself has failed in the attempt. In a letter to Forster in 1841, he describes their mutual friend Angus Fletcher in his highland outfit, saying that he 'cut such a figure as even the inimitable can't depict [sic].'<sup>14</sup>

The legendary origin of Dickens as the Inimitable is the inscription to 'the inimitable Boz' on a silver snuff box Dickens received in 1837 or 1838 from his former school-teacher William Giles.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, William F. Long and Paul Schlicke briefly show that earlier reviews of Dickens's writings also called his work 'inimitable' and at least one review called him 'the inimitable "Boz"' before the presumed date of Giles's gift.<sup>16</sup> In any case, as Hartley says, 'Dickens took enthusiastically to being Inimitable,'<sup>17</sup> and in the letters he associates the title with his fame as a writer. In an 1849 letter to Forster, a comical description of one of his colds where he refers to himself in the third

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<sup>13</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 5, 'To John Forster,' early-Jan 1847.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 'To John Forster,' 5 Jul 1841.

<sup>15</sup> Forster, p. 13; William F. Long and Paul Schlicke, 'When Boz Became Inimitable', *Dickens Quarterly*, 33.4 (2016), 315–16 (p. 315) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/dqt.2016.0039>>.

<sup>16</sup> Long and Schlicke, p. 316.

<sup>17</sup> Hartley, *Selected Letters*, xii.

person, ends with the phrase: ‘*Patient’s name, Inimitable B.*’<sup>18</sup> The following examples are only a few of several of how he uses the title to comment on his own writing. In a letter to Forster in 1847, Dickens writes of an unfavourable review of his work: ‘I see that the “good old Times” are again at issue with the inimitable B. Another touch of a blunt razor on B.’s nervous system.’<sup>19</sup> His chagrin at being criticised is matched by his frustration at his work being copied by hack writers, as he shows in a letter to Emile de la Rue in the same year:

You write of one man imitating the Inimitable! By Heaven they all do – to an extent that it is perfectly inconceivable! I cannot take up a Magazine or story book of any kind, but I see the most palpable and blundering imitation of myself over and over and over again – coupled, very likely, with some disparagement of myself by the same hand. I believe there never was anything like it in Literature.<sup>20</sup>

This letter demonstrates Dickens’s strong feelings towards issues of copyright and his just sense of entitlement towards his authorial property; but it also demonstrates how his own ‘inimitability’ is expressed through characteristic hyperbolic expressions of ‘perfectly inconceivable’ and ‘there never was anything like it,’ as if to confirm in this way that it is indeed the Inimitable writing this letter.

As in the description of the corpse in a letter mentioned above, Dickens also often couples his ‘inimitability’ to some peculiar similitic language, as if to give a pointed example of what the Inimitable can do. Writing to Mary Boyle in 1856, he declares that he cannot tell the difference between himself ‘the Inimitable Writer’ and ‘the Engine that is always out of temper’ at a nearby railway station. In any case, ‘A very large Mill, with a stupid old Brute of a horse in it, is always at work, making what appears to me to

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<sup>18</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 5, ‘To John Forster,’ late-August 1849.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8 January 1847.

<sup>20</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 5, ‘To Emile de la Rue,’ 24 March 1847. Emile de la Rue (1802-70) was a Swiss banker on whose wife Dickens practiced mesmerism to try and cure her of a psychic illness. Dickens wrote 48 letters to him from 1845 to 1866.

be either a cannon ball or a dutch cheese, in the centre of my head.’<sup>21</sup> There are layers of self-curating tactics in this letter. He not only declares himself to be the ‘Inimitable Writer,’ but he also describes himself and his headache in figurative terms, to show that this is what the Inimitable Writer can achieve. The phrase *appears to me* is an example of one of the more self-conscious similitude cues that Dickens uses here to draw attention to his comparison to a Dutch cheese – an image that he had used twenty years earlier in the sketch ‘The Tuggses at Ramsgate’ (1836), where Mr Joseph Tuggs turns ‘as pale as a Dutch cheese.’ As will be explored in the following section, Dickens’s awareness of his own use of simile is especially evident when he repeats his own images.

Dickens was clearly aware of his own tendency to embellish his writing with similitude description, as he shows in a letter to Forster in 1856: ‘No man unacquainted with my determination never to embellish or fancify such accounts, could believe in the description I shall let off when we meet, of dining at Emile Girardin’s.’ The triple negation of ‘no man unacquainted with my determination never ...’ betrays an ironic self-realisation that he *always* ‘embellishes or fancifies such accounts’; and the exaggerated and fantastical figurative description that follows confirms this self-betrayal:

From his seat in the midst of the table, the host (like a Giant in a Fairy story) beholds the kitchen, and the snow-white tables, and the profound order and silence there prevailing. Forth from the plate-glass doors issues the Banquet—the most wonderful feast ever tasted by mortal.<sup>22</sup>

He alludes to the same dinner, or at least the same host, with even more superlatives, in another letter a few months later:

[...] Think of this:

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<sup>21</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 8, ‘To Miss Mary Boyle,’ 15 Mar 1856. The Hon. Mary Boyle was a well-connected cousin of the Watson couple, other friends of Dickens (see footnote [below](#)). Mary Boyle kept up a ‘semi-flirtatious relationship’ with Dickens since 1849 and acted with him in amateur theatricals: in *Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by Philip Collins, 2 vols (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1981), p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘To John Forster,’ 20 Jan 1856. Emile Girardin (1802-81) was a successful French journalist.

## EMILE GIRARDIN

gave another dinner the other day. We were about 15 or 18, and had every possible, impossible, conceivable, and inconceivable, dish [...] after dinner when we were in the Drawing Room, he asked me if I would go into another room and smoke a Cigar? On my replying Yes, he opened a species of mahogany case with a key hanging on his watch chain, and shewed (as nearly as I could compute) about two hundred and fifty thousand inestimable and unattainable Cigars, tied up in bundles of about 1000 each.<sup>23</sup>

The ends of two extremes (*possible, impossible, conceivable, inconceivable*) and the description of the cigar case and ‘unattainable’ cigars shows Dickens’s ‘inability’ to give just an ordinary description of the dinner. He must change it into a fairy-tale with a Giant and magical Cigars.

Dickens’s recourse to figurative embellishment was not the usual approach to letter-writing in his era. Just as with the etiquette guides and prescriptive grammar books of the same period, discussed in Chapter Three, people would commonly use ‘letter writers,’ as letter-writing manuals were called, to copy the models therein and thus adhere to expectations of ‘correct’ composition. Paroissien draws attention to the fact that Dickens would have been familiar with the long-standing *The Complete Letter-Writer* (1768), for Dickens puns on the title in a letter to Wilkie Collins in 1855: ‘I am the *Incompletest* Letter Writer imaginable.’<sup>24</sup> Paroissien argues that Dickens rejected the typical models presented in this work and in others.<sup>25</sup> Laura Rotunno points out that Dickens was not unusual in this: by the time of *David Copperfield*’s publication, there was a growing trend of resisting the stock epistolary form in these manuals.<sup>26</sup> Dickens was not the only one to parody the conventional models, as he does in *David*

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., ‘To the Rev. James White (?),’ 17-22 April 1856 (?).

<sup>24</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 7, ‘To Wilkie Collins,’ 30 September 1855. William Wilkie Collins (1824-89) was a novelist and protégé of Dickens. Dickens wrote 162 letters to him from 1851 to 1870.

<sup>25</sup> Paroissien, p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> Laura Rotunno, ‘The Long History of “In Short”: Mr Micawber, Letter-Writers, and Literary Men’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 33.2 (2005), 415–33 (p. 416) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058721>>.

*Copperfield* with Mr Micawber's epistolary habits of a 'lofty style of composition' and 'the extraordinary relish with which he sat down and wrote long letters on all possible and impossible occasions' (Ch. 49). Rotunno shows how Micawber's style is reminiscent of such manuals as *The London Letter Writer: Containing Elegant Letters on Love, Duty, Friendship, and Business. Written in a concise and familiar Style, and suited to Both Sexes* (1827) and *The Art of Letter-Writing Simplified, by Precept and Example; Embracing Practical Illustrations of Epistolary Correspondence, of every Age, in every Station and Degree, and under every Circumstance of Life* (1847).<sup>27</sup> Micawber's ability to write 'on all possible and impossible occasions' echoes the latter title's 'every circumstance of life.' The detailed titles of the books are indicative of the prescriptive lessons within. *The Art of Letter-Writing*, for example, emphasises the importance of simplicity with no embellishment ('What, for instance, can be more simple, yet more sublime, than the words of the Creator – "Let there be light, and there was light"?''), and, especially in letters of condolence 'no high-flown words or expressions – no straining after effect.'<sup>28</sup> In the model letters presented in *The Art of Letter-Writing* and *The London Letter-Writer*, there is no unusual or exaggerated figurative language. The few metaphors and even fewer similes are of the 'stock' kind discussed in Chapter Two. Some of these are literary or biblical allusions. A model letter to a friend who has enlisted as a soldier while drunk, reads: 'Like the prodigal son in the gospel, you was [sic] desirous of filling your belly with the husks which the swine fed on [...] All the instructions I gave you, have been like water spilt on the ground.'<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418.

<sup>28</sup> *The Art of Letter-Writing Simplified, by Precept and Example; Embracing Practical Illustrations of Epistolary Correspondence, of Every Age, in Every Station and Degree, and under Every Circumstance of Life* (London: Cradock and Co., 1844), pp. 32, 35, British Library 19th Century Collection.

<sup>29</sup> *The London Letter Writer: Containing Elegant Letters on Love, Duty, Friendship, and Business. Written in a Concise and Familiar Style, and Suited to Both Sexes* (London: Dean and Munday, 1827), p. 29, British Library 19th Century Collection.

last simile is an example of the kind of transparent comparison that is common in these models.

Dickens's epistolary similes, meanwhile, are not of a transparent nor common kind. Even when he describes what is common, his comparisons can transmogrify ordinary, domestic realities. As discussed in previous chapters, Dickens uses simile to animate objects or objectify humans in his fiction, and that same tendency appears in the letters. In a letter to his wife, Catherine Dickens, he writes in parentheses, '(John waiting for the Post, with his mouth open, like a Post office in itself).'<sup>30</sup> This description is a forerunner of Mr Wemmick's 'post-office of a mouth' in *Great Expectations* (Bk 2, Ch. 2). The objectification of John or Mr Wemmick also strangely implies the animation of a post-office box: the reader might imagine a post-office box waiting for Dickens's letter or walking along with Pip in *Great Expectations*. The very source of the comparison is distorted, and an everyday object such as a post-office box becomes defamiliarised by these associations. Dickens uses parentheses, as he so often does, to treat his parting commentary as a sidenote; yet, ironically, it is thereby the most remarkable phrase of the letter – the one he is sure his wife will particularly notice. Dickens's similitic description playfully blurs the boundary between objects and living things, as well as the boundary between different objects. In a letter to Benjamin Webster in 1856, Dickens writes, 'I was contemplating my dismantled Study, with the Carpet in the corner like an immense roly-poly pudding, and all the chairs upside down as if they had turned over like birds and died with their legs in the air.'<sup>31</sup> Describing the state of the carpet and the chairs

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<sup>30</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 6, 'To Mrs Charles Dickens,' 21 August 1850. Catherine Dickens, née Hogarth (1815-79), was married to Dickens in 1836. They separated in 1858. Dickens wrote 143 letters to her from 1835 to 1867.

<sup>31</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 8, 'To Benjamin Webster,' 7 May 1856. It is unclear from the context of the letters the reason that Dickens's study is being 'dismantled,' but the untidiness may reflect removals to the recently purchased Gads Hill Place in March 1856 or preparations for his trip to Boulogne, 7 June to 3



turns them into something else – and the sources of comparison are also weirdly associated with the objects: an *immense* roly-poly pudding that no one could possibly want to eat; dead birds with (somehow) *four* legs up in the air. The letter-writer makes it clear that these ideas belong to his own strange fancy: ‘I was contemplating ...’.

The ‘dead’ furniture echoes *Barnaby Rudge*, when Joe Willet barricades himself in a room ‘which was a kind of hospital for all the invalided movables in the house.’ The ‘crippled’ furniture begins to take on a mysterious life of its own as night falls, with one ‘old leprous screen’ frowning on Joe ‘like some gaunt ghost who waited to be questioned.’ Naturally, the narrator does not use the personal ‘I’ as in the letter to Webster above, but there is a sense that the nightmarish scene does not altogether belong to Joe’s own imagination. A glimpse into Joe’s mind as he falls asleep shows that he only ‘dreamed of Dolly’ (Ch. 31). The imagination of the narrator is that of Dickens in his narrator- and letter-writing-persona alike, who was ‘haunted’ by images that, once thought of, would never leave his mind, ‘waking and sleeping’ – as he wrote in a letter to Thomas Beard in 1839: ‘Do you know that a disgusting idea connected with the glass shade of Browne’s table lamp is constantly present to my imagination? It is exactly like the pan of a tavern water closet and haunts me, waking and sleeping.’<sup>32</sup> The slight undertone of horror in this otherwise humorous comparison reflects the vividness of an image he cannot remove from his mind. It foreshadows little David Copperfield thinking ‘of the oddest things’ as he looks about his bedroom and considers that the washing-stand has a discontented something about it, which reminded me of Mrs. Gummidge’ (Ch. 4). David’s imagination is rehearsed in his creator’s letters.

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September. Benjamin Webster (1797-1882) was a dramatist, actor, and manager. Dickens wrote 62 letters to him from 1845 to 1869.

<sup>32</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 1, ‘To Thomas Beard,’ 13 Mar 1839. Thomas Beard (1807-91) was one of Dickens’s earliest friends from their work together as journalists. Dickens wrote 200 letters to him from 1832 to 1868.

Besides furniture, buildings and cities are common objects for Dickens's transformative imagination. By underlining any grotesque detail, Dickens turns the man-made realities that we take for granted into something unfamiliar and even disturbing. An example of this is Dickens's description of Bath, which he repeats in three letters in 1869. He writes to the Viscount Torrington, 'The place is in its usual brilliant state; looking as if the dead in a cemetery had succeeded in rising and taking possession of it—had built a city with their tombstones—and were faintly trying to live in it.'<sup>33</sup> To Forster, he writes much the same with added punning phrases, 'Having built streets of their old gravestones, [the dead] wander about scantily trying to "look alive". A dead failure.'<sup>34</sup> Finally, he writes to Mr and Mrs J. T. Fields<sup>35</sup>:

Bath [...] looked, I fancied, just as if a cemetery-full of old people had somehow made a successful rise against Death—carried the place by assault—and built a city with their grave-stones:—In which they were trying to look alive, but with very indifferent success.<sup>36</sup>

The quality of white sameness of the buildings in Bath have prompted Dickens to compare them to tombstones, and the image expands to include the city's inhabitants. [As noted in the Introduction](#), the target of the comparison in the simile dictates in some sense the source of the comparison.

The next section will look more closely at the connection between the letters and the novels, but it is worth noting here that Bath as the city of the dead is comparable to the description of London in *Little Dorrit* when Arthur Clennam returns home.

'Melancholy streets' and 'monotony' pervade the passage, and another 'dead failure' to

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., Vol. 12, 'To Viscount Torrington,' 29 Jan 1869. Dickens wrote one letter to George Byng, 7<sup>th</sup> Viscount Torrington (1812–84).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 'To John Forster, 29?' Jan 1869.

<sup>35</sup> James Thomas Fields (1817–81) was an American writer and publisher who worked for Ticknor, Reed, and Fields – Dickens's main publishers in America. Dickens wrote 53 letters to him from 1842 to 1870 and 11 letters to his wife, Mrs James Thomas Fields, from 1860 to 1870.

<sup>36</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 12, 'To Mr and Mrs J. T. Fields,' 15 Feb 1869.

‘look alive’ is apparent in the drudgery of the people’s lives all around him: ‘In every thoroughfare, up almost every alley, and down almost every turning, some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling, as if the Plague were in the city and the dead-carts were going round’ (Bk 1, Ch. 3). Clennam’s sad childhood experience of Sunday is what colours the imagery in *Little Dorrit*; perhaps Dickens’s repetitive descriptions of Bath, written almost at the end of his life, were coloured by similar sad reflections. Hartley comments that in the later letters we see a ‘more guarded and secretive Dickens of the last twelve years’: the letters ‘become less expansive’ which ‘underlines how much his life altered after 1858 and the marital break-up.’<sup>37</sup> If Dickens becomes ‘less expansive’ about his private life in later letters, his similitic energy does not necessarily abate, as the letters from Bath demonstrate. Writing with characteristic figurative expressiveness, he continues to present the letter-writing-persona of the Inimitable, even if the shadow of his personal life might be detected in the imagery. Dickens’s description of Bath could even be considered amusing in a macabre way, if one imagines a weird revolutionary uprising of the dead, or of a ‘cemetery-full of old people,’ who are trying to ‘look alive.’

Dickens’s incongruous humour will be explored in Chapter Six, but some of his letters give a taste of how his similitic language introduces a humorously ‘inappropriate’ tone, as seen in another letter of 1869 to Mrs Lehmann. Here Dickens recounts a visit to Henry Chorley, a friend and musical critic, who was a heavy drinker, especially in the years before his death in 1872:

I saw Chorley yesterday, in his own room. A sad and solitary sight! The widowed Brake [widow of Chorley’s servant], with a certain gincherence of manner, presented a blooming countenance and buxom form in the passage:—so buxom indeed, that she was obliged to retire before me, like

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<sup>37</sup> Hartley, *Selected Letters*, x.

a modest stopper, before I could get into the dining-decanter where poor Chorley reposed like the dregs of last season's last wine.<sup>38</sup>

Dickens introduces Chorley's state of inebriation by making a joke out of the servant's similar situation, from her 'gincoherence' to the description of her as the 'modest stopper' to the 'dining-decanter.' The whole tone of the passage, in spite of that exclamation 'A sad and solitary sight!', is facetious; even Chorley himself is compared, insensitively, to expired wine dregs. Dickens deliberately uses humorous similes here as a way of coping with the lamentable situation. The effect is to draw attention to the writer's own sense of the ridiculous rather than to the serious subject-matter. In a letter to his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth in 1852, which recounts a visit to his friend the Hon. Richard Watson's grave,<sup>39</sup> Dickens inserts another of his characteristically self-conscious parentheses:

Before we started, I went quietly into the church, to see poor Watson's grave. [...] Over the Communion Table, is the stained glass Memorial Window, designed by Mrs Watson and Boxall. Not very good, except in color—and with a good deal of landscape (which is an immense fault in stained glass), extremely like bad pickled cabbage. Just as we were going away, Mrs Watson asked me, in a strange manner, if I had been in the old Gallery upstairs? [...] So we walked up together [...] She turned her head away and looked out of a window; and for the life of me I could not decide upon the delicacy or friendliness of making any allusion to her grief. Consequently I turned my head and looked out of another window, until she moved. Then we both came out together, silently and sadly.<sup>40</sup>

The letter has been quoted by both Hartley and Paroissien to show Dickens's sensitivity towards Mrs Watson and his inability to express himself adequately; but the 'pickled

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<sup>38</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, 'To Mrs Lehmann,' 3 February 1869. Mrs Augustus Frederick Lehmann, née Jane (Nina) Chambers (1830-1902), was an accomplished pianist. She and her husband, Frederick Lehmann (1826-91), formed part of a large circle of artists and were close friends with Dickens and his family. Dickens wrote 10 letters to her from 1860 to 1870.

<sup>39</sup> The Hon. Richard Watson was a Whig Member of Parliament from 1830-35 and briefly in 1852. Dickens often corresponded with Watson's wife, Lavinia, 'The Hon Mrs Richard Watson.'

<sup>40</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol 7., 'To Miss Georgina Hogarth,' 19 Dec 1855. Georgina Hogarth (1827-1917) was the sister of Dickens's wife Catherine. After Dickens's separation from his wife, Georgina stayed with Dickens as his housekeeper. Dickens wrote 228 letters from 1845 to 1870.

cabbage' window is not included in their quotations.<sup>41</sup> Paroissien refers expressively to Dickens's delicacy towards Mrs Watson: 'This occasion so tenderly described must have been one of the few when Dickens found himself at a complete loss for words.'<sup>42</sup> The Memorial Window of pickled cabbage, as one of Dickens's emphatic parenthetical observations, shows that the Inimitable is never at a loss of words – but they may come at the wrong time. Hartley and Paroissien probably ignore the phrase precisely because it seems to undermine Dickens's sensitivity.

Dickens himself was aware early on in his career of his tendency towards inappropriate humour, as shown by a letter to Macready in 1839, where he describes his mixed emotions upon learning of Macready's resignation from the management of the Covent Garden Theatre: 'With the same perverse and unaccountable feeling which causes a heartbroken man at a dear friend's funeral to see something irresistibly comical in a red-nosed or one-eyed undertaker, I receive your communication with ghastly facetiousness.'<sup>43</sup> The 'ghastly facetiousness' foreshadows future incongruous comparisons in Dickens's fiction – including a strangely entertaining funeral in *Great Expectations* that will be discussed [in Chapter Six](#).

## ii. Travelogues and Similic Catalogues

Commenting on what she calls the 'translation' of the letters to *American Notes*, Patricia Ard prefers the letters to the *Notes* because they contain 'more genuine emotional and

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<sup>41</sup> Hartley, *Selected Letters*, xi; Paroissien, p. 42.

<sup>42</sup> Paroissien, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 1, 'To W. C. Macready,' 7 Apr 1839.

artistic responses to America.<sup>44</sup> She complains of certain passages from the letters being ‘sanitised’ in the *Notes* and of the ‘relative lack of substantiality of his *American Notes* persona.’<sup>45</sup> However, Dickens’s letter-writing persona is as ‘genuine’ as the narrator-persona he creates in *American Notes* and *Pictures From Italy*. He often purposefully uses his idiosyncratic similitude style in his letters. Rather than providing any commentary on his authorial methods in the letters, he frequently exercises one method – similitude description – with experimental vigour. Dickens’s authorial style in the letters is clear when considering the passages used in the *Notes* and the *Pictures*. Dickens’s deliberate recycling of the material shows that he probably had future publication in mind when composing the letters.

As Ard argues above, sometimes Dickens’s letter-writing persona is more interesting, in that some passages from the letters were ‘sanitised’ when he transferred them to the *Notes*. Indeed, in one passage from a letter to Forster, much Dickensian similitude was removed for its use in the *Notes*. In the letter, Dickens describes his and his wife’s arrival in Columbus, where the people who attend their ‘levee’ at the hotel are described as behaving ‘exactly like the Chorus to God Save the Queen.’ Dickens exclaims: ‘I wish you could see them, that you might know what a splendid comparison this is’ and draws further amusing parallels to a company of chorus-singers.<sup>46</sup> The same levee is described in the *Notes* with no figurative embellishment (Ch. 14). Having experimented already in his letter to Forster, Dickens decided against including the description in the *Notes*. Elsewhere, however, the original similitude language from a letter

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<sup>44</sup> Patricia M. Ard, ‘Charles Dickens’ Stormy Crossing: The Rhetorical Voyage from Letters to American Notes’, *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 23.2 (1996), 34–42 (pp. 39, 41)  
<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/A188966632/AONE?u=ucl\\_ttda&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=abb7ab1f](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A188966632/AONE?u=ucl_ttda&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=abb7ab1f)>  
[accessed 15 November 2021].

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 3, ‘To John Forster,’ 24, 26 April 1842.

is not only used but expanded on for greater emphasis. A passage from the *Notes* [quoted in the previous chapter](#) describes with hyperbolic imagery what it feels like to travel over a ‘corduroy road’ – a road made of logs set into the earth (Ch. 14). The paragraph of heightened sensations is elaborated from one sentence in the original letter to Forster: ‘It is like nothing but going up a steep flight of stairs in an omnibus.’<sup>47</sup> In the *Notes*, this becomes: ‘It would be impossible to experience a similar set of sensations, in any other circumstances, unless perhaps in attempting to go up to the top of St Paul’s in an omnibus’ (Ch. 14). He replicates the original image and elaborates it by inserting St Paul’s as one of his favourite sources of comparisons. Contesting Ard’s comment at the beginning of this section, the narrator of the *Notes* here demonstrates more ‘substantiality’ than in the original letter. What is important here, however, is the aspect of rehearsal in the letters, where Dickens tries out different images that are then excluded or elaborated in the *Notes* and the *Pictures*.

Referring to the preface of *Pictures From Italy* (‘The Reader’s Passport’) in which Dickens calls his book ‘a series of faint reflections – mere shadows in the water,’ Pete Orford argues that in the *Pictures* Dickens renders his descriptions of Italy vague and shadowy:

[Dickens attempts] to dilute his own judgments by deliberately adopting a veil of vagueness, utilizing his keen eye for observation still but blurring the description to make the likeness of what he sees closer to reflections in the water. The reality of Italy becomes enveloped in the fantasy of Dickens’ mind.<sup>48</sup>

Nonetheless, we also find the ‘fantasy of Dickens’s mind’ in the letters from Italy, which presumably would contain his original, more immediate reflections, for the effect of his

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Pete Orford, “‘Italy Is Not His Ground’: Dickens on the Outside in ‘Pictures from Italy’”, *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 46.1 (2019), 35–61 (p. 40)  
<https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&issn=10520406&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA59375181&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs> [accessed 19 November 2021].

‘keen eye for observation’ is frequently mediated through imaginative likenesses. Moreover, far from ‘diluting’ his own judgements, he considers these likenesses to be ‘splendid comparisons,’ as quoted from the letter to Forster above. One passage in the *Pictures* amplifies the self-conscious imagery Dickens used in a letter to the Countess of Blessington, describing a view of the Roman amphitheatre:

[...] looking down into the Theatre again, it had exactly the appearance of an immense straw hat, [...] the rows of seats representing the different plaits of straw: and the arena, the inside of the crown. *Do* shut your eyes and think of it, a moment.<sup>49</sup>

The emphatic plea to share his vision reveals a sense of the enjoyment he takes in his own comparison – and one that he believes to be ‘exact.’ In the *Pictures*, the description of the amphitheatre is the same: ‘the inside of a prodigious hat of plaited straw, with an enormously broad brim and a shallow crown; the plaits being represented by the four-and-forty rows of seats’ (Ch. 9). He adds, ‘The comparison is a homely and fantastic one, in sober remembrance and on paper, but it was irresistibly suggested at the moment, nevertheless’ (Ch. 9). The narrator of the *Pictures* adds a layer of self-consciousness by reflecting on the *memory* of an image he had found ‘irresistible’ in the moment. The author of the *Pictures* is writing not from memory but from manuscript, as it were, so the self-conscious reproduction of the image is twofold.

Given that the two travelogues are meant to be the personal observations of Dickens himself, it is not surprising that Dickens should have used his letters as useful memoranda with a view to a planned future work. He clearly had this in mind in letters to Forster, as when he wrote: ‘Oh! the sublimated essence of comicality that I *could*

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<sup>49</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 4, ‘To the Countess of Blessington,’ 20 Nov 1844. Marguerite, Countess of Blessington (1789–1849), wife of the wealthy Earl of Blessington, hosted many writers, and authored several pieces herself. Dickens wrote 31 letters to her from 1841 to 1849.



distil, from the materials I have!’<sup>50</sup> Dickens also asked to borrow letters when he wanted to refer to them in his travelogue, as when he asked his friend Albany Fonblanque to return a letter describing scenes from Washington. These scenes include some entertaining similitic description that is repeated in the *Notes*. Waiting to be seen by the President, Dickens describes a ‘Kentucky farmer nearly seven feet high [...] who leaned against the wall, and kicked the floor with his heel, as though he had Time’s head under his shoe, and were literally “killing” him.’<sup>51</sup> To his brother-in-law, Henry Austin, Dickens wrote:

Do you happen to have by you, in a semi-tindery state, the letter I wrote you from Niagara? I know it is not at all likely that you have, but *if* you have, will you lend it me? I should like to refer to it, when I come to that part of my ‘Voyages and Travels.’<sup>52</sup>

Dickens replicated some of letter’s similitic description of the Niagara Falls in chapter 14 of the *Notes*<sup>53</sup>; but he did not use it only for ‘that part’ of his travels. Dickens transposes his description of a Niagara hotel from the letter to a hotel in the American factory town, Lowell, in chapter four of the *Notes*. The passage from the letter has this description of the Niagara hotel:

These Colonnades make it look so very light, that it has exactly the appearance of a house built with a pack of cards; and I live in bodily terror, lest any man should venture to step out of a little observatory on the roof, and crush the whole structure with one stamp of his foot.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, ‘To John Forster,’ 24, 26 April 1842.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘To Albany Fonblanque,’ 26 August 1842; the original manuscript has been lost, but the summary of the contents is recorded in the Park-Bernet Galleries catalogue. The original letter describing Washington is ‘To Albany Fonblanque,’ 12 March 1842; cf. Ch. 8 of *American Notes*. Albany William Fonblanque (1793-1872) was a renowned journalist. Dickens wrote 13 letters to him from 1838 to 1861.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘To Henry Austin,’ 6 September 1842. The original letter describing Niagara is ‘To Henry Austin,’ 1 May 1842. Henry Austin (?1812-1861) was an architect and civil engineer who married Dickens’s sister, Letitia, in 1837. Dickens wrote 154 letters to his brother-in-law from 1833 to 1858.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Ch. 14 of *American Notes* where these similes from the letter are reproduced: ‘When the Sun is on them they shine and glow like molten gold. When the day is gloomy, the water falls like snow – or sometimes it seems to crumble away like the face of a great chalk Cliff – or sometimes again, to roll along the front of the rock like white smoke.’

In the *Notes*, the passage is slightly changed and adds to other similitude description of Lowell's landmarks:

In one place, there was a new wooden church, which, having no steeple, and being yet unpainted, looked like an enormous packing-case without any direction upon it. In another there was a large hotel, whose walls and colonnades were so crisp, and thin, and slight, that it had exactly the appearance of being built with cards. I was careful not to draw my breath as we passed, and trembled when I saw a workman come out upon the roof, lest with one thoughtless stamp of his foot he should crush the structure beneath him, and bring it rattling down. (Ch. 4)

Dickens used the description of one place to embellish his characteristic use of simile in another. It is the comparison itself that matters in this case, rather than the actual place it is describing. The more prosaic comparison to a house of cards may have felt out of place amidst the majestic description of the Falls. Dickens appears more concerned about repeating a peculiar image where it fits better, stylistically, than giving a faithful account of a particular site.

There is an explicit and oft-remarked connection between the letters and the travelogues, and it is not surprising that the similes that Dickens used in the letters recurred in *American Notes or Pictures From Italy*. When certain similes recur in both the letters and his fictional works, it becomes even more apparent that the source of the figurative description rather than the target reality is the important stylistic factor for Dickens. This connection between the novels and the letters has not been made explicit before. In a letter to Forster in 1841, Dickens describes 'the huge masses of rock' he sees on the way to Glencoe, Scotland: 'which fell down God knows where, sprinkling the ground in every direction, and giving it the aspect of the burial place of a race of giants.'<sup>54</sup> In *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Scrooge and the Ghost of the Christmas Present venture 'upon a bleak and desert moor, where monstrous masses of rude stone were cast

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<sup>54</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 2, 'To John Forster,' 9 Jul 1841.

about, as though it were the burial-place of giants' (Stave III). The places described might be quite distinct, but the simile is essentially the same. While the image is not one of Dickens's more extraordinary comparisons, it does indicate that Dickens had practiced the image, as it were, before bringing it to his fiction.

In *David Copperfield* (1849-50), little David observes Uriah Heep 'reading a great fat book, with such demonstrative attention, that his lank forefinger followed up every line as he read, and made clammy tracks along the page (or so I fully believed) like a snail' (Ch. 16). The child's horrified imagination, emphasised by that parenthetical statement of belief, sees visible slimy tracks in the wake of Heep's finger. A similar image is evident in a letter to R. H. Horne in 1852, where Dickens facetiously expresses his 'openness' to being 'enlightened' by Horne about snails:

I know nothing whatever about a Snail, except that I could wish him dryer, and don't like the trail he leaves—a sort of dirty-nosed remembrance of the way he went. Besides which, I may not want to receive this slimy information of the direction of his walks. In fact, I dont [sic].<sup>55</sup>

Dickens highlights the 'dirty-nosed remembrance' left by the snail and recalls the objectionable wetness of the snail that features as the source of little David's description of Heep's slimy hands. There is no express connection between Dickens's letters and his fiction with these images of the burial-place of giants and the trail of a snail, but the repetition shows that once a certain image occurs to him, not only is it 'irresistible in the moment,' as he explains in the letter above to the Countess of Blessington, but it also becomes fixed in his catalogue of idiosyncratic comparisons. In his novels and his letters alike, images are recycled as though Dickens were claiming copyright for his unique vision. Indeed, he seems to claim ownership of ideas when he writes in a letter to the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., Vol. 6, 'To R. H. Horne,' 6 Apr 1852. Richard Henry Horne (1803-84) was a poet and journalist. He wrote *A New Spirit of the Age* in 1844 which includes Dickens among the most influential writers of the time. Dickens wrote 39 letters to him from 1839 to 1869.

Editor of the Knickerbocker Magazine in 1839, 'I never commit thoughts to paper until I am obliged to write, being better able to keep them in regular order, on different shelves of my brain, ready ticketed and labelled, to be brought out when I want them.'<sup>56</sup>

Some of Dickens's 'ready ticketed and labelled' or recyclable images are Shakespearean comparisons that he uses for comic effect. Shakespearean allusions are common in the sample letters found in the manuals of the period. *The Art of Letter-Writing*, for example, presents a letter from Lord Byron to his friend Moore, where he describes his bride-to-be as 'full of the "most blest conditions" as Desdemona herself.'<sup>57</sup>

Dickens shows his awareness of these conventions when he parodies the epistolary use of allusion in *David Copperfield*. When Mr Micawber denounces Uriah Heep's infamy in a long-winded epistle, the narrator comments in every pause on the letter-writer's 'enjoyment of his epistolary powers,' which include such phrases as 'Then it was that I began, if I may so Shakespearianly express myself, to dwindle, peak, and pine,' and 'as the philosophic Dane observes, with that universal applicability which distinguishes the illustrious ornament of the Elizabethan Era, worse remains behind!' (Ch. 52).<sup>58</sup>

Dickens's expert coinage of the word 'Shakespearianly' underlines Micawber's grandiose quotational energy. Dickens himself 'Shakespearianly' expresses himself in his letters, but he appears to mock the elegant standard of Shakespearean quotation by using it as a source for what some might call vulgar comparisons.

Valerie Gager has almost exhaustively catalogued Dickens's allusions to Shakespeare in his published works and letters.<sup>59</sup> From her compilation, it can be seen

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., Vol. 1, 'To the Editor of the Knickerbocker Magazine,' June/July? 1839; House and Storey note that the letter was probably an answer to a request for a contribution to the magazine.

<sup>57</sup> *The Art of Letter-Writing*, p. 33. The allusion is to *Othello* 2.1.249-250.

<sup>58</sup> Allusions to *Macbeth* 1.3.23 and *Hamlet* 3.4.180.

<sup>59</sup> Valerie L. Gager, *Shakespeare and Dickens: The Dynamics of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); in the next chapter I will point to allusions in Dickens's fiction that could be included in Gager's book.

that several comparisons with Shakespearean sources are repeated in both fiction and letters. In a letter to Mary Boyle in 1850, Dickens writes that a servant ‘observes, like an uneducated Ghost in a new Hamlet – so solemn is his warning – “The Post is a closen of itself Sir!” – and shuts me up.’<sup>60</sup> In the first number of *David Copperfield* (May 1849), the meek doctor, Mr Chillip, is described as walking ‘as softly as the Ghost in Hamlet, and more slowly’ (Ch. 1). In both novel and letter the solemn ghost of Hamlet’s father is humorously separated from its original context and used as a source of adverbial comparison to describe the servant’s speech or the doctor’s walk. Even when the target of the comparison is not ridiculous, Dickens manages to make light of a situation by turning to Shakespeare as a source. In a letter to Mrs Gilbert Elliot in 1860, Dickens uses *Hamlet* to describe his mother’s failing mental state:

[...] the impossibility of getting her to understand what is the matter, combined with her desire to be got up in sables like a female Hamlet, illumines the dreary scene with a ghastly absurdity that is the chief relief I can find in it.<sup>61</sup>

The Shakespearean comparison is macabre in its ‘ghastly absurdity,’ echoing the ‘ghastly facetiousness’ Dickens accuses himself of in the letter to Macready, [quoted above](#). Another ‘female Hamlet’ introduces a touch of grisly comedy in the ninth number of *David Copperfield* (January 1850) when David is introduced at a dinner ‘to a very awful lady in a black velvet dress, and a great black velvet hat, whom I remember as looking like a near relation of Hamlet’s – say his aunt’ (Ch. 25). ‘Hamlet’s aunt’ then re-appears several times throughout the dinner to overshadow the proceedings with hilarious gloom. Although Gager does not make explicit the way that Dickens uses Shakespeare as a source for unusual similes, her helpful listing of these allusions to

<sup>60</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 6, ‘To Miss Mary Boyle,’ 15 Oct 1850.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 9, ‘To Mrs Frances Dickinson,’ 19 Aug 1860. Mrs Gilbert Elliot, née Frances Dickinson (1820-98), was a writer of history and travel books. Dickens wrote 24 letters to her from 1857 to 1870.

Shakespeare in Dickens's work makes it easy to see the continuity of Dickens's similitic style between the novels and the letters.

An unusual image in *Great Expectations* (1860-61) that is repeated in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) and *Edwin Drood* (1870) was first used by Dickens in a letter to Frank Stone<sup>62</sup> in 1854. To my knowledge, this connection has not been previously discovered. In the letter, Dickens describes a certain 'Buckle,' who is 'a man who has read every book that ever was written (and written one, I believe, that never was read) and is a perfect Gulf of information.' Dickens is unimpressed with the man's way of sharing this information:

Before exploding a mine of knowledge he has a habit of closing one eye and wrinkling up his nose, so that he seems to be perpetually taking aim at you and knocking you over with a terrific charge. Then he loads again, and takes another aim. So you are always on your back, with your legs in the air.<sup>63</sup>

In *Great Expectations*, the comparison is used when Pip meets a 'secret-looking man whom I had never seen before. His head was all on one side, and one of his eyes was half shut up, as if he were taking aim at something with an invisible gun' (Bk 1, Ch. 10). Although the mysterious man does not 'explode a mine of information' like Buckle in Dickens's letter, yet, by showing Pip that he has the convict's file, the man could potentially 'explode' Pip's secret. He effectively leaves Pip helpless, as if he was indeed on his back with his legs in the air. The man's look is repeatedly described in this way, serving to remind Pip, and the reader, who the man is when Pip sees him again years later:

[...] his attire disguised him absurdly; but I knew his half-closed eye at one glance. There stood the man whom I had seen on the settle at the Three

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<sup>62</sup> Frank Stone (1800–59) was a painter who illustrated some pieces for Dickens. Dickens wrote 161 letters to him from 1838 to 1859.

<sup>63</sup> *Letters*, Vol. 7, 'To Frank Stone,' 30 May 1854.

Jolly Bargemen on a Saturday night, and who had brought me down with his invisible gun! (Bk 2, Ch. 9)

Like Pip's frightened imagination, Dickens's imagination can also become 'haunted' by a particular image, since this comparison came back to him years after he first tried it out on his friend Frank Stone. The recurrence of this very specific comparison indicates that Dickens used his correspondence to exercise his similitude inventiveness before adding it to one of the 'different shelves of [his] brain, ready ticketed and labelled,' to be used confidently in his published works. Dickens uses the image again in *Our Mutual Friend* and in *Edwin Drood*, and this will be discussed in Chapter Seven as one of the ways Dickens connects *Our Mutual Friend*'s Bradley Headstone and *Edwin Drood*'s John Jasper.

One effect of the repetition of imagery is that it becomes even more impossible to 'unsee' what Dickens has seen, and his unusual comparisons become an aspect of his style that readers come to expect, as discussed in the previous chapter. The next two chapters will examine how, mainly in his later works, Dickens uses the repetition of unusual similitude language for a more intense characterisation, as in the case of the unnamed convict, and for a kind of 'ghastly absurdity' or incongruous humour, as in the example of the 'female Hamlet.' By using the tools of his trade, as it were, in the letters, he also caters to those expectations, writing in the style that his correspondents would come to expect from the Inimitable.

### *iii.* Friends, Family, and Female Correspondents

This final section considers how Dickens's different correspondents influenced the frequency and degree of his use of simile in the letters. Dickens's friends and family

were the recipients of most of the letters that contain Dickensian simile. Moreover, it appears that Dickens's female correspondents were especially favoured with samples of his similitic language. Unlike the novels, the letters are not readily available as *.txt* files that can be inserted into a concordance software; they cannot easily be searched for common similitic markers such as *like* or *as if* to show the relative frequency of those cues. A more accurate tally of the frequency of similitic language in the letters belongs to a future project. A manual search of the letters has provided enough examples to provide some relative frequencies of similitic language per correspondent.

Of course, Dickens did not use unusual similitic language in his letters to all correspondents. Paroissien comments on two different accounts Dickens gives of burning his personal correspondence at Gads Hill in 1860.<sup>64</sup> To the Rev. Samuel Hole, he wrote: 'A year or two ago, shocked by the misuse of the private letters of public men, which I constantly observed, I destroyed a very large and very rare mass of correspondence.'<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, to his close friend W. H. Wills,<sup>66</sup> Dickens writes:

Yesterday I burnt, in the field at Gad's Hill [sic], the accumulated letters and papers of twenty years. They sent up a smoke like the Genie when he got out of the casket on the seashore; and as it was an exquisite day when I began, and rained very heavily when I finished, I suspect my correspondence of having overcast the face of the Heavens.<sup>67</sup>

There is clearly a marked difference in the description of the same event. The letter to Wills as a close friend is coloured by a characteristic use of fantastical simile. As Hartley says, 'Each one of Dickens's letters is a performance, finely calibrated to the

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<sup>64</sup> Paroissien, p. 35.

<sup>65</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 10, 'To the Rev. S. R. Hole,' 20 December 1864. The Rev. Hole had written to ask for any letters Dickens may have received from the artist John Leech on the occasion of Leech's death.

<sup>66</sup> [See footnote above](#). Dickens wrote 493 letters to W. H. Wills from 1837 to 1870.

<sup>67</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 9, 'To W. H. Wills,' 4 September 1860. The image of the Genie refers to 'The Story of the Fisherman' in *The Arabian Nights*.



nature of its recipient, as if he were talking to him or her.’<sup>68</sup> Even if not all correspondents were privy to the same performance, the many excerpts from Dickens’s letters in the previous sections demonstrate that he was liberal in the exercise of his similitic flair. Family and close friends benefited most from the Inimitable’s style. One might think that Dickens would have wanted to keep such confidential letters from the public eye, but, when writing to his ‘future biographer’ John Forster, or to his wife and sister-in-law, whose lives depended on his authorial success, Dickens would perhaps be even more conscious of their expectations of him as a public figure. Most examples of Dickensian simile occur in letters to the ten correspondents below:

<i>Correspondent</i>	<i>Frequency of simile</i>
The Hon. Mrs Richard Watson <sup>69</sup>	4.1
Mrs Charles Dickens	3.9
Wilkie Collins	2.0
Miss Georgina Hogarth	1.9
W. C. Macready	1.9
W. H. Wills	1.7
Miss Burdett Coutts <sup>70</sup>	1.6
Thomas Beard	1.6
Thomas Mitton <sup>71</sup>	1.3
John Forster	1.3

Figure 12: Frequency of simile per correspondent in Dickens’s letters<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Hartley, *Selected Letters*, xii.

<sup>69</sup> See footnote [above](#). Dickens wrote 63 letters to Mrs Watson from 1847 to 1870.

<sup>70</sup> Dickens collaborated closely with the heiress Miss Angela Burdett Coutts on several social issues including the running of Urania Cottage, a home to rehabilitate women into society from a former life of prostitution. For further reading, see Edgar Johnson’s preface in *The Heart of Charles Dickens* about Dickens’s relationship with Angela Burdett Coutts. Dickens wrote 573 letters to her from 1839 to 1866.

<sup>71</sup> [See footnote above](#). Dickens wrote 198 letters to Thomas Mitton from 1834 to 1867.

<sup>72</sup> The top ten correspondents were chosen based on the frequency of similes in the letters rather than on the number of letters Dickens wrote to that correspondent. To calculate the frequency of similitic markers in letters to a given correspondent, the number of similes was divided by the total number of letters to that correspondent and multiplied by 10.

Bodenheimer has claimed that there is not as much imagination in Dickens's letters to women as to men,<sup>73</sup> yet the top ten correspondents include four women, three of whom are among the top four correspondents for frequency of simile. The numbers indicate that Dickens is particularly fluent with his figurative flourish in letters to these women, and this is probably not a coincidence. Of course, two of these women were close relations – Dickens's wife and her sister (Georgina) – and the higher degree of confidence would naturally allow Dickens to be more experimental or playful. However, their gender may also indicate the reason for Dickens's stylistic abundance. In her book *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, Ruth Perry shows how in this period, 'Letters were the one sort of writing women were supposed to be able to do well.'<sup>74</sup> In *The Art of Letter-Writing*, 'well-educated and intelligent women' are praised for being 'generally superior to men' as letter-writers: 'their style is more natural, more fluent, more racy, more fascinating than that of the ruder sex.'<sup>75</sup> It is not clear what is meant by these qualities: the manual does not encourage embellishment as a rule, as mentioned above, and any similitic language in the model letters is of a clarifying 'simplicity.' Nevertheless, even if Dickens's female correspondents themselves did not use any unusual figurative language, the frequency of Dickens's own similitic flair in his letters to these women indicates the greater ease of their communication and a resulting correspondence that is 'more racy, more fascinating' than his letters to many of his male correspondents.

Hartley comments that Dickens's letters to Georgina are more 'lively' than those to his wife, Catherine.<sup>76</sup> However, Dickens's letters to Catherine contain more frequent recourse to his similitic style, as in the example with John the walking post office box,

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<sup>73</sup> Bodenheimer, p. 93.

<sup>74</sup> Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), p. 68.

<sup>75</sup> *The Art of Letter-Writing*, p. 9.

<sup>76</sup> Hartley, *Selected Letters*, xiii.

[quoted above](#). In another letter to Catherine in 1850, he despairingly describes his artist-friend Daniel Maclise's dressing habits: 'I don't know what he may have, in a portmanteau like a Bible; but he certainly don't put it on, whatever it is. His shirt in front is very like a pillow-case.'<sup>77</sup> As with the post-office, Dickens's typical similitic description dissociates a familiar target reality from its normal functions while keeping the source itself familiarly domestic. The Hon. Mrs Richard Watson is almost always favoured with some amusing description, as when he recounts his picnic excursion with his son Charley and Charley's school-fellows. Having been delayed by 'the wettest morning ever seen out of the tropics' he finds the boys wondering with long faces whether he would even come:

They seemed to have no bodies whatever, but to be all face; their countenances lengthened to that surprising extent. When they saw us, their faces shut up, as if they were put on strong springs, and their waistcoats developed themselves in the usual places.

No longer despondent, the boys 'couldn't sit still a moment, and were perpetually flying up and down, like the toy-figures in the sham snuffboxes.'<sup>78</sup> The mechanisation of the boys in comparison to toy-figures with springs in their body is evidence of the transformative quality of Dickens's similes discussed earlier.

In a letter to Miss Burdett Coutts in 1848, Dickens uses a similar transformative description about Lord Ashley, 'who makes such mistakes (he seems to be a kind of amiable Bull, in a China-Shop of good intentions)'<sup>79</sup> Dickens's uses his characteristic parentheses to draw attention to the modification of the idiomatic phrase. Another letter to Burdett Coutts that same month contains an example of what has been discussed in

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<sup>77</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 6, 'To Mrs Charles Dickens,' 24 June 1850.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 'To the Hon. Mrs Richard Watson,' 11 Jul 1851.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, 'To Miss Burdett Coutts,' 18 Oct 1848. The notes suggest that Lord Ashley's (7th Earl of Shaftesbury's) evangelical influence in different reforms may have annoyed Dickens.

the previous section: Dickens practices a simile that he will use later in *David Copperfield*. He writes in the letter that the assistant matron at Urania Cottage – appropriately named Mrs Furze – ‘is rather thorny and irritating [...]. I think she has an idea that she is to serve as a sort of human rasp, or file, or nutmeg-grater, in respect of the general establishment.’<sup>80</sup> In *David Copperfield*, the older David remembers how his nurse Peggotty’s finger is ‘roughened by needlework, like a pocket nutmeg-grater’ (Ch. 2). Dickens notably repeats this image in the last chapter, speaking of Peggotty’s ‘rough forefinger, which I once associated with a pocket nutmeg-grater’ (Ch. 64). The experimental way Dickens writes the simile in the letter to Burdett Coutts indicates that he is testing out the image on his correspondent.

In his letters to female correspondents there is a tendency to exhibit this authorial similitic style without necessarily adding self-reflexive critique or commentary. Indeed, he seems to show off, as in a letter to Miss Burdett-Coutts in 1843 where he alludes to *Nicholas Nickleby* to describe one of his colds:

A hideous cold has taken possession of me to an almost unprecedented extent. I am not exactly, like Miss Squeers, screaming out loud all the time I write; but I am executing another kind of performance beginning with an s, and ending with a g; perpetually.<sup>81</sup>

Interestingly, the common cold and the cold in general are targets for some uniquely Dickensian comparison in Dickens’s letters, probably because of the many colds he suffered in his life. He wrote to his daughter Mamie (Mary) in 1867 about a hall where he was to hold one of his public readings: ‘I have seldom seen a place look more hopelessly frozen up than this place does. The hall is like a Methodist chapel in low spirits, and with a cold in its head.’<sup>82</sup> The building’s cold in its head echoes the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 26 Oct 1848.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Vol. 3, ‘To Miss Burdett-Coutts,’ 13 Oct 1843.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., Vol. 11, ‘To Miss Mary Dickens,’ 22 Jan 1867.

description in *A Christmas Carol* of the ‘tremulous vibrations’ of the ancient church bell near Scrooge’s office ‘as if its teeth were chattering in its frozen head up there’ (Stave I). In the same letter to Mamie he complains that the cold room makes him ‘feel as if I were something to eat in a pantry.’ In letters to male friends or fellow-writers, Dickens appears more self-conscious about the way he composes a comparison. Dickens deliberated about the effectiveness of one comparison in a letter to Thomas Beard: ‘I am working away upon my new book, like – like a brick. I don’t know why it is, but that popular simile *seems* a good one.’<sup>83</sup> Dickens’s emphasis on *seems* points to his self-consciousness. Writing to Wilkie Collins, in 1863, Dickens comments that certain reflections ‘run in my head, as the river ran—excuse the reference—I have just been reading it up—in Little Dombey’s mind.’<sup>84</sup> Conscious of their relationship as fellow-writers, Dickens uses his own art as the source for the comparison in a slightly more modest-boastful way than he does in the letter to Miss Burdett-Coutts quoted above. Dickens even appears defensive of his methods in an oft-quoted letter to Edward Bulwer-Lytton<sup>85</sup> in 1865 which reveals layers of this self-conscious deliberation:

I work slowly and with great care, and never give way to my invention recklessly, but constantly restrain it; and [...] I think it is my infirmity to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally. Also, I have such an inexpressible enjoyment of what I see in a droll light, that I dare say I pet it as if it were a spoiled child.<sup>86</sup>

‘I *think*,’ ‘I have such an *inexpressible* enjoyment,’ and ‘I *dare* say,’ are self-conscious expressions of self-defence, even if it is apparent that he takes pride in his inimitability.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, ‘To Thomas Beard,’ 15 Nov 1842. The new book is *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

<sup>84</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 10, ‘To Wilkie Collins,’ 29 Jan 1863.

<sup>85</sup> Sir Edward George Bulwer-Lytton (1803-73) was a writer and politician. Dickens wrote 132 letters to him from 1838 to 1870.

<sup>86</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 11, ‘To Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton,’ 28? Nov 1865.

iv. Conclusion: Performing Simile in the Letters

Although Dickens can seem self-conscious and even defensive about his similitic style in letters to some close friends, what is clear is that he practiced that style mainly with those whom he trusted, as if he were asking them to be present at a rehearsal for future performances. To rephrase what Jenny Hartley has said of the letters (quoted above), ‘Each one of Dickens’s letters is a *rehearsal*’ rather than a final performance. This practice is consistent with what Dickens enjoyed doing during his work on his novels, as can be seen in a letter Wilkie Collins wrote to a friend:

You will have a glorious number of ‘Bleak House’, on the last day of the month. Dickens read us the two first chapters as soon as he had finished them – speaking the dialogue of each character, as dramatically as if he was acting [...] his own personages; and making his audience laugh and cry with equal fervour and equal sincerity.<sup>87</sup>

Dickens felt the need to rehearse those two chapters ‘as soon as he had finished them,’ which is consistent with an eagerness to practice his style in other ways, using his figurative inventiveness in his letters to see the effect it would have on his correspondents. Mamie Dickens and Georgina Hogarth state in their preface to the 1880 edition of Charles Dickens’s letters: ‘no man ever expressed *himself* more in his letters than Charles Dickens.’<sup>88</sup> However, this *self* is a self-conscious construct as much as Dickens’s narrator-persona that has been explored in Chapter Three. Rosemarie Bodenheimer argues in *Knowing Dickens* that we can never access the ‘real’ Dickens in the letters.<sup>89</sup> Certainly, considering the letters as literary texts in themselves, Dickens is as much the author of the letters as he is of his novels. The real Dickens becomes

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<sup>87</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, ed. by William Baker and William M. Clarke, 2 vols (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1999), Vol. 1, 16 September 1852.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Georgina Hogarth and Mary Dickens (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880), vii.

<sup>89</sup> Bodenheimer, p. 16.

apparent in the letters, nevertheless, as someone who is hyper-aware of his own art and who carefully curates the image of himself as an Inimitable observer of life.

While Dickens himself might argue that he was a victim of his fancy, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, or that he was haunted by certain ‘irresistible’ images, what this chapter has shown is that Dickens also experimented with and catalogued his favourite images. He deliberately flouted conventions to create such ‘ghastly absurd’ images as a ‘female Hamlet.’ His self-critiquing, but also self-appraising, commentary on his own similes shows his personal pride in the inventory of ideas stored ‘on different shelves of [his] brain, ready ticketed and labelled.’ The letters demonstrate that similitude is at the heart of what Dickens found singular in the things around him. In his letters, and especially in his imaginative similitude descriptions, Dickens offers us insight into his own ‘inexpressible enjoyment’ of whatever he sees ‘in a droll light,’ whether that be colds or corpses.

## Chapter Five: A Dickensian Frame of Mind (1846-1853)

### *i.* Dickensian Simile and ‘Mind-style’

I hope any one who may read what I write, will understand that if these pages contain a great deal about me, I can only suppose it must be because I have really something to do with them, and can't be kept out. (*Bleak House*, Ch. 9)

These words of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* could be interpreted as belonging to her creator, Charles Dickens, projecting his own awareness that his narrator-persona cannot be ‘kept out’ of his works. Philip Horne comments that Victorian readers would probably have thought of the third-person narrator in Dickens’s works as Dickens himself. He notes that narration, ‘even when not first-person – can be understood as always implicitly characterising itself – revealing its attitudes and preoccupations, its visual habits, its rhythms, manifesting its own inner rules.’<sup>1</sup> The voice of Dickens’s narrator-persona, as discussed in Chapter Three, can almost always be distinguished in the narration of his works and is particularly recognisable through Dickens’s use of an idiosyncratic similitic language. Likewise, Dickens’s self-styling as the Inimitable has been linked in Chapter Four to his use of Dickensian simile. This chapter will consider a shift that begins to take place in Dickens’s narrative technique as he produces the three novels that follow *Martin Chuzzlewit*: *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), and *Bleak House* (1852-53). The voice of Dickens’s narrator-persona begins to make way, albeit still in a subtle fashion, for the individual voices of the characters.

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<sup>1</sup> Horne, p. 162.



*Dombey and Son* has traditionally been considered a turning point in Dickens's career. F. R. Leavis considered it Dickens's first 'elaborately plotted Victorian novel.'<sup>2</sup> Steven Marcus argues that *Dombey and Son* marks the beginning of Dickens's mature works for its consistent narrative and its treatment of major themes.<sup>3</sup> It is the first novel for which there is evidence of extensive number planning. However, all three of these novels together indicate a transition in the way Dickens incorporates simile into his narrative technique. This chapter will show how in *Dombey and Son* the similitic language moves towards a consistent depiction of some characters rather than simply reflecting the style of the Dickensian narrator-persona. The repetition of some similes reveals that Dickens is now manipulating simile for the purposes of characterisation. In *David Copperfield*, even though the novel can be seen as a semi-autobiographical text, the first-person narrator 'David' is distinct from Dickens 'as Dickens.' While the similitic style of the narrative echoes that of the Dickensian narrator-persona, this chapter will explore how it serves to reveal the point of view of David's character rather than that of Dickens as the implied author.<sup>4</sup> Finally, *Bleak House*'s narrative is famously divided between a first-person narrator speaking in the past tense (Esther Summerson) and a third-person narration in the present tense. The last section of the chapter will explore how Dickens's use of simile in *Bleak House* dissociates both narratives from his characteristic narrator-persona's voice. Rather, similitic language effectively characterises the two narratives as representing individual 'mind-styles' or 'frames of mind.'

This chapter uses the stylistic theory of 'mind-style' as a tool to show how a distinctively 'Dickensian' narrative technique can work to characterise individuals

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<sup>2</sup> F. R. Leavis, 'Dombey and Son', *The Sewanee Review*, 70.2 (1962), 177–201 (p. 178) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27540763>>.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd., 1965).

<sup>4</sup> See [Figure 4](#) for the definition of *implied author*.

within a text. Dickens's narrator-persona's voice cannot be 'kept out' of his works, but this is not incompatible with the creation of other personas, other mind-styles, within the narrative. The first section of this chapter will consider how mind-style can be a useful tool for an analysis of Dickensian characterisation. The sections that follow will then consider how simile creates individual mind-styles in the three novels, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, and *Bleak House*. Roger Fowler coined the term 'mind-style' in his book *Linguistics and the Novel* (1977). It is used to explain how the style of a narrative takes on a character's point of view and represents the way a character thinks or speaks. Fowler defines mind-style as 'consistent structural options, agreeing in cutting the presented world to one pattern or another' which 'give rise to an impression of a world-view.'<sup>5</sup> This 'impression' could be given directly or indirectly through the 'structural options' used. Fowler further says:

We may coin the term 'mind-style' to refer to any distinctive linguistic presentation of an individual mental self. A mind-style may analyse a character's mental life more or less radically; may be concerned with relatively superficial or relatively fundamental aspects of the mind; may seek to dramatise the order and structure of conscious thoughts, or just present the topics on which a character reflects, or display preoccupations, prejudices, perspectives and values [...] of which s/he may be quite unaware.<sup>6</sup>

It is evident from the examples used that Fowler considers that the narration must structurally imitate in some way how a character thinks in order to represent an individual mind-style. Fowler contrasts Kingsley Amis's *Take a Girl like You* (1960) with William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) to show how a narrative does or does not show a character's mind-style.<sup>7</sup> In the former, Jenny Bunn's mind-style is shown through catchwords and phrases that show that the narration is basically a

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<sup>5</sup> Fowler, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99–103.

transcription of Jenny's viewpoint, as when the narrator observes, 'And it was so smashing here.' In *Vanity Fair*, meanwhile, the description of Amelia Sedley's isolation after George Osborne has deserted her does not show Amelia's specific way of thinking. Fowler says, 'Her feelings are confidently labelled, categorised: "unhappy", "solitary", "doubts", "cares", "misgivings", "fears", "brooding". But though these are inner-view, psychological, terms, they are general and shallow, as if the narrator isn't really interested in analysing the girl's sorrows in their specificity.'<sup>8</sup>

Fowler's examples of mind-style point to techniques that represent a character's specific way of thinking and speaking rather than narratorial observations that are externally imposed on the character. For Fowler, free indirect style and other 'structural options' such as vocabulary choice and sentence structure work together to create mind-style. Certainly, Dickens creates mind-style in this way, as in *Bleak House*, when Mr Guppy is announced to Lady Dedlock as 'the young man of the name of Guppy' and the phrase is repeated throughout the passage. The initial phrase reflects the servant's announcement, but the repetition thereafter appears to echo Lady Dedlock's own thoughts:

Is this the full purpose of the young man of the name of Guppy, or has he any other? Do his words disclose the length, breadth, depth, of his object and suspicion in coming here; or if not, what do they hide? He is a match for my Lady there. (Ch. 29)

The questioning repetition indicates that these are Lady Dedlock's anxiety-ridden impressions of the conversation as she attempts to discover how much Guppy knows about her past. Dickens also gives us insight into his characters' mind-styles through their external characterisation, as this chapter will explore. Fowler's own exposition of mind-style suggests that a character's external description as such does not represent

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

their mind-style. In fact, the description of Amelia in *Vanity Fair* lacks the specificity proper to an individual's way of seeing the world. However, Fowler's definition of mind-style can be broadly interpreted to allow external description to indicate mind-style: any 'distinctive linguistic presentation' of a character's mental self could be mind-style.

In her article exploring how the concept of mind-style has evolved since Fowler's coining of the term, Elena Semino struggles with the all-encompassing nature of his original conceptualisation: 'the term "mind style" is ambiguous as to whether it refers to linguistic patterns in texts ("style") or to the characteristics that we attribute to particular (fictional) minds by interpreting linguistic patterns in texts.'<sup>9</sup> If it refers to the latter, any linguistic patterns could be interpreted to attribute characteristics to an individual mind, including the patterns of similitic language that Dickens uses in his descriptions. Fowler himself resists the idea that Dickens's characterisation could allow the reader to perceive individual mind-styles. Using Dickens's description of Mr Bounderby in *Hard Times*, Fowler indicates 'familiar modal signs of estrangement' – words or phrases like *seemed*, *appearance*, *looked*, or *might have had* – which show that Dickens is 'struggling to grasp Bounderby's essence from his external appearance.' These words or phrases are only a few of many similitic cues that Dickens uses, as has been seen throughout this thesis. As a result of these 'modal signs,' Fowler says that 'Dickens evolves a series of bizarre but consistent comparisons.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Elena Semino, 'Mind Style Twenty-Five Years On', *Style*, 41.2 (2007), 153–72 (p. 168) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.41.2.153>> [accessed 8 April 2021].

<sup>10</sup> Fowler, p. 94.

Fowler remarks that the following passage from *Hard Times* ‘exhibits a remarkably severe and potent distancing, an utter dissociation of the author from his character’<sup>11</sup>:

[Bounderby] was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open, and lift his eyebrows up. A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start. [...] A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility. [...] He had not much hair. One might have fancied he had talked it off; and that what was left, all standing up in disorder, was in that condition from being constantly blown about by his windy boastfulness. (Ch. 4)

Fowler argues that the accumulation of similes is evidence of Dickens ‘struggling’ to capture Bounderby’s essence.<sup>12</sup> However, with the different comparisons, Bounderby’s essence is made superabundantly clear. His interiority is exposed by the external description, which seems to focus on physical attributes, yet provides insight into his motivations and even foreshadows his downfall. He is made of ‘coarse material’ that ‘seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him’: this represents how Bounderby has exaggerated and falsified his humble beginnings at the expense of others, including his mother. That exaggeration is indicated by the magnification caused by his ‘brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice’ and the falsity of his whole self-presentation is indicated by over-stretched skin that reminds one of an inflated hot-air balloon that is in danger of bursting. Even his hair, or rather lack thereof, is proof of his ‘windy boastfulness.’ All of this shows Bounderby’s need to hide the truth about himself under his absurd and self-contradictory performance as the ‘Bully of humility.’

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Granted that Bounderby's interiority is not complex, it is still interiority – and as Fowler qualifies his definition of mind-style, it can be 'concerned with relatively superficial or relatively fundamental aspects of the mind' and it may 'display preoccupations, prejudices, perspectives and values' of which the characters themselves are unaware.<sup>13</sup> Dickens's similes are concerned with the relatively superficial aspects of Bounderby's mind in this case; and inasmuch as the reader does not have direct access to Bounderby's consciousness, he himself may be unaware of his own preoccupation with presenting a false front to the world. Fowler helpfully indicates that Dickens uses 'bizarre but consistent comparisons' and that the similitic nature of the description causes the character to be completely 'dissociated' from the author. It is this dissociation and this consistent imagery that gives the character an individual mind-style separate from the narrator-persona's. While the similitic language still belongs to the narrator, nevertheless, the repeated emphasis on over-stretching, over-inflation, or 'windiness' represents the way that Bounderby himself filters the world through a particular lens – even if he himself is unaware of it. The dissociation tactics allow Dickens a satirical distance as well; for the truth-telling imagery presents a definitively unsympathetic insight into the character's real motivations.

Fowler considers that the 'modal signs' or similitic cues in Dickens are too 'alienating' and make the character 'incomprehensible, unreachable, scarcely a member of the human race.' He argues that other more 'realistic' descriptions of a character's physical appearance replicate 'the gradual and fragmentary fashion in which we come to any knowledge of the people we encounter.'<sup>14</sup> A physical description of a character would thus remain literally external to him or her. Although Fowler objects to the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

‘alienating’ quality of Dickens’s description, by contrasting Dickens’s characterisation with the normal process of getting to know a person, he seems to be protesting that our knowledge of Bounderby’s character through the figurative description is immediate and non-fragmentary – that the character’s essence is all too evident, in fact. For Fowler, Thackeray and Dickens represent two extremes of how a narrative fails to adopt a character’s mindstyle. Thackeray’s narrator informs us what Amelia is thinking: this is too direct and does not allow Amelia to ‘speak for herself,’ as it were. With his ‘alienating’ or ‘modal’ language, Dickens’s narrator introduces bizarre and transformative imagery: this is too *indirect* and renders the character incomprehensibly fixed in a certain way. Neither approach, Fowler would argue, provides us with the mind-style of the character. However, I argue that Dickens’s dissociative yet consistent approach in his use of similitic language precisely allows us to perceive in a non-fragmentary way a character’s worldview as distinct from the implied author’s. In other words, Dickensian similitic characterisation *is* mind style, if not in the way that Fowler originally conceptualised it.

Fowler’s conceptualisation of mind-style links it to an overt consciousness or voice in the novel:

In the novel, there may be a network of voices at different levels, each presenting a distinct mode of consciousness: the I-figure narrating, the characters, [and] the implied author who controls both narrator and characters, and who often takes a line on them.<sup>15</sup>

The voice of Dickens’s narrator-persona, as seen in Chapter Three, is equivalent to Fowler’s implied author, who ‘often takes a line’ on his characters. While a third-person

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76. Fowler takes the concepts of ‘implied author’ (and ‘real author’) from Wayne Booth’s *Rhetoric of Fiction*. Fowler argues that the implied author is the real author accessed through the transformations effected by language. Thus, the term ‘implied author’ as I will use it acknowledges the presence of the ‘real author’ who necessarily uses and manipulates language.

narrator is not necessarily a character in the story, Dickens frequently uses self-conscious or facetious commentary to indicate the point of view of a distinct narrator-persona – more obviously in the Christmas books, as has been seen. In this sense, there is certainly a mode of consciousness connected to his narrator’s voice. It could even be called a mind-style, although I will simply call it Dickens’s narratorial style and reserve the term mind-style for characters within the narrative. The first-person narrations in *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House* evidently give insight into the mind-styles of the character-narrators, or ‘I-figures’ as Fowler calls them. I argue that the use of Dickensian simile for external characterisation in these narratives is also linked to the ‘distinct mode of consciousness’ of certain characters. The interior motivations or preoccupations of some characters become externalised through the figurative language.

Elena Semino and Kate Swindlehurst would argue against this understanding of mind-style. They explicitly link mind-style and point of view by defining mind-style as ‘the way in which the fictional world is perceived and conceptualised by the mind whose point of view is adopted.’ They argue, ‘we can perceive a character’s mind style only if we are presented with his or her point of view.’<sup>16</sup> Since external description of a character is technically from the narrator’s point of view, it is difficult to reconcile Dickensian mind-style with a traditional understanding of the term unless it is considered ‘indirect’ or ‘implied’ mind-style. In this sense, it is a particular instance of free indirect style in the narrative, for Dickens’s descriptions may imply a character’s point of view without adopting it. It is clear, for example, that Dickens’s fanciful characterisations do not follow the psychological realism of characters’ inner thought-

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<sup>16</sup> Elena Semino and Kate Swindlehurst, ‘Metaphor and Mind Style in Ken Kesey’s “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”’, *Style*, 30.1 (1996), 143–66 (p. 145) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/42946325>> [accessed 9 April 2021].



processes in some other Victorian novels. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, for example, little Maggie Tulliver's thoughts are represented from her point of view:

Maggie stood motionless, except from her sobs, for a minute or two; then she turned round and ran into the house, and up to her attic, where she sat on the floor and laid her head against the worm-eaten shelf, with a crushing sense of misery. Tom was come home, and she had thought how happy she should be; and now he was cruel to her. What use was anything if Tom didn't love her? Oh, he was very cruel! Hadn't she wanted to give him the money, and said how very sorry she was? She knew she was naughty to her mother, but she had never been naughty to Tom—had never *meant* to be naughty to him. (Bk 1, Ch. 5)

George Eliot criticises Dickens for a lack of this kind of psychological realism, arguing that he has 'the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population' but does not render 'their psychological character – their conceptions of life, and their emotions – with the same truth as their idiom and manners.'<sup>17</sup> Eliot's partner George Henry Lewes also famously said that Dickens's characters are like 'frogs whose brains have been taken out for physiological purposes' and who thus lack the 'complexity of the organism':

Place one of these brainless frogs on his back and he will at once recover the sitting posture; draw a leg from under him, and he will draw it back again; tickle or prick him and he will push away the object, or take *one* hop out of the way; stroke his back, and he will utter *one* croak. All these things resemble the actions of the unmutated frog, but they differ in being *isolated* actions, and *always the same*: they are as uniform and calculable as the movements of a machine.<sup>18</sup>

The exploration of Dickensian mind-style in this chapter offers a counterpoint to Eliot's and Lewes's criticism. Rather than maintaining a superficial approach to his characters through the external nature of his descriptions, Dickens precisely externalises his characters' interiority through his peculiar similitic characterisation. Mr Carker's 'two

<sup>17</sup> George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', *The Westminster Review*, 1856, 51–79 (p. 55) <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/natural-history-german-life/docview/2138578828/se-2>>.

<sup>18</sup> George Henry Lewes, 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 11.62 (1872), 141–54 (pp. 148–49) <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/dickens-relation-criticism/docview/2430311/se-2>>.

unbroken rows of glistening teeth' in *Dombey and Son*, are an example of how a physical description immediately reveals the character's interior attitude:

It was impossible to escape the observation of them, for he showed them whenever he spoke; and bore so wide a smile upon his countenance (a smile, however, very rarely, indeed, extending beyond his mouth), that there was something in it like the snarl of a cat. (Ch. 13)

Carker's toothy smile is consistently used to characterise his preying, prowling nature throughout the novel. While Lewes acknowledges the vividness of Dickens's depictions as a strength, he argues that Dickens's characters are as predictable as a machine because of their repetitive characteristics. However, if repetition comes with a sense of predictability and even inevitability, it does not preclude interiority – whether this interiority be essentially superficial or one that reveals the 'complexity of the organism.' As will be seen throughout this chapter, repetition of his similitude description is essential to Dickens's characterisation in his later works and helps create the mind-style of certain characters. Dickensian mind-style thus encompasses two different ways of presenting the viewpoints of characters. In the first place, Dickens represents traditional mind-style in the way that Fowler uses it. In the narrative, the presentation of a particular point of view can offer a direct appreciation of individual perceptions and emotions. Secondly, according to a broader interpretation of the way Fowler defines mind-style as a 'distinctive linguistic presentation' of an individual's mind, Dickensian similitude characterisation can be considered mind-style because of a consistent use of imagery that represents a character's unique frame of mind.

ii. The Implied Author in *Dombey and Son*

Dickens, as the implied author, can never be completely absent from his creation – as Esther cannot be kept out of her own narrative in *Bleak House*. As discussed previously, in the novels of the early 1840s, readers had come to expect the fanciful and unusual similitic description of Dickens's narrator-persona. Dickens's experimentation with this aspect of his style in *Dombey and Son* at the end of the decade is not as radical as it is in *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*. His narrator-persona still dominates the narrative and makes it more difficult to discern when the similitic description is creating a character's individual mind-style. During the serial publication of *Dombey and Son* (1846-1848), Dickens wrote his final Christmas books, *The Battle of Life* (1846) and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* (1848) – wherein a more obviously intrusive narrator can be heard. The personable tone of these and the other Christmas books has much to do with how Dickens imagined them as being literally delivered in his own voice. He would read them aloud to select audiences, as indicated in a letter to his friend William Macready, where Dickens says that he wishes to read aloud to him and Mrs Macready 'my little Christmas Book,' *The Chimes*, 'In which I have endeavoured to plant an indignant right-hander on the eye of certain Wicked Cant that makes my blood boil.'<sup>19</sup> He felt personally involved in his story – almost morally obliged to make his own voice heard. Dickens also told his wife, Catherine, in another letter, that for a proposed dramatization of *The Battle*, he felt 'obliged to engage to read the book' to the actors so that they would get the tone right.<sup>20</sup> It was important for Dickens that the tone of the narration was literally heard by those actors. The Christmas books were the only

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<sup>19</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 4, 'To W. C. Macready,' 28 Nov 1844. The reading took place on 1 Dec 1844.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 'To Mrs Charles Dickens,' 19 Dec 1846.

works that Dickens would read aloud in their entirety, but throughout his life, he continued the custom of reading aloud passages from his novels to small, private audiences. The public readings from his works that took place from 1853 to 1870 demonstrate how Dickens expressly associated himself and his own voice with his fictions. However, Dickens never offered public readings taken from the novels written after *David Copperfield*. Dickens prepared two readings from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1860-1), but he never performed them publicly.<sup>21</sup> This indicates that it was easier for Dickens to perform the personable narrator, the one more clearly associated with himself, who emerges explicitly in the earlier works. If he avoided public readings from the later works, it is probably because, as will be seen in this chapter, *Bleak House*, the first novel after *David Copperfield*, completes a transition in Dickens's narratorial style where he dissociates his own personal voice from the narration.

That transition began with *Dombey and Son*, even if readers would have encountered in the first number the familiar simile style of the Dickensian narrator-persona from previous novels. In the very first paragraph, the typical Dickensian narrator-persona is heard, detailing the birth of little Paul Dombey and the death of Mrs Dombey. The new-born baby is described as having been 'carefully disposed on a low settee immediately in front of the fire and close to it, as if his constitution were analogous to that of a muffin, and it was essential to toast him brown while he was very new' (Ch. 1). The facetious simile indicates the narrator's point of view, commenting on how little Paul is treated as a precious commodity from the beginning of his life. The baby's humanity is humorously obscured by the image of a new-born muffin – which

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<sup>21</sup> *Charles Dickens: The Public Readings*, ed. by Philip Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), lxxv.

reflects the incapacity of Mr Dombey to care for his son as a *son* and not as the idealised *Son* of 'Dombey and Son.' The animating quality of typical Dickensian simile is also evident in the 'race' between the watches of Mr Dombey and the doctor: the watches 'seemed to be racing faster' as Mrs Dombey becomes weaker – in the solemn silences, they 'seemed to jostle, and to trip each other up' (Ch. 1). The incongruous image of the watches in lively competition as Mrs Dombey dies also gives the reader an impression of Mr Dombey's emotional detachment from the scene. The descriptions thus convey something of Mr Dombey's character, but it is indirectly achieved through the similitic language.

When the similitic description is used more consistently in the novel in the characterisation of Mr Dombey and others, it indicates the development of a narrative technique whereby similes create a character's worldview that is distinct from the narrator's. Consistent imagery characterising Mr Dombey enables us to access, for example, his inflexible mind-style. Mr Dombey is presented as automaton-like, as when he first greets Mrs Toodle, 'turning round in his easy chair, as one piece, and not as a man with limbs and joints' (Ch. 2). The stiffness of his body may only be a surface-level description, but it ludicrously reflects the inflexibility of his mind. The one item of importance is the care of his son, on whom all his hopes for 'Dombey and Son' depend. The description of Mr Dombey as almost a mechanical object reflects how he is behaving 'not as a man' in his disregard for his little daughter Florence and his dispassionate regret for his wife's death. Later in the novel, after dining with Major Bagstock and Mr Carker, Mr Dombey lies on the sofa 'like a man of wood without a hinge or a joint in him' (Ch. 26). He is presented 'not as a man' here either, in that he is a man of wood, which also communicates the unbending quality of his mind. He meditates woodenly for the rest of the evening – no doubt, after the conversation during

dinner, considering the possibility of making Edith the new Mrs Dombey. In the sense that he is in some manner attracted to Edith, he is still 'a man'; but he is a 'man of wood' in that the idea takes on the same inflexibility as his other goals in life. Now that little Paul has died, Edith is a potential mother of a new Son for Dombey and Son.

The descriptions of Mr Dombey during little Paul's christening party are particularly revealing. As the family gathers beforehand in the drawing room, we see Mr Dombey responding to his sister: "Perhaps Louisa," said Mr. Dombey, slightly turning his head in his cravat, as if it were a socket, "you would have preferred a fire?" The dry humour of the scene is apparent: "Oh, my dear Paul, no," said Mrs Chick, who had much ado to keep her teeth from chattering; "not for me." The contrast between Dombey's unfeeling body-parts and Mrs Chick's chattering teeth comically amplifies Dombey's obliviousness to proper human sensations. Dickens's use of humour in his similitic descriptions will be discussed further in the next chapter. For now, the grotesqueness of Dombey's automaton-like posture, consistent with other descriptions of Dombey in the novel, provides insight into his mind-style. Dombey's stiffness is juxtaposed with the utter lack of warmth in the cold drawing room: even the 'stiff and stark fire-irons appeared to claim a nearer relationship than anything else there to Mr Dombey' (Ch. 5). Ironically, when surrounded by his nearest relations, Dombey is described as more akin to the fire-irons, and, like them, is stoking no fire. This imagery is consistent with several variations on the frozen theme throughout the chapter. The chill day of the 'Icy christening,' so called by Dickens in his working notes for the novel,<sup>22</sup> is of Mr Dombey's own making: he is 'as hard and cold as the weather; and when he looked out through the glass room, at the trees in the little garden, their brown

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<sup>22</sup> Stone, *Dickens' Working Notes*, p. 685.

and yellow leaves came fluttering down, as if he blighted them.’ The thoughts that motivate that blighting glance are clear from the mirror above the mantelpiece, which ‘reflecting Mr Dombey and his portrait at one blow, seemed fraught with melancholy meditations.’ As with the description of Mr Bounderby above, the similitic cues of *as if* and *seemed* dissociate Dombey’s mind-style from the narrator’s own voice. The similes lend Mr Dombey more individuality than when the narrator states that Dombey has an ‘indescribable distrust of anybody stepping in between himself and his son’ (Ch. 5). Like the description of Amelia in *Vanity Fair*, when Dickens’s narrator informs the reader *what* Dombey is feeling it does not show *how* he feels as much as the figurative language does.

Dombey’s distrustful mind-style is also shown through the similitic language. As his ‘cold and distant nature’ focuses all its hopes on little Paul, ‘it seemed as if its icy current, instead of being released by this influence, and running clear and free, had thawed for but an instant to admit its burden, and then frozen with it into one unyielding block’ (Ch. 5). Dombey’s interiority is evident from this description of his obsession with little Paul. Indeed, it is a rare moment where the figurative language focuses directly on a character’s interior attitude rather than showing that interiority through an external physical description. More frequently, the similitic description of external gestures reflects those internal currents. When Mr Chick greets Dombey at the christening, he ‘gave Mr Dombey his hand, as if he feared it might electrify him. Mr Dombey took it as if it were a fish, or seaweed, or some such charming substance, and immediately returned it to him with exalted politeness’ (Ch. 5). The adverbial nature of the adverbial *as if* clause reveals Dombey’s intentionality. Dombey’s ‘icy current’ will not take in any ‘charming substance’ other than its main obsession – even such connatural substances like fish or seaweed. Besides the facetious insertion of

‘charming’, it is the excessiveness of the imagery rather than direct narratorial commentary that shows Dombey’s mental attitude. Dickensian simile unconventionally elaborates the conventional image of a character’s ‘cold and distant nature.’ It is not just that Mr Dombey is a man of ice, but also that he changes everything to ice around him in the ‘icy christening.’ By the end of the christening dinner, ‘The party seemed to get colder and colder, and to be gradually resolving itself into a congealed and gelid state, like the collation round which it was assembled’ (Ch. 5). There is a special kind of pathetic fallacy at work here: not only nature (with its falling leaves) but also every object around him begins to reflect Mr Dombey’s state of mind.

This kind of engineered pathetic fallacy is also evident in the description of Dombey’s train journey after little Paul’s death. The narrator states that Mr Dombey infects his surroundings, ‘tinging the scene of transition before him with the morbid colours of his own mind, and making it a ruin of a picture of decay’ (Ch. 20). Nevertheless, this generic figurative language is less informative of Dombey’s mind-style than the similitic comparisons during the icy christening. The description of the ‘morbid colours’ of Dombey’s mind ‘tinging’ the scene around him works like direct narratorial commentary in the sense that it is not unique to Dombey’s way of seeing things and imposes an interpretation of the scene. The similes used during the christening scene, on the other hand, lend an individuality to Dombey’s mind-style. Anyone can have morbid thoughts; only Mr Dombey can make a whole party of people subside into gelatinous frigidity. Similarly, when we are told that ‘It was a dagger in the haughty father’s heart, an arrow in his brain, to see Florence clinging after the dismissed Polly [Mrs Toodle]’ (Ch. 6), this conventional imagery does not provide any unique insight into Mr Dombey’s character. As discussed in Chapter Two, Dickens subscribes to a popular style of stock imagery by using such figurative language. Unless he makes



something of the cliché, as when Dombey's coldness is literally freezing everyone around him, the use of expected tropes limits the readers' understanding of Dombey's mind-style. Dickens's narrator-persona does not yield to an individual mind-style in those moments.

Likewise, typical Dickensian allusions to Shakespeare belong more to the narrator-persona than the individual mind-style of a character. In *Dombey and Son*, when Mr Dombey wishes to introduce Mr Carker to Edith and her mother, he finds it hard to say something that might uncharacteristically reveal a personal desire, hesitating and 'making as if he swallowed something a little too large for his throat' (Ch. 26). The words stick in his throat like the 'Amen' in *Macbeth* when Macbeth cannot respond to the prayer of the guards after Duncan's murder: 'But wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen"? / I had most need of blessing, and "Amen" / Stuck in my throat' (II.ii.29-31). The same comparison is used for two other characters in the novel. Telling Florence about Walter Gay's escape from shipwreck, Captain Cuttle 'made a gulp as if to get down something that was sticking in his throat' (Ch. 49) – indicating, perhaps, that instead of his constant refrain that Walter is 'drowned' he will now tell her that he is alive. At Florence and Walter's wedding, 'The amens of the dusty clerk appear, like Macbeth's, to stick in his throat a little' (Ch. 57) – which has more to do with dust than anything like Macbeth's moral dilemma. In *Shakespeare and Dickens*, Valerie Gager documents only this last explicit allusion to *Macbeth* in *Dombey and Son*. However, the first two are very similar and are probably alluding to the same source. It was a favourite image of Dickens's. Gager notes the same allusion in an 1842 letter to David C. Colden where Dickens describes his meeting with the President of the United States, John Tyler: 'He [John Tyler] expressed great surprise at my being so young. I would have returned the compliment; but, he looked so jaded, that it stuck in my throat like Macbeth's amen.'

The comparison shows an inherent inability to say an untruth – like Macbeth’s inability to pray after committing murder. Gager gives as the earliest reference to these lines a passage in *Nicholas Nickleby*, when Ralph Nickleby is saying good bye to his niece: ‘The blessing seemed to stick in Mr Ralph Nickleby’s throat, as if it were not used to the thoroughfare, and didn’t know the way out. But it got out somehow, though awkwardly enough’ (Ch. 19). Although Dickens uses this allusion to *Macbeth*, and most of the references above, to show how characters struggle against natural inclinations, the use of the same source of comparison for several different characters shows that the similitic description reveals the narrator’s style more than the individual mind-style of those characters.

Meanwhile, when Mr Dombey is alone in Cousin Feenix’s dining room on a day shortly before his marriage to Edith, the similitic description is meant to capture his unique worldview. Cousin Feenix has been away so long that

[...] the room had gradually put itself into deeper and still deeper mourning for him, until it was become so funereal as to want nothing but a body in it to be quite complete.

No bad representation of the body, for the nonce, in his unbending form, if not in his attitude, Mr Dombey looked down into the cold depths of the dead sea of mahogany on which the fruit dishes and decanters lay at anchor; as if the subjects of his thoughts were rising towards the surface one by one, and plunging down again. (Ch. 30)

The imagery uses the estranging modals Fowler speaks of – Mr Dombey only *represents* a dead body ‘in his unbending form’; he looks at the table only *as if* his thoughts can be seen there. In Dickens’s working notes for this scene, he writes: ‘Mr Dombey musing at table – Dead sea of mahogany, with plates and dishes riding at anchor.’<sup>23</sup> Mr Dombey’s icy current has become a dead sea. The shiny surface of a luxurious mahogany table lends itself perfectly to Dombey’s ‘reflections.’ Once treasured ideals rise to the surface

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

only to plunge down again, perhaps threatening to evade his grasp as they did before. The room and its furniture add to the atmosphere. It is ostensibly in mourning for its missing owner, but it is subtly in mourning for the death of its present brooding occupant. His mental state is as unfeeling as a dead body's.

What Dombey's thoughts are *like* shows more what they are than when the narrative directly reveals his thoughts – and even then, when describing Dombey's thoughts, the narrator is careful to indicate that Dombey repels any real insight into his inner world:

Again came Florence [...] and absorbed his whole attention. Whether as a fore-doomed difficulty and disappointment to him; whether as a rival who had crossed him in his way, and might again; whether as his child, of whom, in his successful wooing, he could stoop to think as claiming, at such a time, to be no more estranged; or whether as a hint to him that the mere appearance of caring for his own blood should be maintained in his new relations; he best knew. Indifferently well, perhaps, at best; for marriage company and marriage altars, and ambitious scenes – still blotted here and there with Florence – always Florence – turned up so fast, and so confusedly, that he rose, and went upstairs to escape them. (Ch. 30)

The implied author's voice tells us what Dombey could be thinking about, but the list of possible reflections ends with 'he best knew' – and 'Indifferently well, perhaps, at best.'

As discussed [in Section i](#), Roger Fowler's definition of mind-style allows that it may disclose 'preoccupations, prejudices, perspectives and values' which the character himself is unaware of.<sup>24</sup> In the above passage, the narrator tells the reader directly that Dombey is confused by his own thoughts and goes upstairs to escape them. However, even before this, the similes show that Dombey's mental attitude is no better than a corpse's and that his thoughts are incoherently reflected in the tabletop. Dickensian mind-style is thus achieved through the similitic description more than through the direct commentary.

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<sup>24</sup> Fowler, p. 103.

By the end of the novel, Mr Dombey's individual mind-style weakens through inconsistency of the similitic characterisation. Dickens resorts to 'stock' images like the daggers in Mr Dombey's heart and the arrows to his brain. Dombey's resentment of Edith's disdain for him is represented as a moralising sentiment: that the armour of pride is as vulnerable 'to deep stabs in the self-love' as is 'the bare breast to steel' (Ch. 40). Rather than revealing his interiority, these generic descriptions seem to rob Dombey of the individuality he had when he was freezing the christening party. Finally, when his business and his pride have been simultaneously wrecked and this is reflected in the image of a deserted house, Dombey's mind becomes literally fragmented as he walks through the empty corridors: 'his thoughts already lost coherence as the footprints did, and were pieced on to one another, with the same trackless involutions, and varieties of indistinct shapes' (Ch. 59). The disintegration of Dombey's mind is shown in generic figurative language; and afterwards no new mind-style is constructed out of the wreckage. His conversion is stated matter-of-factly in the final chapter: 'Ambitious projects trouble him no more. His only pride is in his daughter and her husband.' The only figurative description of Dombey in the last chapter does not recall the icy, wooden Mr Dombey of before: his face 'bears heavy marks of care and suffering; but they are traces of a storm that has passed on for ever, and left a clear evening in its track' (Ch. 62). When the imagery becomes less consistent or more conventional, Mr Dombey of the 'icy christening' disappears. He is more interesting and indeed more complex in his interior obsessions at the beginning of the novel than when he is a gentle grandfather at its close.

The effectiveness of Dickensian mind-style is shown when unusual or absurd similitic description captures a distinctive worldview, as in the case of Mr Dombey being described as literally freezing cold or woodenly immobile. With other characters in the

novel, Dickens's description does not indicate the same individuality. The characters of Edith Granger and Florence Dombey have been seen as empty and melodramatically represented. George Gissing wrote, 'Florence is too colourless for deep interest, and the second Mrs Dombey is rather forced upon us than accepted as a natural figure in the drama.'<sup>25</sup> As when the mind-style of Dombey breaks down, the pattern of simile in Edith's and Florence's characterisation is either inconsistent or too conventional. It stays on the surface rather than externalising their interiority. One of the first descriptions of Edith tells us that she has the 'very twilight of a smile: so singularly were its light and darkness blended' (Ch. 21). She is literally presented to the reader 'in black and white.' The conventional metaphors of light and darkness in this 'twilight' smile point to her future downfall. Similarly, when she speaks last to Mr Dombey before running away, 'Her face and bosom glowed as if the red light of an angry sunset had been flung upon them' (Ch. 40). The phrase 'angry sunset' does externalise her anger, but in such a way that it is associated with the imagery of light and darkness from before, foreshadowing the metaphorical sunset of her reputation. Elsewhere, like Mr Dombey, Edith is likened to a statue, but the description of Edith is primarily external with the brief simile Dickens employs: she 'sat, like a statue, at the feast.' Mr Dombey, meanwhile, 'being a good deal in the statue way himself, was well enough pleased' (Ch. 35). The periphrastic phrasing of *a good deal in the x way himself* makes the same simile much more individual to Mr Dombey, for it humorously equates his statue-like quality to a line of professional work, as if he were in the 'carpentry way.' His rigidity, reflecting an inner inflexibility is a constant. The imagery used to describe Edith, moreover, is much less consistent than that used for Mr Dombey. Her passions are shown by comparisons to

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<sup>25</sup> George Gissing, *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens: Essays, Introductions, and Reviews*, ed. by Pierre Coustillas, 3 vols (Grayswood, Surrey: Grayswood Press, 2004), I, p. 148.

several different domains: light and darkness; marble and statues; her anger is like a chord plucked on a 'wild harp'; she looks at 'as if she were a beautiful Medusa' who could kill Mr Dombey with a glance; and she crouches and crawls 'like some lower animal' when Florence tries to speak to her before Edith's flight in the night (Ch. 47). Although externalising her feelings and motivations to some extent, the inconsistent imagery renders Edith's mind-style incoherent and unpredictable. Indeed, as a character, Edith *is* unpredictable, running away from Mr Dombey but also fleeing her would-be lover, Mr Carker.

Even less can the reader access the mind-style of Florence, for, in the figurative description surrounding her, the indefatigable narrator-persona's voice consumes whatever individuality Florence might have. After little Paul's death and her father's absence have left her alone in the house, we read that 'No magic dwelling-place in magic story, shut up in the heart of a thick wood, was ever more solitary and deserted to the fancy, than was her father's mansion in its grim reality, as it stood lowering on the street' (Ch. 23). It is not Florence's fancy that is being referred to: the personified glower of the house shows the presence of Dickens's narrator-persona. As seen in previous chapters, Dickens frequently uses fantastical similitude description for the personification of houses. There is no indication that Florence's mind-style is being represented. Her loneliness is implied; but no interior worldview is externalised in the description of her situation. She lives alone while 'blank walls looked down upon her with a vacant stare, as if they had a Gorgon-like mind to stare her youth and beauty into stone' (Ch. 23). Florence is a passive figure within the animating energy of the figurative language. If anything, the similitude language is an indirect indication of Florence's mental state, as when Dombey's inhumanity is expressed in the similes [in the opening chapter of the novel](#). The furniture in Florence's lonely house is described in

funereal terms, which reflects her sadness after her little brother's death. Nevertheless, the animation of the objects belongs more to the narrator-persona's voice: 'Hecatombs of furniture, still piled and covered up, shrunk like imprisoned and forgotten men'; 'Boards, starting at unwonted foot-steps, creaked and shook'; 'pictures seemed to go in and secrete themselves. Mildew and mould began to lurk in closets' (Ch. 23). The narrator is describing a subversive reality separate from Florence's world. This is evident from the fact that Florence enters and leaves rooms 'as quietly as any sunbeam, excepting that she left her light behind' (Ch. 23). The conventional light imagery shows that the other grotesque fancies up to this point are not attached to the depiction of her. The figurative description of these passages emphasise Florence's loneliness, but as they do not indicate her own mind-style; she remains an 'external' character. Like Louisa Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, who will be discussed in the next chapter, Florence and Edith are characters who escape Dickensian similitic characterisation. Because Dickensian mind-style is not consistently at work in the description of Florence and Edith, they remain 'colourless' or 'forced' and not as memorable as Mr Dombey (before his conversion) and other characters in the novel.

### iii. The Narrator-Persona as Character-Narrator in *David Copperfield*

In spite of some individual mind-styles surfacing in *Dombey and Son*, the overarching narratorial style is still predominantly that of the typical Dickensian narrator-persona in its idiosyncratic use of similitic description. Dickens adapts this similitic style to the creation of character-narrators in his next two novels, *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*. He manipulates the self-conscious structuring of his own similitic style to portray

a character's awareness of their use of language. In *David Copperfield*, the first-person narrative is still united to the implied author, and indeed to the real author in its autobiographical elements. Nevertheless, there is an important layer of separation from Dickens, the real and implied author, in that the self-consciousness of the similitic language is meant to reveal how David thinks and observes the world around him. The character of David appropriates the typical voice of Dickens's narrator-persona and any similitic description he uses reveals the mind-style of David, rather than Dickens. To add to this complexity, there are two David figures in the narrative. There is the grown-up and reminiscing David, whom I will call 'David-now,' and the younger David as the object of the older David's reflections, whom I will call 'David-then.' The way Dickens uses similitic description shows the viewpoints and mind-styles of both Davids, although the primary narrator is David-now. In his working notes for the first number of the novel, Dickens emphasises that the narration is from David-now's perspective on 'The things that come out of the blank of his infancy on looking back.' On the other hand, there are also notes that underline a 'Child's remembrance,' and David's 'state of mind – childish incidental whimsicalities,'<sup>26</sup> which indicates that there are moments when David-then's point of view is being articulated. Dickens frequently changes the point of view from David-then to David-now. At times the two points of view are conflated and difficult to distinguish, although, as this section will consider, some linguistic clues point to David-then's or David-now's perspective. The problem of the fluctuating points of view – even though one character is the subject of both – is something Dickens may have been aware of when he decided to experiment with two very different viewpoints in his next novel *Bleak House*. The difficulty associated with viewpoint in *David*

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<sup>26</sup> Stone, *Dickens' Working Notes*, pp. 143, 145, 147.



*Copperfield* is that the mind-styles of David-now and David-then are tied to each one's point of view, according to the traditional concept of mind-style [defined above](#). Thus, the shifting narrative perspectives do not make it easy to decipher whether the similitude style belongs to David-then or David-now.

The specificity of some similitude descriptions from David's childhood is one way that Dickens signals David-then's mind-style. One of David's first memories is that his nurse Peggotty had 'cheeks and arms so hard and red that I wondered the birds didn't peck her in preference to apples' (Ch. 2). Another impression he has that he 'cannot distinguish from actual remembrance' is that the touch of Peggotty's rough forefinger is 'like a pocket nutmeg-grater' from its accustomed needlework. He apologetically inserts that 'This may be fancy'; but then adds: 'I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy' (Ch. 2). The self-conscious commentary belongs to David-now as he reflects on his memories, but the figurative comparisons belong to David-then's child's mind, as we see at the very end of the novel when they are repeated:

The cheeks and arms of Peggotty, so hard and red in my childish days, when I wondered why the birds didn't peck her in preference to apples, are shrivelled now [...]; but her rough forefinger, which I once associated with a pocket nutmeg-grater, is just the same. (Ch. 64)

Other incidents from his childhood reminiscing are evidently from David-then's point of view, as when he sees how Mr Peggotty returns from washing his face 'so rubicund, that I couldn't help thinking his face had this in common with the lobsters, crabs, and crawfish, – that it went into the hot water very black, and came out very red' (Ch. 3). The new sights he experiences in a fishing locality provide the source domain for this analogy for Mr Peggotty's red face. Moreover, David-then 'couldn't help thinking' of this comparison, which shows how closely the childish analogy is linked to a specific

memory. Analogy *is* memory in the child's imagination, keeping alive the vividness of an impression.

Dickens uses the past-present dynamic of David-then and -now to reflect on his own narrative style. Alone in his room, after coming home to find Mr Murdstone is his 'new Pa,' David feels desolate: 'I thought of the oddest things [...] of the washing-stand being rickety on its three legs, and having a discontented something about it, which reminded me of Mrs Gummidge under the influence of the old one' (Ch. 4). David had been confused by Mr Peggotty's reference to the 'old 'un' as the excuse for Mrs Gummidge's fretfulness, until he was told that the 'old 'un' meant Mrs Gummidge's late husband. David-then projects his own feeling of abandonment by his mother for her new husband onto his discontented washing stand, and thereby personifies or animates objects – as Dickens's narrator-persona habitually does. Dickens allows his narrator a self-conscious reflection on this tendency: 'I thought of the oddest things,' and this layer of self-awareness is the voice of David-now. At other moments, Dickens tries to provide only the perspective of David-then. In his working notes for the novel, Dickens writes of David's drunken episode: 'His first time of getting tipsy. Description of it, exactly.'<sup>27</sup> He underlines the second sentence twice. The linguistic cue he uses to describe the tipsiness 'exactly' is the present-tense adverb *now*. As Fowler notes, 'The combination of past tense (non-proximate) with the proximate temporal adverb *now* is the commonest indicator of free indirect style.'<sup>28</sup> The use of *now* indicates that the passage is from David-then's point of view: 'Now, somebody was unsteadily contemplating his features in the looking-glass. That was I too' (Ch. 24). The similitude description thus belongs to

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>28</sup> Fowler, p. 102.

David-then's mind-style. When he emerges from the drunken stupor and realises that the 'somebody' who is drunk is himself, he relates:

[...] as that somebody slowly settled down into myself, did I begin to parch, and feel as if my outer covering of skin were a hard board; my tongue the bottom of an empty kettle, furred with long service, and burning up over a slow fire. (Ch. 24)

Without the temporal indicator of *now* and our knowledge of Dickens's intention to represent David's experience 'exactly,' it would be difficult to tell whether this is how David-then *experienced* it at the time, or whether this is how David-now chooses to *remember* it now.

The stylistic difficulty Dickens encounters is that David is the same subject of all these impressions regardless of the temporal divide. For example, David-now might use self-conscious, almost apologetic insertions, much as does the self-conscious narrator discussed in Chapter Three, and this would indicate that the similitude description belongs to David-now's mind-style; however, the images may well belong to David-then, because David-then's childhood impressions are also couched in similitude language. For example, as young David tries to recite his lessons in front of Mr Murdstone, he relates:

I felt the words of my lessons slipping off, not one by one, or line by line, but by the entire page. I tried to lay hold of them; but they seemed, if I may so express it, to have put skates on, and to skim away from me with a smoothness there was no checking. (Ch. 4)

That insertion of a present-tense narration – *if I may so express it* – appears to indicate that the image of words on skates belongs to David-now's mind-style as he recalls his childhood desperation. The same phrase is used when David describes his infatuation with Dora Spenlow, and in that chapter it evidently belongs to David-now's present reflections: 'If I may so express it, I was steeped in Dora. I was not merely over head and ears in love with her, but I was saturated through and through' (Ch. 33). David-now provides a satirical distance between himself and his lovestruck past self by humorously

likening his infatuation to a kind of infusion of love: ‘Enough love might have been wrung out of me, metaphorically speaking, to drown anybody in; and yet there would have remained enough within me, and all over me, to pervade my entire existence’ (Ch. 33). The absurd image shows that the description belongs to David-now at a temporal distance where he can satirise his excessive devotion. The description of the words on skates, on the other hand, seems an image that could occur to a child. As with David-then’s impression of Mr Peggotty’s lobster-like face, a child could draw on his own experiences to make such analogies. Armando Iannucci’s 2019 film *The Personal History of David Copperfield* vividly presents the image as the child David’s impression of the words of his lesson. The words on the page become blurry and superimposed as young David tries to read and he tells Mr Murdstone, ‘The words have skates and skim away.’<sup>29</sup> It is one of many interesting ways that Iannucci’s film attempts to bring Dickens’s figurative language to the screenplay. Sometimes the older David, who is occasionally seen observing his younger self, uses the similes in his own commentary; but the young David voices many of the similitude descriptions himself, as in this instance. The film indicates the child’s growing tendency to make unusual associations. Although a film can clearly show whose mind-style is being portrayed, there are difficulties in the book when it comes to distinguishing David-now’s from David-then’s perceptions in the narrative.

In the first chapter of the novel, it is impossible that the events related could have been perceived by either David-now or David-then, by his own admission. About to describe events that occurred before he was born, he says, ‘I can make no claim therefore to have known, at that time, how matters stood; or to have any remembrance,

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<sup>29</sup> *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, dir. by Armando Iannucci (Lionsgate, 2019).

founded on the evidence of my own senses, of what follows' (Ch. 1). It remains to be seen, then, whose senses and whose remembrance he is referencing. Even though the narrator hints that his mother has told him all these things afterwards, the highly figurative descriptions are clearly not his mother's, as she is 'too uneasy in herself, and too subdued and bewildered altogether, to observe anything very clearly' (Ch. 1). With the introduction of Miss Betsey Trotwood, the description belongs not to David's mother, but to a familiar Dickensian voice: 'Miss Betsey, looking round the room, slowly and enquiringly, began on the other side, and carried her eyes on, like a Saracen's Head in a Dutch clock, until they reached my mother' (Ch. 1). As mentioned [in Chapter Two](#), a Dutch clock is a favourite source domain for Dickens's characterisations. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Quilp goes back into his room 'with one jerk and clapped the little door to, like a figure in a Dutch clock when the hour strikes' (Ch. 48). In a letter to John Forster in 1846, he writes of the Prefect of Police in Paris 'turning his head incessantly from side to side, like a figure in a Dutch clock, and scrutinizing everybody and everything, as if he suspected all the twigs in all the trees in the long avenue.'<sup>30</sup> These comparisons are taken from the same shelf in Dickens's mental 'catalogue,' discussed in Chapter Four. All show the presence of Dickens's narrator- or letter-writing-persona. Meanwhile, in *David Copperfield*, this figurative voice is associated not with Dickens himself but with a character – David. On the one hand, the similitude style is another proof of the autobiographical nature of the novel. On the other hand, by projecting his voice onto a character, Dickens detaches himself from his own similitude style to portray someone else's frame of mind.

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<sup>30</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 4, 'To John Forster,' ?30 November 1846.

In the first chapter, since David cannot have experienced the events himself, it is easy to assume that the descriptive voice belongs more to Dickens's narrator-persona than to David-now or David-then. However, the images are repeated later in the novel to show that they reflect the mind-style of David as the character-narrator. Later in the novel, for example, Miss Betsey is characterised with clock imagery when, disturbed by Uriah Heep's influence in the Wickfield household, she begins to walk around David's rooms and 'kept passing in and out, along this measured track, at an unchanging pace, with the regularity of a clock-pendulum' (Ch. 40). David could not possibly have seen his aunt before he was born, yet he takes up the clock imagery that is used in the first chapter. Dickens's narratorial style is incorporated into the character-narrator's mind-style. In the first chapter, the characterisation of the doctor, Mr Chillip, also appears to belong primarily to Dickens as the implied author. It is obviously not the pre-born David-then who could make this observation: '[Mr Chillip] walked as softly as the Ghost in Hamlet, and more slowly' (Ch. 1). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Dickens 'Shakespeareanly' draws on a favourite source domain for this comparison to the Ghost of Hamlet's father. Nevertheless, there is a reference to *Hamlet* later in the novel that shows that the play is also a favourite source domain for the character-narrator, David. During a dinner party at the Wickfields' London residence, David describes 'a very awful lady in a black velvet dress, and a great black velvet hat, whom I remember as looking like a near relation of Hamlet's – say his aunt.' This 'aunt' of Hamlet's 'had the family failing of indulging in soliloquy, and held forth in a desultory manner, by herself, on every topic that was introduced' (Ch. 25). Dickens held on to the incongruous idea of a 'female Hamlet' to repeat it in a later letter (1860), as mentioned in Chapter Four. Thus, David-now's voice is essentially Dickens's, and vice versa. Dickens does not disguise or change his own typical similitude style, but he consciously

transfers it to a character's way of perceiving the world. The voice of Dickens via the implied author or narrator-persona in the first chapter of *David Copperfield* is indeed David-now's voice.

In her contributions to the concept of mind-style, Elena Semino highlights the importance of 'systematic but unconventional figurative patterns' as a 'powerful device for the evocation of mind style.'<sup>31</sup> Together with Kate Swindlehurst, Semino analyses Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to show how the first-person narrator Bromden's mind style is revealed through 'consistent and nonconventional metaphorical patterns':

We suggest that, at an individual level, the systematic use of a particular metaphor (or metaphors) reflects an idiosyncratic cognitive habit, a personal way of making sense of and talking about the world: in other words, a particular mind style.<sup>32</sup>

David's mind-style is also shown through the 'idiosyncratic cognitive habit' of using similes to describe different impressions. David essentially adopts the typical Dickensian narrator-persona's similitude style; but the deliberate degree of removal between implied author and character-narrator in *David Copperfield* shows that Dickens is reflecting precisely on the 'idiosyncratic cognitive habit' that, until now, has revealed the voice of 'Dickens' in his narratives. *David Copperfield* thus acts as the middle ground in the transition from the typical Dickensian narrator-persona's similitude style to Dickens's purposeful use of simile to characterise an individual mind-style.

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<sup>31</sup> Elena Semino, 'Mind Style', in *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics (Second Edition)*, ed. by Keith Brown (Oxford: Elsevier, 2006), pp. 142–48 (p. 146) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/00527-7>>.

<sup>32</sup> Semino and Swindlehurst, p. 147.

iv. The Two Narrators of *Bleak House*

After re-constituting his narrator-persona as a character-narrator in *David Copperfield*, Dickens was doubly careful in *Bleak House* to transpose his narratorial style by making the unusual choice of alternating first-person (past-tense) and third-person (present-tense) narratives. Dickens manipulates similitic description differently in each narrative, and both similitic styles are dissociated from the typical Dickensian narrator's voice. The third-person narrator observes everything in the present tense. Dickens had used the present tense in earlier novels at certain stages to heighten the sense of immediacy in the narrative or the vividness of the impressions. In *Bleak House*, the third-person narrator uses the present tense, but is not necessarily as omniscient as Dickens's typical narrator-persona. In its present-tense immediacy, similitic characterisation in the third-person narration of *Bleak House* is presented as external observation rather than direct narratorial commentary. The technique of Dickensian mind-style discussed earlier is thus more clearly seen in this narrative's description of some characters. In the first-person, past-tense narrative, the style of the character-narrator Esther Summerson is distanced from the usual style of a Dickensian narrator-persona by the heightened self-consciousness in her use of simile. As discussed in Chapter Three, facetious self-conscious simile is, in fact, a trait of Dickens's narrator-persona; the character-narrator in *David Copperfield* also draws attention to his own comparisons. However, Esther's self-consciousness is much more pronounced. It is used not to emphasise or take ownership of a comparison but to reveal her own lack of self-confidence. This section will explore how Dickens uses similitic description to dissociate the two narratives from himself as the implied author.



Dickens removes his own similitude style from Esther Summerson's by undermining Esther's self-assurance when drawing comparisons. Typically, Esther self-deprecatingly deflects her own figurativeness, as when she is leaving her aunt's home: 'she gave me one cold parting kiss upon my forehead, like a thaw-drop from the stone porch – it was a very frosty day' (Ch. 3). The cold kiss can easily be understood as revealing the frosty feelings of Esther's aunt, but Esther prefers to attribute the coldness to the weather, as if correcting her own implication. The comparison to the 'thaw-drop from the stone porch' externalises her aunt's cold nature according to Dickensian mind-style, but Dickens puts distance between his own kind of characterisation and Esther's conscious effort not to interpret her own fancies. Esther is also quick to point out when a figurative description belongs to someone else in the narrative. While she waits with Ada and Richard for the Lord Chancellor in his private room, she notes: 'the fire, which had left off roaring, winked its red eyes at us – as Richard said – like a drowsy old Chancery lion' (Ch. 3). The suspended 'as Richard said' inserts a literal space within the sentence and between Esther and the other character responsible for the phrase. Similarly, when describing Mrs Jellyby, Esther observes that she has 'handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if – I am quoting Richard again – they could see nothing nearer than Africa!' (Ch. 4). Esther makes haste to separate herself from the curious image, even though she uses it herself later: 'Mrs Jellyby was looking far away into Africa straight through my bonnet and head' (Ch. 23). When the image appears a third time, it is Caddy Jellyby speaking of her mother, also within Esther's narrative: "'she only gives me a placid look, as if I was I don't know what – a steeple in the distance,'" said Caddy, with a sudden idea' (Ch. 30). Caddy's 'sudden idea' is not new to the reader or Esther herself, but Esther gives the impression that such fanciful thoughts cannot come from her own imagination.

In fact, this description of someone's far-away gaze is a typical Dickensian image. In *Dombey and Son*, Captain Cuttle's friend Mr Bunsby 'seemed by expression of his visage to be always on the look-out for something in the extremest distance, and to have no ocular knowledge of anything within ten miles' (Ch. 23). In *David Copperfield*, David says of his aunt:

I never could look at her for a few moments together but I found her looking at me – in an odd thoughtful manner, as if I were an immense way off, instead of being on the other side of the small round table. (Ch. 14)

These similar images neatly demonstrate the transition that occurs in Dickens's experimentation with his similitude style within these three novels. In *Dombey and Son*, the description of Mr Bunsby belongs to Dickens's facetious narrator-persona's voice: the elaborate wordiness of 'extremest' and 'ocular knowledge' draws attention to the comparison. Later, Bunsby's 'eye continued to be addressed to somewhere about the half-way house between London and Gravesend' while he 'two or three times put out his rough right arm, as seeking to wind it for inspiration round the fair form of Miss Nipper' (Ch. 23). The consistent imagery shows how Dickensian mind-style externalises Bunsby's mental attitude. He seems absent, and indeed it takes him a while to express his thoughts and come to obscure conclusions. Even though he seems bodily present to Susan Nipper's attractions, each part of him seems detached and discontinuous, representing his incoherent thoughts. Dickens disconnects Bunsby's sight, his rough right arm, and even his voice, which speaks 'of its own accord, and quite independent of himself, as if he were possessed by a gruff spirit': "'Whereby,'" proceeded the voice, "why not? If so, what odds? Can any man say otherwise? No. Awast then!" (Ch. 23). The hearers are understandably confused by this utterance. Meanwhile, the first-person narrator's use of a similar image in *David Copperfield* principally shows his own manner of observing appearances, even if it also indicates the aunt's frame of mind. He

describes her in reference to himself, showing that the description is his personal impression. The specificity of the ‘small round table’ also indicates that it is David-then’s impressions being portrayed. The narrative has moved to the level of reflecting on the impressions formed by David’s imagination. Finally, in *Bleak House*, Esther credits the image to someone else – to Richard, and then Caddy – and in this way Dickens puts a deliberate distance between her mind-style and that of the Dickensian narrator-persona.

One striking instance of Esther’s self-conscious deflection is when she goes to see Mr Guppy with her altered looks to convince him not to renew his proposal of marriage. Entering the parlour after Mrs Guppy, she observes ‘there was a portrait of her son in it, which, I had almost written here, was more like than life: it insisted upon him with such obstinacy, and was so determined not to let him off’ (Ch. 38). The awkward phrase ‘I had almost written here’ makes no sense, since she *has* ‘written here.’ The phrase is meant to draw attention to the humorous image of Guppy’s obstinate portrait. It also has the effect of emphasising Esther’s uncomfortably self-deprecating mind-style in her hesitation to commit to the imaginative illustration. Apologetic or self-scrutinising insertions put some kind of distance between Esther’s and Dickens’s similitic styles. Looking at Krook’s rag-and-bottle shop, Esther finds ‘that the shop had, in several little particulars, the air of being in a legal neighbourhood, and of being, as it were, a dirty hanger-on and disowned relation of the law’ (Ch. 5). The image is an echo of Miss Tox’s ‘dark little house’ in *Dombey and Son*, which ‘stood in the shade like a poor relation of the great street round the corner, coldly looked down upon by mighty mansions’ (Ch. 7). Dickens’s animating similitic language often personifies houses, as discussed before. In Esther’s narrative the phrase *as it were* subtly distances her from that personifying energy. The Dickensian narrator will also use such semi-apologetic

insertions, and Esther's words seem equivalent to David's 'if I may so express it.'

However, Dickens uses such minor suspensions in Esther's narrative to add to her self-conscious mind-style – already seen in the quotation used at the beginning of this chapter where she apologises that 'these pages contain a great deal about me' (Ch. 9).

It is worthwhile recalling here that simile is a more self-conscious form of figurativeness than metaphor, as discussed in the Introduction. The explicit linguistic cues (*like, as, seems, etc.*) in a similitic comparison emphasise that it *is* a comparison. Semino and Swindlehurst explain that the 'explicit comparisons' of similitic language 'highlight some form of similarity between domains perceived as clearly distinct.'<sup>33</sup> The real and the imaginative frames of reference are deliberately distinguished through the use of an explicit linguistic cue. For this reason, Semino and Swindlehurst consider that a preference for similitic over metaphorical language reveals more effectively an individual mind-style's perception of the fictional world. Since direct figurative comparisons keep intact the reality being targeted in the text, similitic flights of fancy can be more readily interpreted as belonging to a character's personal impressions as they navigate the 'real' fictional world. Thus, it is telling that Esther's narrative uses almost exclusively similitic figurative language, which is appropriate considering her self-conscious narratorial style.

In the third-person narrative, meanwhile, fanciful descriptions distort reality unchecked by this kind of self-reflective hesitation. Even when Esther admits to her own personifying fancies – as when she is seeking her mother at the end of the novel and recollects confusedly 'that the stained house fronts put on human shapes and looked at me [...] and that the unreal things were more substantial than the real' (Ch. 59) – she

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

nevertheless emphasises that these are fancies and that there is a reality that she is distorting. By contrast, in the third-person narrative, the house fronts do not ‘put on’ human shapes – they are simply given human shapes: ‘Impassive, as behoves its high breeding, the Dedlock town-house stares at the other houses in the street of dismal grandeur, and gives no outward sign of anything going wrong within’ (Ch. 56). The house is considered as one more character in the narrative. The language used to describe the house – and many other objects and people in the third-person narrative – takes for granted that the target reality is in fact already fantastically transformed. In the initial description of the Dedlocks’ ‘dull street,’ for example, simile language elaborates rather than creates the personification of the houses:

It is a dull street, under the best conditions; where the two long rows of houses stare at each other with that severity, that half a dozen of its greatest mansions seem to have been slowly stared into stone, rather than originally built in that material. It is a street of such dismal grandeur, so determined not to condescend to liveliness, that the doors and windows hold a gloomy state of their own in black paint and dust, and the echoing mews behind have a dry and massive appearance, as if they were reserved to stable the stone chargers of noble statues. (Ch. 48)

The similes do not create the personification of the house, as they do in the description in *Barnaby Rudge* of the Maypole Inn, [discussed in Chapter Three](#). Rather, they elaborate the existing personification. The houses are already staring – and so intently that they ‘seem to have been slowly stared into stone, rather than originally built in that material.’ The similes playfully hint at the ‘reality’ behind the fanciful description. The dry *appearance* of the mews is *as if* the horses inside belong to statues rather than human beings. The animation of objects and the objectification of human characters is often achieved independently of simile in the third-person narrative, making ‘unreal things more substantial than the real’; yet there is still an abundance of simile that continues to play with those ‘unreal things.’ The third-person narrative uses simile much

more than Esther's narrative. In fact, it uses simile more frequently than several of Dickens's earlier third-person narratives with a frequency of 23.27 per 10 000 words.<sup>34</sup> Esther Summerson's narrative contains far less figurative description than the third-person narrative, with a frequency of 13.86 similitic cues per 10 000 words.<sup>35</sup> The greater frequency of figurative comparison in the third-person narrative appears to compensate for the limited imaginative scope of Esther's narrative.

The abundant figurative language gives an overall impression of a fantastical world – even more fantastical than in some of Dickens's earlier works. One reason for a greater sense of the fantastical in *Bleak House* is that the third-person narrative defies the way that simile normally distinguishes clearly between the target and source domains. Domains are not kept distinct but rather disrupted, and the comparisons play with fields of reference, constituting a different kind of world. In the first few paragraphs of *Bleak House*, Dickens manages to make the familiar mud and fog of London an unfamiliar space. Besides the famous image of 'a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn-hill' out of the primordial mud, there is also the personification of ordinary realities like flakes of soot that are really snow-flakes 'gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun,' or gaslight as it glimmers through the fog: 'Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time – as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look' (Ch. 1). The target and source domains are distorted in terms of what is the targeted reality and what is the source of comparison. The Megalosaurus waddles *like an elephantine lizard* – but the Megalosaurus as the target domain does not exist in the first place: *it would not*

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. [Figure 1](#).

<sup>35</sup> The different frequencies of 23.27 and 13.86 are the result of separating the chapters with the third-person narrative from the chapters with Esther's narrative. In [Figure 1](#) the frequency of similitic cues in *Bleak House* is listed as 18.19 because the two narratives are calculated together.

*be wonderful to meet* one, but of course it is only imaginary. The source domain is itself mixed, since the lizard is *elephantine*, which is another similitude comparison. The target reality of flakes of soot are *as big as full-grown snow-flakes*, but the snowflakes, as the source domain, are then personified as *gone into mourning*, making the original blackness of the soot the source of comparison, conflating target and source. The *seems* in the description of the gaslight would appear to keep the reality and the imaginative personification separate: the gaslight ‘seems to know.’ The next clause – ‘for it has a haggard and unwilling look’ – shows that the target reality is already personified.

This distortion of the fictional reality continues throughout the third-person narrative. Even when similitude cues are used (*like, as, as if, etc.*), the domains are not kept distinct, which Semino and Swindlehurst consider essential to a mind-style that uses simile, [as mentioned above](#). In the case of Dickensian mind-style achieved through external description, target and source domains are blurred. When we meet Mr Tulkinghorn, we are told, ‘One peculiarity of his black clothes, and of his black stockings, be they silk or worsted, is, that they never shine. Mute, close, irresponsive to any glancing light, his dress is like himself’ (Ch. 2). One peculiarity of Dickens’s structure here is the confusion between which nominal – Tulkinghorn’s dress or himself – is being given the attributes of *mute, close, and irresponsive*. Grammatically, the attributes would modify *his dress*, personifying his clothes to characterise his attitude. Aesthetically, there is a resolution of the triple adjectival structure in the final word *himself*: the rhythm unites the description of the clothes directly with Mr Tulkinghorn himself, externalising a key tenet of the lawyer’s mind-style. He is guarded in thoughts and speech; he has confidence in no one.

As with Mr Dombey, the consistency of the figurative description of Mr Tulkinghorn gives us access to his individual mind-style, but the target and source

domains are not as clearly kept separate. Near the beginning of the novel, Mr Tulkinghorn is identified with the crow that Mr Snagsby has seen flying to Lincoln's Inn Fields (where the lawyer lives): 'Mr Tulkinghorn goes, as the crow came – not quite so straight, but nearly – to Cook's Court, Cursitor Street,' where Mr Snagsby lives (Ch. 10). The narrator repeats an idiomatic phrase that has been used earlier – 'we may pass from the one scene to the other, as the crow flies' (Ch. 2). There is a subtle hint here of the Dickensian narrator playing with idiomatic expressions. However, rather than digressing as the narrator does in *A Christmas Carol* with the expression *dead as a door-nail*, the *Bleak House* narrator incorporates the idiom into the narrative, making the crow a real crow and then juxtaposing the bird neatly with the movements of Mr Tulkinghorn. As Mr Tulkinghorn steps into Snagsby's shop, we read 'Mr Snagsby was about to descend into the subterranean regions to take tea, when he looked out of his door just now, and saw the crow who was out late.' Within the present-tense narrative the past-tense of *looked* and *saw* refers to a time before the present moment, but 'the crow who was out late' also points to the speaker of the next line: 'Master at home?' asks Mr Tulkinghorn (Ch. 10). The spatial and linguistic association of the crow and the lawyer is a way of implicitly characterising Tulkinghorn's mind-style. The straight path of the crow's flight is like his determination to uncover Lady Dedlock's secret. Mr Tulkinghorn is also like a crow in his scavenging after the law-writer's remains. That he happens upon the 'carrion' of Nemo's corpse at the end of the chapter only solidifies the image.

This implicit characterisation of the lawyer is then made explicit when the third-person narrative describes Tulkinghorn on one of his visits to Chesney Wold: 'any fine morning when he is down here, his black figure may be seen walking [on the leads] before breakfast like a larger species of rook' (Ch. 12). The modification of 'a larger



species' seems to indicate only the outward appearance of Mr Tulkinghorn as he walks on the leads. Nevertheless, the foreboding imagery is consistent with the crow from before. The explicit similitude description is in fact a continuation of the earlier implicit comparison. Mr Tulkinghorn is still on the look-out for carrion. Dickens, moreover, was conscious of this portrayal of Mr Tulkinghorn as a bird, writing in his notes for Ch. 42, 'Tulkinghorn coming back at dusk – London bird'<sup>36</sup> Mr Tulkinghorn is described in his natural habitat of Lincoln's Inn Fields as being 'Like a dingy London bird among the birds at roost in these pleasant fields' who is 'so long used to make his cramped nest in holes and corners of human nature that he has forgotten its broader and better range' (Ch. 42). The characterisation of Tulkinghorn's scavenging mind-style moves in this way from an implicit association with a crow, to an explicit similitude comparison to a rook, and finally a similitude *like* morphs into an identification of Tulkinghorn with a 'dingy London bird.' There is a sense that the characterisation of Tulkinghorn has come full circle, since the narrative has already associated the lawyer with the crow from the beginning.

There is thus a difference between the use of similitude language in the third-person narrative of *Bleak House* and that of earlier novels, where simile creates or emphasises a deliberately, even self-consciously, fanciful image. In *Dombey and Son*, for example, the description of the Dombey house at first seems the same as that of the Dedlock house: the walls of Mr Dombey's house 'looked down upon [Florence] with a vacant stare, as if they had a Gorgon-like mind to stare her youth and beauty into stone.' Even though the Dombey house is already personified with the vacant stare, the fancy, like Esther's fancy, is emphasised in the next line ([quoted above](#)): 'No magic dwelling-place in magic

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<sup>36</sup> Stone, *Dickens' Working Notes*, p. 231.

story, shut up in the heart of a thick wood, was ever more solitary and deserted to the fancy, than was her father's mansion in its grim reality, as it stood lowering on the street.' Paradoxically, the emphasis on the fanciful elements of the description in *Dombey and Son* makes the 'grim reality' of the Dombey house less real than the personified Dedlock house in *Bleak House*. Thus, the similitude descriptions in the third-person narrative of *Bleak House* are not the observations of an author demonstrating or reflecting on his similitude style but rather observations of a world that is simply *like this*. The unchangeable quality of the present tense in the third-person narrative adds to this effect. Although the narrator is still the one characterising the mind-styles of the individual characters, the use of the present-tense adds an extra layer of dissociation by seemingly portraying the purely external perspective of an immediate observer. The use of characterising figurative language is thus more subtle than it is in *Dombey and Son*, even though the nuanced comparisons also reveal the mind-style of Mr Tulkinghorn as effectively as the comparisons in *Dombey and Son* show Mr Dombey's inflexible mental attitude. The general absence of self-conscious structuring of the similitude language in the third-person narrative of *Bleak House* also inserts the figurativeness more seamlessly into the narrative. The voice of the third-person narrator is deliberately more detached and less personal or familiar than the assertive authorial voice from earlier novels.

Because of its more impersonal tone, the third-person narrative contrasts sharply with Esther's self-conscious use of simile. The two narrative styles in *Bleak House* can be compared through the figurative depiction of the lawyer Mr Vholes. Several characters appear in both first-person and third-person narratives, yet Vholes is the only character who is described with Dickensian simile by both third-person and first-person narrator. Vholes only appears in one chapter of the third-person narrative in a scene between Vholes and Richard: 'Mr Vholes, and his young client, and several blue bags

hastily stuffed [...] as the larger sort of serpents are in their first gorged state, have returned to the official den.' The legal bags are not the only serpents present, for Mr Vholes is 'always looking at the client, as if he were making a lingering meal of him with his eyes as well as with his professional appetite' (Ch. 39). Vholes is associated with the serpentine legal bags and their den rather than being directly compared to a snake. Nevertheless, the present-tense narrative gives these associations a permanent quality. The unchanging quality of this description confirms Esther's first-person impressions of Mr Vholes, which are given in her characteristically hesitant fashion. She observes what she at first calls a 'slow fixed way he had of looking at Richard' as the only remarkable thing about him. She amends this in the next line, after she has heard him speak: 'and now I observed that he was further remarkable for an inward manner of speaking.' As she watches them ride away together, she comments with a sense of foreboding:

I never shall forget those two seated side by side in the lantern's light, Richard all flush and fire and laughter, with the reins in his hand; Mr. Vholes quite still, black-gloved, and buttoned up, looking at him as if he were looking at his prey and charming it. (Ch. 37)

The same snake-like quality is described, but it has come after reflecting on her first impressions. It is also influenced by her fears for Richard. Like some of David's reflections in *David Copperfield*, the similitic language is transmitted as a personal memory.

Meanwhile, Esther's final description of Vholes at the end of the novel is similar to the third-person narrative's:

As he gave me that slowly devouring look of his, while twisting up the strings of his bag [...] he gave one gasp as if he had swallowed the last morsel of his client, and his black buttoned-up unwholesome figure glided away to the low door at the end of the hall. (Ch. 65)

Taking his 'gorged' bag with him, Mr Vholes 'glides' away like a snake. This more obviously Dickensian description betrays the fact that both first-person and third-person narrators are created by one implied author. The figurative description constitutes Vholes's mind-style without a specific reference to Esther's own feelings. However, Vholes is the only character whose description blends the narrative voices. In this way, his role as a lawyer who obviously preys on his clients, unites the two narratives both thematically and narratively.

Throughout the novel, Dickens differentiates two distinct narratorial styles through the use of similitic language. Esther's mind style is achieved by exaggerating the self-conscious similitic structures of Dickens's earlier narrator-personas. The third-person narrative style is also distinct from Dickens's usual narrator-persona in the way it exaggerates or distorts the transformative use of simile. If Esther is concerned that she cannot be kept out of her own narrative, Dickens himself resists his own Dickensian narrator-persona's style in *Bleak House*. In this sense, *Bleak House* is the third novel in a transitional trilogy that reconstitutes Dickens's use of simile as an effective narrative technique rather than as an idiosyncratic characteristic of his own authorial voice.

#### v. Conclusion: Modulations of the One Voice

Stephen Marcus considers *Dombey and Son* the transition to 'mature Dickens' precisely because there 'is in the main but one voice. This voice modulates, develops and shows considerable variation, but in general it speaks to us in one character.'<sup>37</sup> It is true that there is predominantly one 'voice of Dickens' in *Dombey and Son*, by which the reader

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<sup>37</sup> Marcus, p. 293.

hears the performative quality of Dickensian simile that makes the narrative, as Philip Horne has said, ‘a theatrical self-presentation that suggests the narrator is consciously created as a persona.’<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it can already be seen that a more consistent use of similitic characterisation begins to create individual mind-styles in the narrative. In *David Copperfield*, there is a further shift towards the creation of a character-narrator’s mind-style. Even though there is an evident identification of David with Dickens, the move to a character-narrator allows Dickens to use the narrative to reflect on his own similitic style rather than use it as a vehicle for a kind of ‘theatrical self-presentation.’ It is in *Bleak House* that Dickens deliberately removes that self-presentation from the narrative by creating two narrators that are distinct from Dickens’s own narrator-persona. Fowler comments that ‘Many novelists maintain a point of view consistently either internal or external, because shifting from one mode to the other draws attention to the artifice of the processes involved and so to the technique of the writer.’<sup>39</sup> In *Bleak House*, if the shifting viewpoints draw attention to specific narrative techniques like the use of tense, in another sense, they draw attention away from Dickens as implied author. Dickensian mind-style is thereby more subtly inserted into the narrative.

Dickens’s narratorial style could be said to have a ‘gravitational pull’ on his characters, inasmuch as Dickensian simile shapes them in bizarre and unusual ways. However, as Dickens begins to employ similitic characterisation deliberately and consistently, he begins to create individual mind-styles, whether for character-narrators or for characters described by a more impersonal third-person narrator. Mind-style, as originally conceived by Roger Fowler, is evident in the way that Dickens’s character-narrators use similitic language. Meanwhile, the unusual interpretation of mind-style that

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<sup>38</sup> Horne, p. 162.

<sup>39</sup> Fowler, p. 90.

I have called 'Dickensian mind-style' is not necessarily connected to a character's point of view. Dickensian mind-style uses figurative description to externalise interiority and viewpoint, especially if imagery is employed consistently to show a fixed frame of mind. While Dickens's characters are not given the same kind of psychological realism as characters like Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, the external depictions of his characters do not leave them like 'frogs whose brains have been taken out for physiological purposes' [as Lewes declared](#). The repetition of imagery that Lewes would object to as 'uniform and calculable' reinforces a specific frame of mind – of greater or lesser complexity, but still an individual mind. The more extraordinary or transformative the consistent imagery is, the more individuality that mind has; for, as seen above with Florence and Edith, commonplace or stock similes lead to generic behaviour or motivation. This chapter has broadened the interpretation of narrative mind-style to show that Dickens's 'external characters' do indeed have interiority, if of a Dickensian frame of mind.

## Chapter Six: The ‘Grimly Ludicrous’ in Dickens’s Late Similic Style (1854-61)

### *i.* ‘Dark Dickens’ and Incongruous Simile

The transition from an overarching narrator-persona’s voice to emerging individual mind-styles in *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, and *Bleak House* discussed in the previous chapter sets the stage for the further development of Dickens’s characterisation in his later work. Chapters Six and Seven of this thesis are two shorter chapters that will consider different aspects of this development. Chapter Seven will compare Dickens’s last two novels to show that *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) employs typical Dickensian mind-style to reveal a character’s interiority, while *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) uses Dickensian simile atypically to obscure a character’s interiority. This chapter, meanwhile, will focus on the use of similic characterisation for humorous effect in *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and *Great Expectations* (1860-1). It will consider how Dickens’s absurd or grotesque imagery in the later writings is integrated into an overarching narrative, in contrast to the more spontaneous flashes of amusing simile found in his earlier works. The first section will look at the nature of Dickens’s similic humour, arguing that incongruity is at the heart of how this humour is achieved. The subsequent sections will look more in depth at the novels from 1854 to 1861. The ‘expectations’ created by the exploration of serious themes in these novels are sometimes undermined by humorous similic characterisation; indeed, it is precisely the incongruity of these instances that creates a horrible kind of comedy. As Pip says in *Great Expectations*, responding to the incongruity of his long-

awaited benefactor being revealed as the convict he never wanted to see again, ‘Some sense of the grimly ludicrous moved me to a fretful laugh’ (Bk 3, Ch. 1).

In *The Violent Effigy*, John Carey examines the power of Dickens’s imaginative humour from various angles, claiming that Dickens’s humour is ‘so interfused with his creative process that when it fails his imagination seldom survives it for more than a few sentences.’<sup>1</sup> This is a bold statement, but Carey somewhat qualifies the sweeping nature of his claim when he argues that it is in Dickens’s ‘melodramatic’ mode, that his ‘sense of humour, his greatest gift as a novelist, simply switches off.’<sup>2</sup> When Dickens tries to cater to the expectations of the period in terms of the sentimental or melodramatic, as discussed in Chapter Two, his similitic language in particular appears forced or generic. Carey poses this question about *Dombey and Son*: ‘Why, when it comes to Edith [Dombey], does Dickens’ sense of humour let him down?’ Carey’s answer is that Edith is altogether too melodramatic.<sup>3</sup> It was noted in the previous chapter that the similes used to describe Edith are of a generic or ‘stock’ nature. She sits ‘like a statue’ (Ch. 35), or she crouches ‘like some lower animal’ (Ch. 47). In these instances, Dickens’s similes draw on predictable imagery. At least in terms of similitic description, Carey’s statement about the limitations of Dickens’s melodramatic language could be applied to his early fiction.<sup>4</sup> In his earlier writings, as discussed in Chapter Two, Dickens adapted his similitic language to the ‘tragic and comic scenes’ in his writing. His humorous similes are almost always limited to the comic scenes. However, subsequent chapters in this thesis have shown that as his career advanced, there is not such an obvious delineation of the comical or the melodramatic. The very first scene in *Dombey and Son*, for example, of

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<sup>1</sup> Carey, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 175, 60.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Early fiction’ or ‘earlier writings’ refers to the works covered in the first three chapters, written 1833-1844.



Mrs Dombey's sad death in Florence's arms, is surrounded by amusing similitude descriptions: little Paul's 'constitution' is 'analogous to that of a muffin' and the watches of Mr Dombey and the doctor compete in a grotesque race to the finish as Mrs Dombey fades (Ch. 1). The combining of 'tragic and comic' in the same scene becomes a key to Dickens's brand of incongruous humour in the late novels.

The comedic aspect of Dickens's earlier similitude descriptions appears to remain intact to some extent in his later works, undermining truisms concerning a 'darker Dickens' in the later novels. The description of the cricket player in *The Pickwick Papers* 'whose body and legs looked like half a gigantic roll of flannel, elevated on a couple of inflated pillow-cases' (Ch. 7) does not seem very different in effect from the description of Mrs Sparsit in *Hard Times* after she has spied on Louisa Gradgrind's rendezvous with James Harthouse. Mrs Sparsit struggles through the rain in pursuit of Louisa Gradgrind 'with a bonnet like an over-ripe fig [...]; with a stagnant verdure on her general exterior, such as accumulates on an old park fence in a mouldy lane' (Bk 2, Ch. 11). Both descriptions seem to focus only on the external appearance and comically to exaggerate some aspect of the same. However, as the previous chapter has discussed, Dickens's similes consistently externalise a character's interiority in his later writings. While the over-ripe fig is obviously a description of the external state of Mrs Sparsit's bonnet, the stagnant mould is not only to be found on her exterior: her antiquated ways stifle within her any fresh mode of thought and prevent her from seeing that there is any other outcome to the story than Louisa's moral downfall. Whereas the cricket player's role is that of an 'extra' in an explicitly 'comic' episode in *The Pickwick Papers*, Mrs Sparsit is not confined to 'the comic scenes': her influence is crucial to the novel's plot. Mrs Sparsit's ridiculous appearance here and elsewhere in the novel is contrasted with the tragic figure cut by Louisa in the events between Louisa, Mr Bounderby, and

Harthouse; Mrs Sparsit's comical pursuit of Louisa is juxtaposed with the scene of Louisa's would-be elopement and degradation and her subsequent escape to her father's house. The absurdity of Mrs Sparsit's description thus serves a larger narrative purpose than the early comic caricatures in Dickens. As will be explored later, the comedy of Mrs Sparsit is contrasted with the predicament of Louisa as a character who is "not allowed" to be comic, in a manner of speaking – just as she is "not allowed" to be fanciful.

Comedic similitude description in later Dickens becomes purposefully incongruous. In *Dickensian Laughter*, Malcolm Andrews says that incongruity is in fact essential to Dickens's humour throughout his career. He does not analyse Dickens's similitude language, but he remarks on it when he notes that Dickens's 'magnificent conceits' which are 'shock analogies between utterly disparate things' are 'a species of bisociation' and belong 'at the core of his humour.'<sup>5</sup> Andrews compares Dickens's incongruous humour to Arthur Koestler's 'bisociation' of ideas, linking the concept to the letter of Dickens to Bulwer-Lytton ([quoted in Chapter Four](#)): 'I think it is my infirmity to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally.'<sup>6</sup> Koestler's explanation of bisociation could be compared to Dickens's 'infirmity': 'It compels us to perceive the situation in two self-consistent but incompatible frames of reference at the same time.'<sup>7</sup> The concept of bisociation or incongruous association in humour helps us to understand how Dickens's similes can blend very different conceptual domains. Andrews says, without expanding on the idea, that 'the perception of relations between apparently unlike things is the key to Dickens's extravagant

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<sup>5</sup> Andrews, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 11, 'To Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton,' ?28 November 1865.

<sup>7</sup> Qtd. in Andrews, p. 79.

*metaphorical* practices.’<sup>8</sup> This chapter qualifies that statement by arguing that incongruity is the key to Dickens’s extravagant *similic* practices. Simile demands an explicit linguistic marker, and prolific use of *similic* language purposefully draws attention to that *perception* of the relation between unlike things – to the art of bringing disparate frames together.

The ‘incongruity theory’ of humour states simply that something is funny *because* it incongruous – because something happens or someone says or does something that does not match one’s expectations. John Morreall investigates how human beings are the only animals that ‘*enjoy* the incongruity and the mental jolt it involves.’ When the unexpected occurs, when a familiar association is disrupted, we experience humour in response to the shock to our rational expectations.<sup>9</sup> In *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Rod A. Martin and Thomas E. Ford affirm that ‘most contemporary investigators would agree that the perception of “incongruity” is at the heart of the humor experience [...]. That is, humor involves an idea, image, text, or event that is in some sense incongruous, odd, unusual, unexpected, surprising, or out-of-the-ordinary.’ Martin and Ford explain, ‘in the humorous mode of thinking, contrary to the rational logic of normal, serious thought, a thing can be both X and not-X at the same time.’<sup>10</sup> Bringing things together that do not belong in the same domain and seem very unlike each other can thus provoke hilarity. This incongruous type of association has always been an aspect of Dickensian simile, as seen throughout this thesis, from the description of the waterman in *The Pickwick Papers* – ‘who, with a brass label and number around his neck, looked as if he were catalogued in some

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<sup>8</sup> Andrews, p. 77 (emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> John Morreall, ‘Enjoying Incongruity’, 2.1 (1989), 1–18 (p. 9, 4) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.1989.2.1.1>>.

<sup>10</sup> Rod A. Martin and Thomas E. Ford, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Elsevier Inc., 2018), p. 4, ScienceDirect <<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-812143-6.00012-6>>.

collection of rarities' (Ch. 2) – to the description of the sinister land-agent Mr Scadder in *Martin Chuzzlewit* – 'every time he spoke something was seen to twitch and jerk up in his throat, like the little hammers in a harpsichord when the notes are struck' (Ch. 21).

A bizarre or unexpected comparison seems appropriate in an obviously comical passage. In the cases of the waterman in *The Pickwick Papers* and Mr Scadder in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the light-hearted setting prepares the reader to expect the unexpected comparisons, for Dickens is writing in his humorous vein. In *The Pickwick Papers*, the chapter begins with the mock-grandiose description of Pickwick bursting 'like another sun from his slumbers' (Ch. 2); in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Martin Chuzzlewit and Mark Tapley have already encountered several outrageous characters in their American quarters before meeting Mr Scadder (Ch. 21). However, in a passage where the reader might expect serious or sentimental commentary, Dickensian simile strikes an additionally incongruous note. As mentioned [in Chapter Four](#), Dickens himself was aware of his capacity to find something unexpectedly droll in serious situations, calling this tendency a 'ghastly facetiousness.'<sup>11</sup> In a letter to his American friend C. C. Felton,<sup>12</sup> he recounts taking the artist George Cruikshank to the funeral of another friend, the bookseller William Hone. He describes the scene as one 'of mingled comicality and seriousness':

George has enormous whiskers which straggle all down his throat in such weather, and stick out in front of him, like a partially unravelled bird's-nest; so that he looks queer enough at the best, but when he is very wet, and in a state between jollity (he is always very jolly with me) and the deepest gravity (going to a funeral, you know) it is utterly impossible to resist him.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 1, 'To W. C. Macready, 7 Apr 1839'.

<sup>12</sup> [See footnote above.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 3, 'To C. C. Felton,' 2 March 1843.

The amusing simile is incongruous in itself – Cruikshank’s beard is compared not simply to a bird’s nest but to a *partially unravelled* bird’s nest – as well as incongruous in its funereal context. Dickens cannot resist the comicality of his friend’s appearance and behaviour even as he is genuinely distressed by the grief of the mourning family members at the funeral.

Almost 20 years later, Dickens describes another funeral scene of ‘mingled comicality and seriousness’ in *Great Expectations*. The similitic language throughout the scene of Pip’s sister’s funeral underlines the ‘ghastly facetiousness’ of finding something amusing in a sombre setting. The chapter begins seriously enough, with Pip’s melancholy reflection on death as he goes home for his sister’s funeral. He remembers how she would beat him when he was small, but the memory is softened because of her departure, and he thinks as he walks: ‘the very breath of the beans and clover whispered to my heart that the day must come when it would be well for my memory that others walking in the sunshine should be softened as they thought of me’ (Bk 2, Ch. 16). The tone then immediately shifts from serious to comedic in the next passage. As Mr Trabb (of Trabb and Co.) arranges the funeral procession in the parlour ‘two and two,’ Pip says, ‘it was dreadfully like a preparation for some grim kind of dance.’ Dickens subtly robs the adverb *dreadfully* of any connotations of horror when the mourners are then instructed to put pocket-handkerchiefs to their faces, ‘as if our noses were bleeding.’ Finally, he describes the procession:

[...] it being a point of Undertaking ceremony that the six bearers must be stifled and blinded under a horrible black velvet housing with a white border, the whole looked like a blind monster with twelve human legs, shuffling and blundering along, under the guidance of two keepers, – the postboy and his comrade. (Bk 2, Ch. 16)

A funeral procession becomes a dance, the gesture of drying tears becomes that of stanching a bloody nose, and the coffin with its bearers becomes some fantastic beast.

The incongruity of these comparisons is doubly bizarre because the chapter has begun on such a sad note.

Andrews notes that humour and incongruity have been linked for centuries.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, by Dickens's time, humour had been explicitly associated with the incongruous. In his 1819 essay 'On Wit and Humour,' William Hazlitt defines humour as 'an imitation of the natural or acquired absurdities of mankind, or of the ludicrous in accident, situation, and character.' He distinguishes it from wit, which is the 'heightening the sense of that absurdity by some sudden and unexpected likeness or opposition of one thing to another.' Nevertheless, both humour and wit fall under a larger category which Hazlitt calls 'the laughable': 'The essence of the laughable [...] is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another.' While humour shows the laughable in itself, wit exposes and heightens the laughable through 'art and fancy.'<sup>15</sup> Although 19<sup>th</sup>-century readers might have distinguished Dickens's satirical wit from a more light-hearted humour, both would have been considered laughable by Hazlitt's definition. Edwin P. Whipple's 1867 review of Dickens's works states that his 'superabundant humour' is 'odd, droll, unexpected, and incalculable in itself,'<sup>16</sup> which indicates that Dickens's contemporaries noted the laughable – the unexpected or incongruous – quality of his humour. For the sake of simplicity, this chapter will not make the above categorical distinctions. When discussing Dickens's 'humour' this is understood to be basically identifiable with his 'wit' (or satire) and with what is 'laughable' (or incongruous). With regards to his use of

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<sup>14</sup> Andrews, pp. 78-9.

<sup>15</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On Wit and Humour', in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1963), pp. 15, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Edwin P. Whipple, 'The Genius of Dickens', *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1867), xix, pp. 546-54, qtd. in Collins, *The Critical Heritage*, p. 483.

similes, the incongruous effect of their humour can be seen both in the similitic associations themselves and in their use in an otherwise non-humorous setting.

The novelist George Gissing was one of those who saw Dickens's humour mainly as a satirical tool to unmask corruption and other evils. In an essay on Dickens's 'Humour and Pathos,' Gissing argued that Dickens uses humour to make an unpleasant reality memorable.<sup>17</sup> In his essay on 'Satiric Portraiture,' he argued that Dickens's humour is 'the great preservative' that keeps the satire from losing interest when the historical realities are no longer present. He explained that even if the Yorkshire schools of *Nicholas Nickleby* are no longer an issue, yet because the Squeers and Dotheboys satire is an 'inextricable blending of horror and jocosity,' that particular social ill will be forever remembered.<sup>18</sup> It is this mention of the 'blending of horror and jocosity' that gives a clue to the kind of humour that becomes prevalent in Dickens's later use of similitic language. In Dickens's earliest writings, on the other hand – as discussed in Chapter Two with the 'streaky bacon' analogy in *Oliver Twist* – his use of similitic language is noticeably distinct between 'the tragic and the comic scenes.' This is evident in *Nicholas Nickleby* as well: even if the grim humour of the Squeers family hints at the tragi-comic integration of similitic humour as 'comic relief' in a miserable setting, it is one of the rare instances in the early novels of the kind of blending that is found in the later novels. Indeed, some contemporary responses to Dickens's earlier work saw his separation of comedy and tragedy as a clearcut dichotomy. In *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), R. H. Horne affirmed:

It is one of Mr. Dickens' greatest merits, that notwithstanding his excessive love of the humorous, he never admits any pleasantries into a tragic scene,

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<sup>17</sup> George Gissing, *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens: Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, ed. by Simon J. James, 3 vols (Grayswood, Surrey: Grayswood Press, 2004), II, p. 138.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 97.

nor suffers levity to run mischievously across the current of any deep emotion in a way to injure its just appreciation.<sup>19</sup>

This analysis was based on the novels written before 1844; Dickens's more 'grimly ludicrous' humour was to become evident in the novels written after this point, where, as Gissing said, Dickens's descriptions would be 'provocative of laughter, when in very truth we should sob.'<sup>20</sup>

Humour in Dickens has not been given extensive critical attention. Turn-of-the-century Dickens criticism – dominated by the essays of G. K. Chesterton and George Gissing – emphasised the 'graver' side of Dickens's later novels. Chesterton says that *Hard Times* 'strikes an almost unexpected note of severity'; *Little Dorrit* is 'in every way so much more sad [sic] than the rest of his work'; and *A Tale of Two Cities* is unusual in its dignified seriousness. Chesterton argues that with his later novels, Dickens increasingly strikes a 'graver note,' which is struck with the most success in *Great Expectations*.<sup>21</sup> These impressionistic statements seem justified when the novels are analysed in light of their thematic content and the societal ills that Dickens is addressing in each work. Certainly, Dickens himself professed his intentions clearly with respect to *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. He wrote to Thomas Carlyle about his purpose with *Hard Times* to 'shake some people in a terrible mistake of these days'<sup>22</sup> – arguably referring to the utilitarian philosophies satirised in the novel; he repeatedly dwelt on how he used the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* to satirise the bureaucratic parliamentary process<sup>23</sup>; and he acknowledged in his preface to *A Tale of*

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<sup>19</sup> Horne, I, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> Gissing, II, p. 138.

<sup>21</sup> Chesterton, pp. 230, 232, 236.

<sup>22</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 7, 'To Thomas Carlyle,' 13 Jul 1854.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 8, 'To Sir Edwin Landseer,' 10 January 1856: 'there are some of your friends in Place-Regions who will look mightily blue when they see No. 3. Let me whisper that in your ear'; 'To Frank Stone,' 27 January 1856: 'There is a dash in No. 3 at the great system of abuse under which we live, that



*Two Cities* the influence of Carlyle's own social commentary in *The French Revolution*.<sup>24</sup> When he began writing *Great Expectations*, Dickens was aware that the novels preceding it were lacking in humour. He wrote to John Forster, 'You will not have to complain of the want of humour as in *The Tale of Two Cities* [sic]. I have made the opening, I hope, in its general effect exceedingly droll.'<sup>25</sup> However, even this novel was generally considered by turn-of-the-century critics as one of Dickens's more sombre works.

The 'dark Dickens' of the later works was still in fashion in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century criticism. A 1943 essay by Lionel Stevenson argued that *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Little Dorrit* should be called 'the dark novels,' adopting a phrase from Shakespearian criticism, for the 'atmosphere of bitterness and frustration that pervades all three of them.' Stevenson also considered that *A Tale of Two Cities* is Dickens's 'nearest approximation to the dignity of a tragedy.' In these novels, 'Farcical humor is almost totally absent.'<sup>26</sup> J. Hillis Miller's influential 1958 study, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, cemented this view of late Dickens. Hillis Miller says of *Great Expectations* that Pip's childhood explores themes of abandonment, abuse, and remorse: 'His very existence is a matter of reproach and a shameful thing.'<sup>27</sup> These opinions echoed that of the earlier critics. Gissing said of *A Tale of Two Cities*, for example, 'Among other presumed superfluities, humour is dismissed'<sup>28</sup>; and for Gissing, *Great Expectations* was

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will flutter the Doves in the House of Commons Lobby, I flatter myself'; 'To John Forster,' 30 January 1856: 'I have the grim pleasure upon me to-night in thinking that the Circumlocution Office sees the light, and in wondering what effect it will make.'

<sup>24</sup> Cf. David Sorensen, "'The Unseen Heart of the Whole": Carlyle, Dickens, and the Sources of *The French Revolution* in *A Tale of Two Cities*', *Dickens Quarterly*, 30.1 (2013), 5–25 <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/unseen-heart-whole-carlyle-dickens-sources-french/docview/1319492365/se-2>> [accessed 21 July 2021].

<sup>25</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 9, 'To John Forster,' early Oct 1860.

<sup>26</sup> Lionel Stevenson, 'Dickens's Dark Novels, 1851-1857', *The Sewanee Review*, 51.3 (1943), 398–409 (p. 398) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27537430>> [accessed 27 May 2021].

<sup>27</sup> Hillis Miller, p. 251.

<sup>28</sup> Gissing, II, p. 56.

noteworthy for its pathos of a ‘graver and subtler kind.’<sup>29</sup> Perhaps as time put more distance between the critic and Victorian societal issues, Dickens criticism in the 1970s and 80s moved away from broader thematic discussions of the late novels to pay specific attention to Dickens’s bizarre imagination and his humour, linking them through a discussion of his figurative analogies. As noted [in the Introduction](#), John Carey underlined the fact that Dickens frequently uses simile to animate objects and objectify animate beings: ‘His similes remake the world.’<sup>30</sup> The novels in this chapter contain many examples of how Dickens’s similes work transformations of animation (or humanisation) and objectification. The first time Mr Pancks is introduced in *Little Dorrit*, he ‘snorted and sniffed and puffed and blew, like a little laboring [sic] steam-engine’ (Bk 1, Ch. 13). Although Carey calls the characterisation of Pancks a ‘dreary joke,’<sup>31</sup> it is clear that Pancks’s characterisation and similar humorous descriptions in the novel counteract Chesterton’s idea that *Little Dorrit* ‘is in every way so much more sad [sic] than the rest of his work.’

In *The Language of Dickens* (1970), George Leslie Brook comments on Dickens’s humorous use of simile and quotes comparisons from Dickens’s later works that he calls ‘homely and ludicrous.’ From *Little Dorrit*, for example, Tite Barnacle’s house has ‘a little, dark area, like a damp waistcoat pocket’ (Bk 1, Ch. 10). Brook might have extended his quotation from *Little Dorrit* to show how Dickens will often add similitic description to an initial comparison: ‘To the sense of smell, the house was like a sort of bottled filled with a strong distillation of mews; and when the footman opened the door, he seemed to take the stopper out.’ As Arthur Clennam is ushered further

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>30</sup> Carey, pp. 102, 130.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

inside: ‘At the inner hall-door, another bottle seemed to be presented and another stopper taken out. This second vial appeared to be filled with concentrated provisions, and extract of Sink from the pantry’ (Bk 1, Ch. 10). The imaginary bottles are conjured with the similitic phrases *sort of* and *seemed* – and the similes reflect Dickens’s working notes for the novel: ‘House like a bottle of smell. When the footman opens the door, he seems to take the stopper out.’<sup>32</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Dickens’s working notes are certainly not comprehensive when it comes to the countless images and figures that he uses. The specific mention of the bottle and stopper shows how these associations stood out for him. Likewise, when Mr Merdle’s dinner-guests in *Little Dorrit* are compared to houses in an elaborate analogy, Dickens’s working notes read: ‘People like the houses they Inhabit – Suppose a dinner party of houses.’<sup>33</sup> These notes point to Dickens’s habit, discussed in Chapter Four, of mentally cataloguing and recycling idiosyncratic similes. Comparing people to houses or vice versa is a favourite tactic of Dickens, as seen with the Maypole Inn in *Barnaby Rudge* or the Dedlock mansion in *Bleak House*; and he used the same image of a bottle and stopper in an 1869 letter ([quoted in Chapter Four](#)) recounting Dickens’s visit to his friend Chorley.

Meanwhile, despite the evidence of humour in the above similitic comparisons, several essays in David Paroissien’s 2008 *A Companion to Charles Dickens* and in the 2018 *Oxford Handbook of Charles Dickens* show that the idea of ‘dark Dickens’ in the later novels still holds sway in recent scholarship. Anne Humphreys calls *Hard Times* the most tragic of Dickens’s works by virtue of its ending. She comments that an 1854 play adaptation even ‘redeemed’ the novel by reversing its sad conclusions.<sup>34</sup> Francesca

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<sup>32</sup> Stone, *Dickens’ Working Notes*, p. 275.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Humphreys, ‘Hard Times’, in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by David Paroissien (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008), pp. 390–400. (pp. 394, 396)

Orestano's essay on *Little Dorrit* echoes Chesterton and Gissing by commenting on 'the unusually grave tone of the narration, prevailing throughout, despite a few scenes of potential comic effect,' although she also acknowledges the 'mastery of characterisation' in the novel.<sup>35</sup> Paul Davis's essay on *A Tale of Two Cities* focuses on the serious complexity of the novel. Andrew Sanders's essay on *Great Expectations* comments that most criticism on the novel has ignored the emphasis that early reviews and Dickens himself placed on its comic aspect.<sup>36</sup> One early reviewer wrote, 'To those who may not be satisfied with a work of this author's unless humour superabounds most, we can heartily commend *Great Expectations*.'<sup>37</sup> As mentioned above, Dickens wrote to John Forster, of the 'exceedingly droll' opening number.<sup>38</sup> After publishing five more numbers, Dickens was of the same opinion in a letter to Mary Boyle<sup>39</sup>: 'I think it is very droll.'<sup>40</sup> In his essay, Sanders seeks to answer the question, 'just how "droll" is the "grotesque" side of *Great Expectations*?' He essentially agrees with Chesterton that the novel's mature style is distinguished by melancholy undertones, but he also acknowledges that the comedic ambiguity surrounding the social commentary on class demonstrates the 'grotesque tragi-comic conception' of the novel that Dickens had commented on in the above-quoted letter to John Forster.<sup>41</sup> That incongruous blending of the comic with the sad in Dickens's late work cannot be ignored, although critics tend to focus on one or the other. Indeed, Dickens's incongruous humour liberates readers

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<sup>35</sup> Francesca Orestano, 'Little Dorrit', in *The Oxford Handbook of Charles Dickens*, ed. by John Jordan, Robert L. Patten, and Catherine Waters (Oxford Academic, 2018), p. 247  
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198743415.013.17>> [accessed 19 March 2023].

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Sanders, 'Great Expectations', in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by David Paroissien (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008), pp. 422–32 (p. 423).

<sup>37</sup> E. S. Dallas, 'unsigned review,' *The Times* (17 Oct 1861), qtd. in Collins, *The Critical Heritage*, p. 434.

<sup>38</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 9, 'To John Forster,' early Oct 1860.

<sup>39</sup> [See footnote above.](#)

<sup>40</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 9, 'To Miss Mary Boyle,' 28 Dec 1860.

<sup>41</sup> Sanders, pp. 423, 427; Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 9, 'To John Forster,' early Oct 1860.

from the ‘darkness’ of Dickens’s late works. It allows readers to laugh at characters or events that would otherwise not be laughable at all.

ii. Similic Purpose in *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*

Besides providing readers with an escape from ‘dark Dickens,’ similic characterisation also serves the larger purposes of the narrative in Dickens’s later works. This section will consider how, in *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens employs his unexpected similes at the purposefully ‘wrong moment’, precisely to allow an essential understanding of certain characters through incongruous humour. One 1854 unsigned review of *Hard Times* disapproved of Dickens’s inappropriate humour in Mrs Gradgrind’s death-bed scene: ‘The death-bed of an inoffensive weak woman should not have been made ridiculous, especially as it does not in any way assist the plot.’<sup>42</sup> However, the incongruity of the humour in the scene does assist the plot, in that it sheds light on the profound wounds Louisa Gradgrind has suffered from her childhood education.

The death-bed scene in *Hard Times* is not initially set up as ridiculous for the reader, beginning on a serious note as in the funeral scene above from *Great Expectations*. Like Pip, Louisa is returning to her childhood home and recalling a different kind of abuse she has suffered:

Her remembrances of home and childhood were remembrances of the drying up of every spring and fountain in her young heart as it gushed out. The golden waters were not there. They were flowing for the fertilisation of the land where grapes are gathered from thorns, and figs from thistles. (Bk 2, Ch. 9)

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<sup>42</sup> *Westminster Review*, Oct 1854, n.s. vi, pp. 604-8, qtd. in Collins, *The Critical Heritage*, p. 308.

The biblical reference to the Gospel of Luke (6.44) in the passage lends the words a special solemnity: ‘For each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs aren’t gathered from thornbushes, or grapes picked from a bramble bush.’<sup>43</sup> Louisa’s upbringing has thwarted any innate fruitfulness of her imagination by insisting on the sole harvest of hard facts. With such melancholy reflections, she goes ‘with a heavy, hardened kind of sorrow upon her, into the house and into her mother’s room’ (Bk 2, Ch. 9). There is then a shift in tone in the passages that follow. The description of Mrs Gradgrind and her dialogue makes her a pathetic and even ludicrous figure:

Her feeble voice sounded so far away in her bundle of shawls, and the sound of another voice addressing her seemed to take such a long time in getting down to her ears, that she might have been lying at the bottom of a well. (Bk 2, Ch. 9)

In the beginning of the novel, Mrs Gradgrind is described as looking ‘(as she always did) like an indifferently executed transparency of a small female figure, without enough light behind it’ (Bk 1, Ch. 4). This initial simile becomes identified with her character (or lack thereof) – she is referred to nominally as ‘the faint transparency’<sup>44</sup> – and when at last she dies, ‘the light that had always been feeble and dim behind the weak transparency, went out’ (Bk 2, Ch. 9). The repetition of the unusual comparison creates an incongruously humorous effect, followed as it is by the solemn phrase: ‘and even Mrs Gradgrind, emerged from the shadow in which man walketh and disquieteth himself in vain, took upon her the dread solemnity of the sages and patriarchs’ (Bk 2, Ch. 9).

The scene is almost a reversal of Mrs Dombey’s death-scene in *Dombey and Son*. There, Mrs Dombey is a figure of pathos in a humorous setting; here Mrs

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<sup>43</sup> Lk 6.44: ‘For each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.’

<sup>44</sup> ‘She gave some feeble signs of returning animation [...] and presently the faint transparency was presented in a sitting attitude’ (Bk 1, Ch. 15).

Gradgrind is a ridiculous figure in a sombre setting. The incongruous humour here contrasts strongly not only with the context but, more importantly, with Louisa's character. She is not allowed to participate in the comic effect. Louisa's thoughts are far removed from the humour of Mrs Gradgrind's characterisation. Dickens hints at Louisa's almost tragic outlook when she asks her mother if she is in pain, and Mrs Gradgrind answers, 'I think there's a pain somewhere in the room [...] but I couldn't positively say that I have got it' (Bk 2, Ch. 9). Although Mrs Gradgrind is characterised from the beginning of the novel as someone 'of surpassing feebleness, mental and bodily [...] who, whenever she showed a symptom of coming to life, was invariably stunned by some weighty piece of fact tumbling on her' (Bk 1, Ch. 4), her answer unwittingly sheds light on Louisa's own deep wounds from childhood. It is Louisa's pain that is 'somewhere in the room' and this is shown by her thoughts throughout the passage. She thinks of her sister's face as 'a better and brighter face than hers had ever been'; she keeps fearfully recalling her mother from 'floating away upon some great water' (Bk 2, Ch. 9). In one sense, Louisa's pain lies in the fact that she cannot herself perceive the humour and remains apart from it.

Neither is Louisa allowed to perceive the comedy of Mrs Sparsit's characterisation, as seen in the first section. Mrs Sparsit is obsessed with Louisa's descent down an allegorical moral staircase. Although Louisa thus figures as the object of Mrs Sparsit's comical pursuit, she is nevertheless set apart from Mrs Sparsit in the manner of her description. Like Edith Dombey, Louisa is described with melodramatic similes. Louisa sits in front of James Harthouse with hands 'like the hands of a statue.' She then escapes the scene while Mrs Sparsit is left stranded and soaked by the rain, 'with a bonnet like an over-ripe fig' etc. (Bk 2, Ch. 12). Louisa thus literally escapes the humour of Dickensian simile. Starved of Fancy, which she seeks in symbolic 'sparks'

from the fire (Bk 1, Ch. 8), Louisa is also starved of a sense of humour. Louisa's humourless, 'fancy-less' outlook seems to support John Carey's [above-quoted claim](#) that if Dickens's humour fails, 'his imagination seldom survives it for more than a few sentences.'<sup>45</sup> However, Dickens has purposefully separated Louisa from those humorous descriptions that appear within a few sentences of proportionately humourless descriptions of her. Dickensian simile is a narrative strategy whereby Dickens blends the tragic and the comic to set up a marked contrast between Louisa and her surroundings. Louisa's potentially tragic end is averted by the end of the novel, but Dickens's incongruous similes in these passages point to a greater tragedy in terms of characterisation. Like Florence and Edith Dombey, Louisa is made impervious to Dickensian mind-style, and this communicates more powerfully than a tragic ending the sense of loss that Louisa has suffered from being denied an imaginative outlet in her childhood.

Stephen Blackpool is also presented as a pathetic figure by contrasting his more serious characterisation with the similitic descriptions of Mr Bounderby. As Stephen walks towards Bounderby's house, to ask for help to obtain a divorce from his wife, he is described as coming 'out of the hot mill into the damp wind and cold wet streets, haggard and worn' (Bk 1, Ch. 11). The same sober depiction of Stephen continues throughout the interview with Bounderby:

In the strength of his misfortune, and the energy of his distress, he fired for the moment like a proud man. In another moment, he stood as he had stood all the time—his usual stoop upon him; his pondering face addressed to Mr Bounderby, with a curious expression on it, half shrewd, half perplexed, as if his mind were set upon unravelling something very difficult; his hat held tight in his left hand, which rested on his hip; his right arm, with a rugged propriety and force of action, very earnestly emphasizing what he said. (Bk 1, Ch. 11)

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<sup>45</sup> Carey, p. 175.



The tone changes, however, whenever Bounderby is the object of the description – beginning with the description of the house that has ‘BOUNDERBY (in letters very like himself) upon a brazen plate, and a round brazen door-handle underneath it, like a brazen full-stop’ (Bk 1, Ch. 11). Stephen will evidently find a dead end in this brazen full-stop, and indeed, Bounderby promptly dismisses his pleas. Stephen ‘left Mr. Bounderby swelling at his own portrait on the wall, as if he were going to explode himself into it’ (Bk 1, Ch. 11). Later in the novel, Stephen is summoned by Bounderby again to be questioned about a possible strike among the factory workers. Although Stephen has not joined the other workers because of a promise he made to Rachael, he staunchly refuses to give information and infuriates Bounderby: Bounderby ‘who was always more or less like a Wind, finding something in his way here, began to blow at it directly.’ Throughout the passage, inserted parentheses reiterate the windy simile: ‘Gusty weather with deceitful calms. One now prevailing’; ‘wind boisterous’; ‘wind springing up very fast,’ and finally, ‘blowing a hurricane’ (Bk 2, Ch. 5). Dickens’s parentheses emphasise apparently superfluous commentary and it is this humorous illustration of Bounderby’s reactions to Stephen that stands out in their interview. The blending of seriousness with satire encourages sympathy with the authenticity of Stephen’s character, for Bounderby himself is impossibly fixed in his ‘windy’ mind-set. The repetition and morphing of similitude description in *Hard Times* works to create a contrast between the ‘comic’ and ‘tragic’ figures in the novel, but especially when it is used to blend both in the same scene.

Nevertheless, some of Dickens’s contemporaries viewed his similitude style as an artistic weakness. Chapter Three has discussed how some critics considered it vulgar in its graphic or homely description. One unsigned review of *A House to Let* (1858) points

unfavourably to its similes<sup>46</sup>: the ‘trick’ of Dickens’s incongruous use of language ‘is simple grotesqueness – the habit of describing the most ordinary and commonplace things in an unexpected manner’; the ‘commonness’ of this style as ‘an easy mode of being amusing’; the unexpectedness of the descriptions ‘is like a highly-flavoured sauce, which will disguise any kind of meat, and it is almost a mechanical trick which any one [sic] might be taught to perform who has the most elementary knowledge of composition.’<sup>47</sup> By this analysis, Dickens’s more unexpected similitic descriptions are a spontaneous ‘mechanical trick’ and not meant to serve a larger purpose in the narrative. A parody of *Hard Times* appearing in *Our Miscellany* (1858) demonstrates that some contemporaries perceived Dickens’s similitic style as ‘highly flavoured sauce.’ It mocks Dickens’s use of simile by inventing ridiculous comparisons: ‘They moved on, towards Coketown. The lights were beginning to blink through the fog. Like winking. The seven o’clock bells were ringing. Like one o’clock’; ‘Towards town. The crowd gathering. Like a snowball. Much dirtier, though. Rather.’<sup>48</sup> The repetitive comparison in *Hard Times* of the machinery to ‘melancholy-mad elephants’ is also parodied:

His melancholy-mad elephants were at work. [...] I shouldn’t like to be a melancholy-mad elephant, to be always at work [...]. Not that I don’t now and then sit up all night myself. But on those occasions I am not melancholy. By no means. Nor in the elephantine line.<sup>49</sup>

The last phrase also appears to poke fun at Dickens’s previous work, echoing the ‘elephantine lizard’ of *Bleak House*.

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<sup>46</sup> *A House to Let* is a collaborative work between Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Adelaide Anne Procter for a Christmas edition of *Household Words*. Two of the three stories contributed by Dickens (‘Over the Way’ and ‘Let at Last’) were written with Collins, so it is difficult to tell which parts of these belong to Dickens. The story ‘Going into Society’ was written by Dickens and contains at least some examples of what the author of the review complains of.

<sup>47</sup> *A House to Let*, *Saturday Review* (25 December 1858, vi, 644),’ qtd. in Collins, *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 406-407.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Hard Times (Refinished)’, *Our Miscellany* (new edn., 1857), 142-56, qtd. in Collins, *The Critical Heritage*, p. 311.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

Such contemporary commentaries and parodies highlight the unexpectedness and repetitiveness of some of Dickens's similes. However, they fail to see that the incongruity or the repetition do serve a larger narrative purpose. The 'melancholy mad elephants' as the image for the machinery of Coketown is a phrase that is certainly repeated in the novel. The initial simile – 'the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness' (Bk 1, Ch. 5) is a fanciful image in a factual world, humorous at least for its strangeness. An elephant, as an exotic creature, is literally a 'far-fetched' image for a factory town in England. The repeated identification thereafter of the elephants with the machinery is no longer unexpected and perhaps consequently no longer entertaining, although it remains appropriate as an image of the repetitiveness of the machinery. The incongruity has been taken up into a larger purpose of satirical intent, reflecting the contrast between Fact and Fancy in the novel and showing the vital importance of Fancy. As Hilary Schor says, the social commentary in *Hard Times* is presented more figuratively than factually<sup>50</sup>: the imaginative portrayal of Coketown, far from being a series of facetious similes as in the parody in *Our Miscellany*, is a repetition of a few images to drive home their satirical meaning. Gissing would have approved of this repetition for the purposes of satire. He says that Dickens's art, 'especially as satirist, lies in the judicious use of emphasis and iteration. Emphasis alone would not have answered his purpose; the striking thing must be said over and over again till the most stupid hearer has it by heart.'<sup>51</sup> The 'most stupid' reader can certainly identify elephants with machinery by the end of the novel. Moreover, the repetition is not only for the sake

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<sup>50</sup> Hilary Schor, 'Novels of the 1850s: *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan, 1st edn (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 64–77 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521660165.006>>.

<sup>51</sup> Gissing, II, p. 105.

of emphasis: this image of the elephants reflects the repetitive, uniform nature of the machinery and shows how the endless cycle of factual reproduction strangles fancy and prevents its growth.

In *Little Dorrit*, the repetition of some similes does not necessarily serve a satirical purpose. Carey calls the similitude characterisation of Mr Pancks a ‘dreary joke’ that is ‘kept alive by relentlessly talking about Pancks, whenever he appears, as if he were literally a steam-tug.’<sup>52</sup> When Arthur Clennam first meets Pancks, Pancks ‘snorted and sniffed and puffed and blew, like a little laboring [sic] steam-engine’ (Bk 1, Ch. 13), and he is thereafter identified with a steam-engine as much as Mr Bounderby with the wind and the Coketown machinery with elephants. It is true that the initial comparison of Pancks with a steam-tug is to highlight Mr Casby’s hypocritical benevolence. Casby is described as wandering aimlessly in his sweet benevolence, ‘much as an unwieldy ship in the Thames river may sometimes be seen heavily drifting with the tide [...] though making a great show of navigation,’ and Pancks is compared to ‘a little coal steam-tug’ that will take the ship in tow to get it out of everyone’s way (Bk 1, Ch. 13). However, Pancks’s indefatigable energy – also shown in the ‘black prongs’ of his hair which seem to multiply when he is excited ‘like the myriad points that break out in the last change of a great firework’ (Bk 1, Ch. 32) – is not repeated to weary the reader but to serve as a contrast to Mr Clennam’s own lack of energy and depressed outlook on life. Pancks appears precisely when Mr Clennam reencounters his old love, Flora Finching, who now seems fat and ridiculous. There is an explicit mix of light-heartedness and seriousness in Clennam’s shattered dream of romance: ‘her once boy-lover contemplated [her] with feelings wherein his sense of the sorrowful and his sense

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<sup>52</sup> Carey, p. 60.

of the comical were curiously blended' (Bk 1, Ch. 13). Clennam's disappointment echoes Dickens's own after re-encountering his former love Maria Beadnell in Mrs Winter. He had written enthusiastically to Mrs Winter, protesting that he should not find her as she had said, 'toothless, fat, old, and ugly.'<sup>53</sup> The next year, in a letter to the Duke of Devonshire about Flora in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens wrote:

I am so glad you like Flora. It came into my head one day that we have all had our Floras (mine is living, and extremely fat), and that it was a half serious half ridiculous truth which had never been told.<sup>54</sup>

Flora was a great favourite with readers from the moment she appeared, as Dickens comments in his letters; yet he writes to Forster as well that although she is 'extraordinarily droll,' there is 'something serious' underneath it all.<sup>55</sup>

The power of Dickens's similitic language in *Little Dorrit* is in its 'half serious half ridiculous' effect in the narrative. Hillis Miller says, '*Little Dorrit* is without doubt Dickens' [sic] darkest novel. No other of his novels has such a somber unity of tone.'<sup>56</sup> However, the impression of darkness is frequently dispelled by humorous similes. The similes might be described like the 'fiery jets' that Arthur observes springing up as the lamplighter makes his rounds: 'one might have fancied them astonished at being suffered to introduce any show of brightness into such a dismal scene' (Bk 1, Ch. 3). Arthur's homecoming does appear very dismal: 'In every thoroughfare [...] some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling, as if the Plague were in the city and the dead-carts were going round.' Arthur projects his anticipation of what awaits him on his return. He remembers Sundays from his past, and with a grim humour he thinks of how he was marched to church 'like a military deserter,' 'morally handcuffed to another boy'

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<sup>53</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 8, 'To Mrs Winter,' 22 Feb 1855.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 'To the Duke of Devonshire,' 5 Jul 1856.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 'To John Forster,' 7 Apr 1856.

<sup>56</sup> Hillis Miller, p. 227.

(Bk 1, Ch. 3). Arthur can still make these ‘grimly ludicrous’ associations even if he himself is a somewhat enervated figure in the narrative. Indeed, the similitude description of Arthur makes it tempting to classify him with Louisa Gradgrind as someone who remains untouched by Dickensian humour: looking back over his life at middle-age he considers it ‘like descending a green tree in fruit and flower, and seeing all the branches wither and drop off one by one, as he came down towards them’ (Bk 1, Ch. 13). This reflection comes after the meeting with Flora: his disappointment is real – and made even stronger by contrast with the comedic description and dialogue of Flora. Arthur even has a passing suicidal thought at one moment, after he has resolved not to fall in love with Pet Meagles. He looks at the river and thinks that it would be ‘better to flow away monotonously, like the river, and to compound for its insensibility to happiness with its insensibility to pain’ (Bk 1, Ch. 16).

The serious tone of Clennam’s characterisation thus echoes that of Louisa. However, unlike Louisa who cannot escape from hard facts into the realm of fancy – and Dickensian simile – Arthur is able to see humorous incongruity in fanciful associations, as in one interview with his mother: ‘Sitting with her hands laid separately upon the desk, and the tall cabinet towering before her, [Mrs Clennam] looked as if she were performing on a dumb church organ. Her son thought so (it was an old thought with him)’ (Bk 1, Ch. 5). The parenthesis not only emphasises the strangeness of the comparison, but also that this is Arthur’s own analogy. Indeed, the comparison is not such a strange one from Arthur’s perspective: ‘it was an old thought with him.’ His mother’s stern religion and his own strict upbringing has led to the natural blending of his mother’s sickroom with a church setting. Underneath the palpable gloom of the scene and these references to childhood trauma, there is a sense that Arthur can escape

his reality through humour. Morreall says that one of the greatest benefits of enjoying incongruity, and its ‘strongest link with rationality’ is:

[...] it allows us overall cognitive control of our experience and thus allows us to get along in almost any circumstances. When ‘the world is too much with us’ we can disengage ourselves, at least temporarily, in Imagination and enjoy the spectacle.<sup>57</sup>

The ‘world is too much with’ Arthur Clennam and making incongruous associations is a way to disengage, temporarily, with his reality. Thus, what might have been a truly dismal scene in the beginning of the novel of a mother’s repudiation of a son whom she has not seen for twenty years is interspersed with flashes of incongruous humour that seem to come from Arthur’s own observations. The reader could assume from the above explicit parenthesis that other descriptions are also ‘old thoughts’ with Arthur that help him disengage from reality. There is a horrible comedy, for example, in the description of Jeremiah Flintwinch, who has ‘a weird appearance of having hanged himself at one time or other, and of having gone about ever since halter and all, exactly as some timely hand had cut him down’ (Bk 1, Ch. 3).

Clennam is not the only character who makes these strange associations. Dickens uses similitude to show how other characters react with humour to what would otherwise be almost frightening. Flora tells Amy Dorrit that Mrs Clennam ‘sits glowering at me like Fate in a go-cart – shocking comparison really –invalid and not her fault’ (Bk 1, Ch. 24). With that parenthetical phrase, ‘shocking comparison really,’ Dickens’s uses Flora to comment on the philosophy of his own similitude style. Through Flora’s half-apologetic comparison, other Dickensian similes are revealed as a ‘shocking’ as well in their seeming inappropriateness. Mrs Clennam is far from being a funny person, but Dickens’s similes bring out an unexpected humour by exaggerating

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<sup>57</sup> Morreall, p. 18.

her awful appearance, as when she is described as if she is the main attraction at a funeral or at a public execution. She sits on a ‘bier-like sofa,’ supported by a ‘great angular black bolster, like the block at a state execution’ (Bk 1, Ch. 3). The symbolism of death and punishment is exaggerated by the overly solemn comparison to a homely bolster. Although not obviously so, from the context, this description may also be from Arthur’s perspective.

Even more than in *Little Dorrit*, in *A Tale of Two Cities* the incongruous similes are confined to the description of specific individuals. The characterisation of Miss Pross, for example, is unexpectedly comical from the beginning. Lucie Manette has become faint at Mr Lorry’s news of her father and, at this dramatic moment, Miss Pross rushes in to help her. Mr Lorry, ‘even in his agitation,’ notices that the woman is wearing a ‘most wonderful bonnet like a Grenadier wooden measure, and good measure too, or a great Stilton cheese’ (Bk 1, Ch. 4).<sup>58</sup> Like Arthur Clennam’s observations in *Little Dorrit* or Esther Summerson’s in *Bleak House*, this is Mr Lorry’s own insight. Dickens purposefully gives one of the rare comical similes to a character rather than the narrator. In this way, the comedy can almost be considered separate from the general tone of the narrative, belonging to a character’s thoughts or speech. Likewise, it is Miss Pross who uses another unusual simile at the end of the novel. When Madame Defarge arrives at the Darnay residence to fulfil her revengeful mission, Miss Pross stands in her way to hide the fact that everyone has fled. Standing immobile, she says to Madame Defarge, ‘If those eyes of yours were bed-winchies [...] and I was an English four-poster,

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<sup>58</sup> The style of a high woman’s bonnet at the time is being compared to a circular measure for liquid; ‘grenadier’ can refer to a foot-soldier and mean of a ‘substantial’ height.



they shouldn't lose a splinter of me' (Bk 3, Ch. 14).<sup>59</sup> Forster found fault with Miss Pross's analogy, writing in a review:

[...] we are hardly content [...] that it should occur to Miss Pross, at a critical moment, to compare Madame Defarge's eyes to bed winches; but these faults, natural to an active fancy, are very few and very slight in the work now before us.<sup>60</sup>

These 'faults' may be very few, but such unexpected moments redeem what is 'Dickensian' in a work where 'humour is dismissed.'<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, it is not simply an example of that 'easy mode of being amusing.' Dickens uses the comic contrast of Miss Pross to highlight the futility of Madame Defarge's fatalistic vision. She dies not in any heroic revolutionary way but in a scuffle with an indignantly protective and slightly ludicrous Englishwoman. Dickens had written to Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1860: 'when I use Miss Pross [...] to bring about the catastrophe, I have the positive intention of making that half-comic intervention a part of the desperate woman's failure.'<sup>62</sup> The intervention is only 'half-comic' because it almost seems out of place in a chapter relating Madame Defarge's downfall: 'The Knitting Done.' The foreboding beginning of the chapter describes Madame Defarge making her way towards the Darnays' house: 'There were many women at that time, upon whom the time laid a dreadfully disfiguring hand; but, there was not one among them more to be dreaded than this ruthless woman, now taking her way along the streets.' The description continues at length to show that 'She was absolutely without pity' (Bk 3, Ch. 14). Madame Defarge's approach is then juxtaposed with the entertaining banter of Miss Pross and Jerry Cruncher (who speaks 'with a most alarming

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<sup>59</sup> Bed-winches are iron keys to screw the nuts and bolts of a bedstead.

<sup>60</sup> John Forster, *Examiner* (10 Dec 1859), 788-9, qtd. in Collin, *The Critical Heritage*, p. 426.

<sup>61</sup> Gissing, II, p. 56.

<sup>62</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 9, 'To Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton,' 5 June 1860.

tendency to hold forth as from a pulpit'). The contrast is deliberately constructed as Dickens intersperses the dialogue with the menacing repetition of 'still Madame Defarge [...] came nearer and nearer' (Bk 3, Ch. 14). When at last they meet, the bizarre simile that Miss Pross utters effectively deflates the mounting tension and even renders Madame Defarge ridiculous at the last.

As mentioned before, Dickens himself sought to remedy the 'want of humour' in *A Tale of Two Cities* with *Great Expectations*.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps he also intended with the former to emulate the grim philosophy of Carlyle's *French Revolution* rather than to demonstrate his own imaginative style. He may have sought Carlyle's advice in the planning of the novel as well,<sup>64</sup> and Carlyle's use of the historical present is imitated in Dickens's narrative. However, Dickens's occasionally bizarre images certainly distinguish *A Tale of Two Cities* from the *Revolution*. Carlyle's *Revolution* is replete with figurative language, including some striking similes, but the style is aggressively accusatory and solemn, as in the following passage where Carlyle decries the fate of impoverished rioters in Brittany, some of whom were 'hanged on the following days':

O ye poor naked wretches! and this, then, is your inarticulate cry to Heaven, as of a dumb tortured animal, crying from uttermost depths of pain and debasement? Do these azure skies, like a dead crystalline vault, only reverberate the echo of it on you? Respond to it only by 'hanging on the following days?' —Not so: not forever! Ye are heard in Heaven. And the answer too will come,—in a horror of great darkness, and shakings of the world, and a cup of trembling which all the nations shall drink.<sup>65</sup>

In comparison to this thunderous language of 'azure skies', some of Dickens's similes in *A Tale of Two Cities* are comical simply for their focus on humble everyday realities.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 'To John Forster,' early Oct 1860.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 'To Thomas Carlyle,' 24 Mar 1859: 'If I should come to a knot in my planning, I shall come back to you to get over it.'

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, ed. by David Sorensen, Brent E. Kinser, and Mark Engel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 20 <<https://oxfordworldsclassics-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/display/10.1093/owc/9780198815594.001.0001/isbn-9780198815594;jsessionid=2AC039C8C00A8236243D0A097A063740>> [accessed 30 May 2023].

When he satirises the ancient respectability of Tellson's, he describes how any young employee is 'kept [...] in a dark place, like a cheese, until he had the full Tellson flavour and blue-mould upon him' (Bk 1, Ch. 1). Cheese is one of Dickens's favourite similitudes: just the homely word by itself seems to puncture any serious mood. If the influence of Carlyle's *Revolution* did lead Dickens to lessen the humour in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the forceful poetry of the former may also have prompted Dickens to incorporate humour to lessen the sting of the awful realities depicted in the novel.

### iii. Pip's Perceptions in *Great Expectations*

Although there are certainly some moments of Dickensian humour in *A Tale of Two Cities*, nevertheless, [as noted above](#), Dickens sensed that his reading public needed something with much more humour. Summarising contemporary reactions to *Great Expectations*, Philip Collins says it was considered an entertaining relief after 'the decade of grimness since *David Copperfield*.'<sup>66</sup> It is evident from the letters quoted in the first section that Dickens was deliberately trying to achieve a humorous effect with his new book. At the same time, his idea of the novel was a 'grotesque tragi-comic conception.'<sup>67</sup> At the heart of this tragi-comic project is Dickens's second and last full-length first-person narrative; and it is in the character-narrator Pip's changing perceptions, often triggered by some grotesque similitude description, that the 'blending of horror and jocosity,' [as Gissing called it](#), can be found.

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<sup>66</sup> Philip Collins, *The Critical Heritage*, p. 427.

<sup>67</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, Vol. 9, 'To John Forster,' early Oct 1860.

Pip, like Arthur in *Little Dorrit*, can find the incongruity of something amusing in a dismal situation, as in the quotation from the beginning of this chapter: ‘Some sense of the grimly ludicrous moved me to a fretful laugh’ (Bk 3, Ch. 1). Unlike Clennam, Pip struggles with understanding his own bizarre associations rather than simply enjoying the effect of incongruity as such. By emphasising the strangeness of his childhood observations, for example, Pip shows how these innocent associations softened much of the horror of the events around him. Elena Semino and Kate Swindlehurst in their discussion of mind-style ([quoted in Chapter Five](#)) argue that *Great Expectations* may present the point of view of Pip as a child, but Dickens ‘does not even attempt to recreate the cognitive habits and limitations of Pip as a young child.’<sup>68</sup> However, Pip’s childhood mind-style is precisely shown through Dickens’s use of deliberately incongruous similes. The reader captures Pip’s innocence in the way he lacks full understanding of the circumstances. When Pip is watching the convict Magwitch being taken back aboard the prison-ship, the fascination of the child in his observation of the frightening scene is shown in the similes he employs:

By the light of the torches, we saw the black Hulk lying out a little way from the mud of the shore, like a wicked Noah’s ark. Cribbed and barred and moored by massive rusty chains, the prison-ship seemed in my young eyes to be ironed like the prisoners (Bk 1, Ch. 5).

Pip’s comparison of the prison-ship to a Noah’s ark – a ‘wicked’ one – shows a childish reasoning process. In size and shape, the ship may remind him of pictures of the biblical boat or of how he has imagined it: but this Noah’s ark must be wicked because it is keeping people inside not to save them from the flood but for other purposes. It is also wicked by association with the convicts: it even has fetters like the convicts in his imagination. His innocent associations create a kind of inappropriate humour in the

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<sup>68</sup> Semino and Swindlehurst, p. 145.

horrible scene. The humour stems not only from its incongruity, but also from the grown narrator's recognition of his innocent way of making sense of things as a child. The child seems to resolve the incongruity of comparing the ship to Noah's ark by labelling it a 'wicked' Noah's ark; however, there remains a sense that the events are ultimately mystifying for him.

It is even more evident that the child Pip is mystified by what he observes when he notices a strange noise the convict makes: 'Something clicked in his throat, as if he had works in him like a clock, and was going to strike.' The noise seems to be caused by emotion, for Pip notices that the convict 'smeared his ragged rough sleeve over his eyes' (Bk 1, Ch. 3). However, Pip simply observes the sound and remarks on its odd likeness to a clock, showing that he does not understand what the noise signifies. In his book *The Artful Dickens*, John Mullan says, 'No one but Dickens could have written that sentence, so perplexingly reliving a child's perception. It makes the convict utterly individual, even as the young Pip's idea of him as a clockwork machine shows the limitation of his sympathy.' Mullan points out that the child Pip notices the sound again when the convict is being led away; but although the reader can tell that the click is a sign of emotion, the child is only curiously observant of the sound itself.<sup>69</sup> Certainly, the click is individual to Magwitch: the sound recurs as something specific to Magwitch's characterisation; but rather than being a trait that demonstrates Magwitch's own mind-style (like Mr Dombey's stiffness), the sound is always refracted through Pip's own perception of the convict. The first two instances of the sound, as noted, puzzle Pip in his childish imagination. The third time Pip hears it is after he discovers that Magwitch is his benefactor. The discovery horrifies him: 'The abhorrence

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<sup>69</sup> Mullan, *The Artful Dickens*, p. 23.

in which I held the man, the dread I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast'; 'I recoiled from his touch as if he had been a snake' (Bk 3, Ch.1). Pip's revolted comparisons here contrasts with his child self's whimsical comparison of Magwitch to a clock. Magwitch then wipes his eyes, and 'the click came in his throat which I well remembered – and he was all the more horrible to me that he was so much in earnest' (Bk 3, Ch. 1). The adult Pip is aware of Magwitch's emotion now and understands that it is the cause of the mysterious click; and yet he finds it 'horrible.' Pip sees reality differently now – more accurately perhaps, but less innocently.

The character-narrator, Pip, communicates both his childhood innocence and his adult selfishness through these different comparisons. There is not as much conflation in *Great Expectations* between the narrative perspective of a 'Pip-then' and 'Pip-now' as there is between that of a 'David-then' and 'David-now' in *David Copperfield*, as discussed in Chapter Five. The way the similes are used in *Great Expectations* reflect the mind-style of Pip within the timeframe of the events being described: the narrator who is looking back at these events thus keeps a certain distance from his own character's development by presenting the reader with the mind-style of his 'then' self at each moment. The similes in the passage below, for example, reflect Pip's innocence as a child as he observes Magwitch eating:

I had often watched a large dog of ours eating his food; and I now noticed a decided similarity between the dog's way of eating, and the man's. The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog. He swallowed, or rather snapped up, every mouthful, too soon and too fast; and he looked sideways here and there while he ate, as if he thought there was danger in every direction of somebody's coming to take the pie away. He was altogether too unsettled in his mind over it, to appreciate it comfortably I thought, or to have anybody to dine with him, without making a chop with his jaws at the visitor. In all of which particulars he was very like the dog. (Bk 1, Ch. 3)

Then, when the convict has re-enters his life years later, the similitude language shows Pip's grown-up, disdainful attitude. He observes with disgust that 'as [Magwitch] turned his food in his mouth, and turned his head sideways to bring his strongest fangs to bear upon it, he looked terribly like a hungry old dog' (Bk 3, Ch. 1). The difference between the determinate (*the*) and indeterminate article (*a*) in each case shows Pip's changed perception. The child Pip is fascinated by the association he sees between two specific behaviours he has observed: the dog's and the man's. Since he 'had often watched' the dog eat his food, it is easy to imagine how closely the child is watching the convict, taking in every movement. The detailed comparison he makes is extraordinary, and he even speculates on whether the convict feels the same anxiety over his dinner as their dog does. Meanwhile, the older Pip's comparison of the convict to *a* hungry dog shows that he is repulsed rather than fascinated by the man's behaviour. It is a generic snap-judgement rather than a specific drawn-out comparison. There is no desire to observe him with the same wondering gaze. The use of the same image from such different viewpoints serves to further blend the grim with the ludicrous in *Great Expectations*, since the narrator describing both events is presumably cognisant of how his own perspective has changed and become more limited.

Pip's perception of Magwitch changes again as the novel progresses. The last time that the click is heard, Magwitch has been captured and faces certain death. Pip promises Magwitch that he will never desert him:

I felt his hand tremble as it held mine, and he turned his face away as he lay in the bottom of the boat, and I heard that old sound in his throat – softened now, like all the rest of him. (Bk 3, Ch. 15)

The 'old sound' or click in Magwitch's throat is 'softened now, like all the rest of him', but it is Pip who has softened in his perception of the man. The childhood wondering comparison of the noise to a clock becomes a worldly disgust at a remembered sound

from a despised past, and finally becomes a compassionate regard for the convict and gratitude for what he has risked for Pip's sake. The repetition of the clicking sound in the convict's throat is not for satirical purposes, as with the melancholy-mad elephants of *Hard Times*, and it is not meant to show Magwitch's mind-style, as with Mr Pancks's steam-engine puffing and snorting in *Little Dorrit*. Rather, it is used to show Pip's changing perceptions and even influences how the reader perceives Pip himself as he reacts differently to Magwitch. Pip repeats his observation of the sound to acknowledge how differently he has come to regard Magwitch.

Pip's repeated images help him to explore his own vision of others. The comical description of Mr Wemmick and his 'post-office' mouth is an example of this:

[Wemmick's mouth] was such a post-office of a mouth that he had a mechanical appearance of smiling. We had got to the top of Holborn Hill before I knew that it was merely a mechanical appearance, and that he was not smiling at all. (Bk 2, Ch. 2)

The phrasing is slightly confusing. Pip realises that his humorous description of Wemmick's smile is strangely literal: it *is* a merely a mechanical appearance and is not a smile at all. From the beginning of his acquaintance with Wemmick's 'post-office,' it is as if Pip needs continually to observe it in order to understand it. The post-office is most in force in the office, where Wemmick must keep up his official appearance. There Pip observes him lunching and occasionally throwing pieces of biscuit 'into his slit of a mouth, as if he were posting them' (Bk 2, Ch. 5). He is later relieved to observe Wemmick genuinely smiling 'and not merely mechanically' when they visit Wemmick's Walworth home. He then notices how Wemmick's smile 'tightened into a post-office again' when they go back to the office (Bk 2, Ch. 6). When Pip later asks Wemmick's advice with regard to putting money down for Herbert, Wemmick discourages him very strongly from doing so. Pip observes, 'I could have posted a newspaper in his mouth, he



made it so wide after saying this.’ However, this is Wemmick’s ‘deliberate opinion in this office’ (Bk 2, Ch. 17); and at Walworth he changes his opinion, much to Pip’s relief. Unlike Pancks’s steam-engine depiction in *Little Dorrit*, Wemmick’s post-office is a changing reality that Pip constantly needs to re-interpret. He gradually understands that the post-office mainly reflects Mr Wemmick’s functioning in an official capacity. As with Magwitch’s clock-like click, the repetition of Mr Wemmick’s post-office mouth serves to show Pip’s changing perception of a character.

#### iv. Conclusion: Achieving the ‘Grimly Ludicrous’

An early critic of Dickens, Hyppolyte Taine, writes of Dickens’s repetitive images with exasperation:

He hugs the child of his fancy in his arms, fondles it, caresses it, forces it on our attention, and asks us to examine it until we grow tired of the display, and refuse to admire what is so perseveringly obtruded on our notice. No man ever rode a metaphor harder than Mr Dickens.<sup>70</sup>

Carey echoes this early opinion when he calls Pancks’s characterisation a ‘dreary joke’ ([quoted above](#)). However, it is evident that, as Dickens developed his use of similitude language, repetition became a narrative strategy in his later works. As seen in this chapter, repetition of an initial strange simile can morph into a satirical vision of the factual world in *Hard Times*. It can also show Dickensian mind-style on different levels: the mind-styles of Mr Bounderby in *Hard Times* and Mr Pancks in *Little Dorrit* are shown through their consistent characterisation, and in *Great Expectations*, the repetition of an initially incongruous simile reveals Pip’s developing knowledge of others and of

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<sup>70</sup> William Forsyth, ‘Literary Style,’ *Fraser’s Magazine*, March 1857, lv, pp. 260-3, qtd. in Collins, *The Critical Heritage*, p. 352.

himself. It is true that the initial incongruity of certain similes in these works is lost with constant repetition. The reader could 'grow tired' of the humour the first unexpected comparison might cause. Nevertheless, Dickens achieves an incongruous humour both in the bizarre associations themselves (at least in their initial appearance), as well as in the manner of deliberately using them at the seemingly wrong moment. In this way, the distinctive humourlessness of characters like Louisa in *Hard Times*, Mrs Clennam in *Little Dorrit*, and Madame Defarge in *A Tale of Two Cities* is highlighted by juxtaposing them with such characters as Mrs Gradgrind, Flora Finching, or Miss Pross.

Furthermore, the weird similes that come from specific characters' perspectives – the 'old thought' of Arthur Clennam in *Little Dorrit* of his mother playing a dumb church organ, Mr Lorry's impression of Miss Pross's hat as a great Stilton cheese in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and any of Pip's comparisons in *Great Expectations* – all point to the idea that an imaginatively associative perception of events is key to finding humour in the direst situations. The following chapter will look at the further significance of similitude characterisation translated through different characters' perspectives, but this chapter has shown that Dickens's later works begin to filter his similitude language explicitly through his characters' thoughts and dialogue for humorous effect. Flora Finching's comparison of Mrs Clennam to 'Fate in a go-cart' ('shocking comparison really') in *Little Dorrit*, or Miss Pross's comparison of Madame Defarge's eyes to bed winches in *A Tale of Two Cities* are examples of how the narrator dissociates himself from some of the stranger similes. The subjective nature of humour is thus somehow safeguarded, for who can blame Dickens if his *characters* choose to make the grim ludicrous.

## Chapter Seven: Simile as Caricature and ‘Anti-Caricature’ (1864-70)

### *i.* ‘So like as to be almost a caricature’

This last chapter completes the discussion of Dickens’s use of similitic characterisation in his later works by focusing on *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) and his unfinished last novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Building on the discussion of humour in the previous chapter, this chapter will consider the often humorous effect of Dickens’s use of simile in the creation of caricature. Caricature can be found in Dickens’s fiction throughout his career. A brief introduction in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* (1836) to an abridgement of ‘The Boarding House’ from the *Sketches* notes that the style of this as-yet-unknown writer is marked by caricature:

This work appears to be an early, perhaps a first attempt, of some new writer: if so, we would recommend him to proceed, for, unless he fall off very miserably in his subsequent efforts, he can scarcely fail to become a successful and popular author. [...] His chief object in the present publication has been to depict life and character as exemplified in the middle ranks of the metropolis; and this he has accomplished in a style, which, bating a little caricature and exaggeration, strikes us as extremely happy. He has much comic power, and perceives traits which are not consciously noted by ordinary observers, and yet, when mentioned, remind every body [sic] of the thing described.<sup>1</sup>

The pejorative connotation of caricature in this passage is still prevalent in the modern use of the term: caricature is often related to absurd exaggeration. The *OED*’s definition of *caricature* (in use by 1748) shows how it exaggerates a salient feature of the original: ‘A portrait or other artistic representation, in which the characteristic features of the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Boarding-House’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, Feb. 1832-Dec. 1853, 219, 1836, 83–84 (p. 83) <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/boarding-house/docview/2545926/se-2>> [accessed 30 March 2023].

original are exaggerated with ludicrous effect.’<sup>2</sup> Dickens’s use of such caricature was not limited to his *Sketches*. An 1865 review of *Our Mutual Friend* comments that in his latest work Dickens has not left some ‘obvious’ faults behind – among them, ‘A certain extravagance in particular scenes and persons – a tendency to caricature and grotesqueness.’<sup>3</sup> By the time Dickens was writing *Edwin Drood*, contemporary reviewers were still commenting on Dickens’s ‘often grotesque exaggeration,’<sup>4</sup> and one critic complains that in *Edwin Drood* there is the ‘same straining after effect, the same exaggeration of previous caricatures of his own’ – including a reproduction of *Our Mutual Friend*’s Bradley Headstone in *Edwin Drood*’s John Jasper.<sup>5</sup>

The similarity between Bradley Headstone and John Jasper will be discussed at length in the second section of this chapter to show that Dickens is not simply reproducing a previously used caricature in his last novel. In fact, this chapter seeks to rescue Dickensian caricature from its negative connotations. It seeks to demonstrate that Dickens uses caricature as a deliberate narrative strategy, both to reveal characters’ interiority in *Our Mutual Friend*, and, in a final plot-twist, as it were, to ‘hide’ from them the true motivations of characters in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. This last strategy is what I call ‘anti-caricature’ in Dickens’s final novel, and it reveals a new, if late, stage in Dickens’s experimentation with simile. The first section of this chapter will consider how caricature relates to *likenesses* in Dickens’s work, exploring a link

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Caricature, n.’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2022) <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/27973](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/27973)> [accessed 15 May 2022].

<sup>3</sup> ‘Our Mutual Friend’, *The London Review of Politics, Society, Literature, Art, and Science* (London, 28 October 1865), pp. 467–68 (p. 467), ProQuest <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/our-mutual-friend/docview/4206737/se-2?accountid=14511>>.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Charles Dickens’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 2.7 (1870), 130–34 (p. 133) <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/charles-dickens/docview/2642825/se-2?accountid=14511>> [accessed 10 May 2022].

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Last Legacies of Thackeray and Dickens’, *Appleton’s Journal of Literature, Science and Art*, 55 (1870), 429 <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/last-legacies-thackeray-dickens/docview/124323858/se-2?accountid=14511>>.

between portraiture, similitude language, and a character's interiority. Following this, a comparison of certain characters from both novels, particularly of Bradley Headstone and John Jasper, will demonstrate Dickens's use of either transparent or opaque similitude characterisation to create caricature or anti-caricature. From this discussion emerges the importance of Dickens's use of specific characters' perceptions in both novels, either to emphasise a certain objectivity in the character descriptions in *Our Mutual Friend* or to emphasise the mystery of subjectivity in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

A scene in *Our Mutual Friend* suggests that caricature is Dickens's way of revealing the true character of someone through an accurate likeness. While begging Mr Twemlow's help to foil the Lammles' plot to marry Georgiana Podsnap to Mr Fledgeby, Mrs Lamble hides this conversation from her husband by inviting Twemlow to admire a book of portraits. Mrs Lamble intersperses her conversation with sudden references to the portraits, as when she says, "Here is another portrait. What do you think of it?" and Twemlow 'has just presence of mind enough to say aloud: "Very like! Uncommonly like!"' After showing him another, she comments, "So like as to be almost a caricature?" (Bk 2, Ch. 16). The construction of Mrs Lamble's question – *so like x as to be y* – has an unexpected resolution in *almost a caricature*, for the implied superlative source would be the original of the portrait. An expected resolution in other words would be *so like as to be actually the original himself*. Mrs Lamble's words convey the notion that caricature is more truth-telling than a literal description or an authorial statement that tells the reader about a character: caricaturising exaggeration is more satisfying as an indirect way of capturing a character's 'true' likeness.

Dickens shows a self-awareness of his caricaturising similitude style when he plays on the connection between similitude likenesses and portraits or photographic likenesses. Dickens uses *likeness* in his fiction to mean both a literal and a figurative portrait, but

his use of similitic language occasionally blends the literal and figurative domains. For example, the only times that photographic likenesses are mentioned in his novels they are immediately juxtaposed with fanciful similitic likenesses. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Mr Wilfer is compared to a cherub, with the figurative source (the cherub) becoming structurally the target of the comparison: 'If the conventional Cherub could ever grow up and be clothed, he might be photographed as a portrait of Wilfer' (Bk 1, Ch. 4). The word *photographed* is part of the similitic phrase *might be photographed as*; Wilfer's fanciful likeness to a cherub is posited as a literal one since it could be a photographic resemblance. The other mention of a photographic likeness is in the opening chapter of *Great Expectations* when Pip imagines what his father and mother looked like:

As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, 'Also Georgiana Wife of the Above,' I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. (Bk 1, Ch. 1; p. 3)

The adult Pip's reflection on his 'unreasonable' childish perception is an example of the 'grimly ludicrous' effect of Dickens's imagery analysed in the previous chapter. The sad reality of his orphaned childhood is filtered through the bizarre image of his parents being like the lettering on the tombstones. As with the cherubic Mr Wilfer, the same blending of target and source domains occurs in this passage from *Great Expectations*. In the absence of photographic likenesses, Pip makes his own fanciful likenesses of the parents he has never seen. The source of his comparison is the tombstones; however, the target of the comparison is also the tombstones, since it is his only knowledge of his parents. The tombstone inscriptions become a strange substitute for his parents' image, conflating the source and target realities of the comparison. Pip's fanciful portrait is not

‘so like as to be almost caricature’ since the original of that portrait is not actually present outside of Pip’s own imagination. Nevertheless, Pip’s imaginative substitute for a photograph uses the same mechanism as Dickens’s caricatures, which use similitudes in place of literal likenesses.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens’s playful use of literal and figurative likenesses is deliberately demonstrated in his description of the guests at the Veneerings’ dinner party. The guests are reflected in a huge sideboard mirror, and Dickens takes advantage of the literal reflections to make each one ‘so like as to be almost a caricature,’ using simile satirically to externalise salient aspects of their personalities. Diffident Mr Twemlow’s reflection shows an exaggerated physical trait that paints a picture of his entire life project: his cheeks are ‘drawn in as if he had made a great effort to retire into himself some years ago, and had got so far and had never got any farther.’ Lady Tippins’s reflection shows ‘an immense obtuse drab oblong face, like a face in a tablespoon’ (Bk 1, Ch. 2). With this similitude turn of phrase, the reflection reflects a reflection. This in turn reflects how Lady Tippins’s opinions reflect the standard ones of society. The reflection-caricature of Mrs Podsnap that emerges from this same passage, where she has ‘neck and nostrils like a rocking-horse’ (Bk 1, Ch. 2), is one of those that is repeated in the novel. It is an enduring portrait of Mrs Podsnap’s complacent prideful habit of rocking grandly over everyone in her path, including her daughter Georgiana. On Georgiana’s birthday, her ‘tiny efforts (if she had made any) were swallowed up in the magnificence of her mother’s rocking’ (Bk 1, Ch. 11). If the guests would but look into the mirror of Dickens’s similitude description of them, they would see themselves as they truly are. The indirectness of the description puts a distance between the narrator and the characters that allows space for satirical exactitude.

In *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*, Hillis Miller has noted a 'transition from simile to metaphor' as he calls it in the characters' descriptions:

Thus the Veneerings' butler is initially '*like* a gloomy Analytical Chemist' (I,2), but thereafter is simply 'the Analytical Chemist.' The character comes to exist entirely as the figure of speech which at first merely seemed to be a witty way to describe him. [...] Gaffer Hexam is a bird of prey, Mr Wilfer is a cherub, Mrs Podsnap is a rocking horse, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Hillis Miller's argument is that the novel becomes a construct of insubstantial words:

'The novel really exists, as thought has a real existence, but it no more exists objectively or refers to an objective existence than a woman can ever be a rocking horse.'<sup>7</sup> By focusing on the fictitious nature of the novel as a whole, Hillis Miller sidesteps the reason that Dickens's characters might come to 'exist entirely as the figure of speech' that originally described them. The original highlighted trait turns into that character's identification because this is the essential way that character functions. There is indeed something objective and substantial about such figurative description, in that it fixes a character a certain way. Sometimes this kind of caricature could be classified as Dickensian mind-style, as it has been defined in Chapter Five, when the reader gains insight into a character's worldview and motivations: 'cherub' points to Mr Wilfer's innocence, or 'rocking horse' points to Mrs Podsnap's domineering pride. At other times, it may not provide interiority so much as highlight an aspect of a character's appearance or function: 'bird of prey' points to Gaffer (Jesse) Hexam's hook-nosed appearance as well his mode of employment on the river, and 'Analytical Chemist' points to the retainer's gloomy administration of various 'poisons' in the form of dinner drinks. Moreover, this kind of identification of the character is not a straightforward transition from simile to metaphor, since the one word or phrase used to describe the

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<sup>6</sup> Hillis Miller, p. 306.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



character after the initial simile necessarily refers back to the original context and description. It is meant to remind the reader of that explicit fanciful description. The description of the retainer as an ‘Analytical Chemist’ or even as ‘the Analytical’ would be especially confusing without the initial scene at the Veneerings’ dinner party, where he ‘goes round, like a gloomy Analytical Chemist: always seeming to say, after “Chablis, sir?” – “You wouldn’t if you knew what it’s made of” (Bk 1, Ch. 2). The adjective *gloomy* is key, even though it is subsequently dropped; and it is the seeming pessimism of his mysteriously ominous presence that is associated with the ‘Analytical Chemist’ thereafter. Rather than a transition from a simile to a metaphor, the repeated words or phrases are extensions of the initial simile.

As noted [in the Introduction](#), similitude normally selects salient aspects of the target to compare with a separate source, and thus simile naturally lends itself to achieving a caricaturising effect in writing. Dickens’s similes especially often exaggerate features of the target reality ‘with ludicrous effect,’ as the *OED*’s definition of caricature puts it. For example, Mr Squeers’s one eye in *Nicholas Nickleby* is (literally) singular enough, but even more so when it is described as ‘unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental: being of a greenish grey, and in shape resembling the fan-light of a street door’ (Ch. 4). The cyclopic effect is emphasised with the homely comparison to the light aperture above a street door. While Dickensian caricature is not exactly the same as Dickensian mind-style, it could be said to create a mind-style when it is repeated to expose the fixed interiority of a character. In an 1849 essay on Charles Dickens, Edwin P. Whipple wrote that Dickens’s sense of the ludicrous leads him to ‘the very verge of caricature,’ but that this caricature is ‘a mode of conveying truth more

distinctly by suggesting it through a brilliant exaggeration.’<sup>8</sup> Moreover, ‘he often flashes the impression of a character or a scene upon the mind by a few graphic verbal combinations.’ The examples Whipple gives of these ‘graphic verbal combinations’ are mainly figurative comparisons using *as if*, *like*, and *seemed*.<sup>9</sup> Among these examples is the description of George Chuzzlewit’s ‘obvious disposition to pimples’ in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, [quoted in Chapter Three](#): ‘the bright spots on his cravat, the rich pattern on his waistcoat, and even his glittering trinkets, seemed to have broken out upon him, and not to have come into existence comfortably’ (Ch. 4). The ‘comic power’ that the above 1836 passage refers to, tied to Dickens’s power of observation, arguably has much to do with his ability to capture the essence of a person through such caricaturising language.

Thus, simile in Dickens is often caricature when it comes to characterisation: the fan-light eye of Mr Squeers, George Chuzzlewit’s pervasive pimples, or Mr Wemmick’s post-office smile from the previous chapter capture the principal impression of the characters’ external appearance. The similitic description might also demonstrate the interiority of the character. Wemmick’s post-office mouth is evidence of Wemmick’s mind-style, for the post-office only appears in his official capacity, when he is in Mr Jaggers’s office and must show no emotions. The fan-light and the pimply cravat may indicate solely external traits, but the comparisons arguably show the interiority of these characters as well: Squeers’s street-door-facing fan-light shows that he is always on the lookout for some new underhand business transaction; George’s pimply exterior is evidence of a comfort-loving attitude towards life. In this respect, Dickens does not appear to be different from other writers of the period who show the underlying truth of

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<sup>8</sup> Edwin P. Whipple, ‘ART. V. - Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son’, *The North American Review*, 69.145 (1849), 383–407 (p. 397) <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/art-v-dealings-with-firm-dombey-son/docview/137197600/se-2>> [accessed 30 March 2023].

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

a character's mindset or attitude through caricaturising similitic description. In the Introduction, examples were used from George Eliot's work to show that she also used similitic characterisation to highlight a particular character trait. Eliot's similes tend to have a preference for sources from the natural world, as when Maggie Tulliver is described in *The Mill on the Floss*: 'Maggie was incessantly tossing her head to keep the dark, heavy locks out of her gleaming black eyes, – an action which gave her very much the air of a small Shetland pony' (Bk 1, Ch. 2). However, Eliot – and Dickens's contemporaries in general – rarely if ever repeat similes to extend a caricature through the novel. Later in *The Mill on the Floss*, for example, when Maggie and her cousin Lucy are together, their appearance is described 'like the contrast between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and a white kitten' (Bk 1, Ch. 7). Still further in the novel, Lucy is described to be watching Maggie affectionally 'like a pretty spaniel' (Bk 6, Ch. 3). Eliot is not interested in fixing her characters into a specific descriptive mould. Neither Maggie nor Lucy morph into a specific kind of animal as Mr Wemmick morphs into a kind of post-office box. In this way, Eliot's similitic language carefully keeps the figurative source of comparison separate from the target reality. Her similes do not have the same ludicrous effect as do Dickens's which blend and play with target and source domains. Moreover, Dickens's humorous exaggeration and repetition of a figurative trait provides a lasting vivid impression, having the same permanence as the highlighted features of a caricature.

ii. 'Anti-caricature' in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

The recurrence and repetition of characteristic Dickensian simile in *Our Mutual Friend* may have given rise to reviews which were critical of his exaggerated style. Garrett Stewart's recent essay on 'The Late Great Dickens: Style Distilled' (2021) comments on some negative criticism that *Our Mutual Friend* received from Dickens's contemporaries – notably from Henry James in his 1865 review for *The Nation* where he called the novel a book 'poor with the poverty not of momentary embarrassment, but of permanent exhaustion.'<sup>10</sup> Stewart argues that Dickens's style is not exhausted in his last finished novel, but rather on display in 'retrospective estimation of his most masterly and inventive formats – phonetic, syllabic, lexical, metaphoric, syntactical, rhetorical, structural – all by turns witnessed (to) in bursts of wry highlighting and implied stylistic hindsight.'<sup>11</sup> In light of what has been presented in this thesis thus far, 'similic' could be added to this list of inventive formats. In his celebratory essay, Stewart shows how Dickens presents some of his favourite tricks to full advantage: the use of multiple adjectives, for example, as in Lady Tippins's '*immense obtuse drab oblong* face, like a face in a table-spoon' (Bk 1, Ch. 2) – or puns, as in Silas Wegg's 'post': 'All weathers saw the man at the post. This is to be accepted in a double sense, for he contrived a back to his wooden stool, by placing it against the lamp-post' (Bk 1, Ch. 5). Stewart's essay is useful for its enthusiastic display of Dickens's stylistic playfulness in *Our Mutual Friend*, which shows the novel to be unabashedly Dickensian. As Stewart says, the novel is 'more a stylistic summa than some irreversible slump.'<sup>12</sup> Dickens's flair for

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<sup>10</sup> Garrett Stewart, 'The Late Great Dickens: Style Distilled', in *On Style in Victorian Fiction*, ed. by Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Online, 2021), pp. 227–43 (p. 227) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108614931>> [accessed 1 March 2023].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

caricature belongs in this ‘stylistic summa.’ Dickens’s use of caricature from the beginning of his career is frequently tied to his use of similitic language, and in his penultimate novel, Dickens uses similitic caricature deliberately and powerfully, as has been seen in the previous section. In *Our Mutual Friend*, with the depiction of Bradley Headstone and other characters, Dickens uses simile in a caricaturising way, and these similitic caricatures reinforce the framing narrative which works to reveal the truth beneath appearances. However, externally caricaturising similes used in the depiction of John Jasper and other characters in *Edwin Drood* do not reveal the characters’ interiority.

Rather than a reproduction of a previous caricature in Bradley Headstone, Jasper is an ‘anti-caricature’ because of the opaque way that simile is used in his characterisation. Ultimately, the misleading nature of the similes suits the framework of mystery in Dickens’s final unfinished novel. To the last, Dickens continues to experiment with similitic language to adapt it to the direction of the narrative. It is worthwhile noting here that a portrait that is a caricature – rather than indicating a truthful likeness as Mrs Lamble suggests to Twemlow in the passage quoted above – instead indicates the obscurity of Jasper’s two-sided existence. Near the beginning of *Edwin Drood*, Dickens draws attention to Edwin’s portrait of Rosa Bud hanging in Jasper’s ‘sombre’ room. The sun rarely shines on ‘the unfinished picture of a blooming schoolgirl hanging over the chimneypiece; [...] her beauty remarkable for a quite childish, almost babyish, touch of saucy discontent, comically conscious of itself’ – and in parentheses: ‘(There is not the least artistic merit in this picture, which is a mere daub; but it is clear that the painter has made it humorously – one might almost say, revengefully – like the original)’ (Ch. 2). It is unclear whether the phrase ‘comically conscious of itself’ refers to the ‘touch’ of the artist or to the ‘saucy discontent’ of the

artist's subject. Certainly the 'saucy discontent' exaggerates one aspect of Rosa's personality. It is a re-wording of Mrs Lammle's question to Twemlow: it is 'revengefully like the original,' or 'so like as to be almost a caricature.' Unlike the charade of appearance vs. reality, however, that Mrs Lammle's book of portraits represents, Rosa's portrait points to an opaque use of caricature. The artist's perception becomes the focus: the adverb *revengefully* points more to Edwin's intentions than to the portrait itself. The truth of the original subject's character is obscured by another's perception. It is precisely Edwin's perception that Jasper later dismisses when the portrait figures in his own twisted declaration to Rosa. He tells her, '[...] even when [Edwin] gave me the picture of your lovely face so carelessly traduced by him, which I feigned to hang always in my sight for his sake, but worshipped in torment for yours, I loved you madly' (Ch. 19). Jasper claims a knowledge of the portrait and the original that Edwin never had: his fixed gaze upon Edwin in the beginning of the novel has 'some strange power of suddenly including the sketch over the chimney-piece' (Ch. 2), and Rosa herself feels 'as if he had power to bind her by a spell' (Ch. 20). Nevertheless, besides his evident sexual obsession with Rosa, Jasper's 'feigning' makes it difficult to know when his appearance gives the reader a true clue to his interiority and when it does not.

Other characters in *Edwin Drood* also evade the kind of caricature that is evident in *Our Mutual Friend*, and indeed in most of Dickens's previous novels. Appearances are evidently not meant to be deceiving in *Our Mutual Friend*.<sup>13</sup> Dickens's caricaturising similes could seem to deny his characters any hidden depths by bringing

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<sup>13</sup> The Boffins' and John Harmon's deception of Bella Wilfer is one exception to the transparent nature behind some appearances in the novel, for the narrative does not give the reader any certain clue that Mr Boffin is not really the dreadful miser that he seems to have become.

those depths very quickly to the surface. This does not mean that a character cannot be multi-faceted or complex; but the caricaturising tendency of Dickens's simile renders those layers transparent, as in the description of Silas Wegg. Wegg's face appears carved, and moreover 'out of very hard material':

[...] he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally, and rather suggested to the fanciful observer, that he might be expected—if his development received no untimely check—to be completely set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months. (Bk 1, Ch. 5)

The similitude description is certainly an exaggeration of Wegg's rugged appearance, but it is a clear commentary on his character as well. Wegg is, figuratively, capable of becoming completely wooden over time – and the narrative bears this out in his predatory scheming against Mr Boffin. The characterisation of Mr Grewgious in *Edwin Drood* is an echo of Wegg's 'dryness' and 'woodenness,' but Dickens takes the same 'dryness' or 'hardness' of character and does something very different with it. Wegg's dryness points to a moral hardness, whereas Grewgious's dry manner hides a nature that is thoroughly amiable.

The description of Mr Grewgious carefully indicates that there is more than meets the eye:

Mr Grewgious had been well selected for his trust [as guardian for Rosa Bud] as a man of incorruptible integrity, but certainly for no other appropriate quality discernible on the surface. He was an arid, sandy man, who, if he had been put into a grinding-mill, looked as if he would have ground immediately into high-dried snuff. (Ch. 9)

His dry manner, which is emphasised as merely a 'quality discernible on the surface,' is exaggerated by the similitude conditional *if* clause with its *as if* phrase. Like Wegg, his face looks as if it has been carved:

[...] he had certain notches in his forehead, which looked as though Nature had been about to touch them into sensibility or refinement, when she had

impatiently thrown away the chisel, and said: 'I really cannot be worried to finish off this man; let him go as he is.' (Ch. 9)

Grewgious is a man of tough wood judging by this description, untouched by 'sensibility or refinement.' However, the wooden imagery hides a susceptible, generous interior.

The sad story of his unrequited love for Rosa's mother may be the hidden meaning of being left unfinished by Nature's chisel, but this only appears much later. Indeed, most of the external description of Grewgious – including his own view of himself – remains on the surface, as in the following passage when Grewgious is speaking with Rosa and is uncomfortably aware of Miss Twinkleton in attendance:

Mr Grewgious, with a sense of not having managed his opening point quite as neatly as he might have desired, smoothed his head from back to front as if he had just dived, and were pressing the water out—this smoothing action, however superfluous, was habitual with him. (Ch. 9)

The simile is caricature, for a habitual, or prominent gesture is heightened by the comparison to pressing water out of his hair, a comparison which also implies a certain breathlessness from just emerging from a dive. The simile is precisely 'on the surface': the diver has emerged from the depths. There *are* depths to Grewgious's romantic interior, but the similitic language refuses to bring them to the surface and all we see is the superficial. The simile is thus purely *external* caricature; it is *anti*-caricature in that it is not externalising Grewgious's interiority as Dickensian caricature is wont to do. Externally, Wegg and Grewgious are woodenly expressed in a similar way; however, the similitic language veils Grewgious's true nature while it reveals Wegg's.

In *Edwin Drood*, Dickens adapts simile to the mystery of the novel's narrative by presenting characters whose depths do not immediately come to the surface. The secret of *Edwin Drood*'s ending has died with Charles Dickens, and 'mystery' also remains the key to Dickens's use of similitic caricaturising language in the novel. As has been mentioned earlier, the character of John Jasper is remarkably similar to Bradley



Headstone in Dickens's previous novel, and several critics have analysed the connection. Philip Collins noted several points of similarity in *Dickens and Crime* (1962) when showing how 'Jasper obviously inherits features from Headstone': Headstone and Jasper both (at least appear to) have murderous designs on a rival lover and are obsessed with girls who hate them. Collins notes:

[... they] go white at moments of tension, they perspire terribly, and then fall into 'a kind of paroxysm, or fit'; both brood over the way in which they have carried out the murder (Headstone explicitly, and Jasper allusively, in his opium-dream). Both are compared to 'a wild beast.'<sup>14</sup>

Eve Sedgwick has used the love-triangle of Headstone-Eugene Wrayburn-Lizzie Hexam and Jasper-Edwin Drood-Rosa Bud to discuss hidden male desire in the two men's sexual obsession.<sup>15</sup> Juliet John considers both characters as perfect examples of melodramatic villains, where Jasper is the 'consummation' of the tension in the relationship between Headstone and Wrayburn.<sup>16</sup> No one (to my knowledge) has commented explicitly on the fact that both men are 'six-and-twenty' years old. Jasper is a deliberate re-embodiment of Headstone even in this detail of his age. Dickens draws attention to Jasper's age through the friendly banter that Jasper and Edwin have about their relationship as uncle and nephew (cf. Ch. 2). The significance of Jasper's youth is his capacity to act the role of sexual rival to Edwin, which echoes the sexual rivalry between Headstone and Wrayburn – although the latter two, of course, cannot even pretend to have any affection for each other. It could seem that Headstone and then

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan and Company Limited, 1962), p. 299.

<sup>15</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Homophobia, Misogyny, and Capital: The Example of *Our Mutual Friend*', and 'Up the Postern Stair: *Edwin Drood* and the Homophobia of Empire', in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 161-179, 180-200.

<sup>16</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 190.

Jasper are variants of a type, or Dickensian caricatures, as observed by the contemporary review [quoted at the beginning of the chapter](#).

However, after setting up a deliberate similarity between Jasper and Headstone, Dickens uses similitic characterisation to describe Jasper in an atypically obscure fashion. If Jasper's character is simply an extension of Headstone's, or if Jasper's trajectory in *Edwin Drood* is meant to be some kind of consummation of Headstone's own struggles, Dickens seems to retreat from this position in the way that he describes Jasper. On the surface at least, the similitic language used to characterise both Headstone and Jasper exaggerates salient features of their external appearance. Jasper's 'hungry' and fixated look at his nephew Edwin is one of the first things noted about him. As he listens to Edwin, 'Mr Jasper's steadiness of face and figure becomes so marvellous that his breathing seems to have stopped' until he becomes 'a breathing man again'; and when Edwin playfully addresses Rosa's portrait, Jasper watches him attentively even after Edwin finishes speaking, 'as if in a kind of fascination attendant on his strong interest in the youthful spirit that he loves so well.' The hint of irony already demonstrates that Jasper is deliberately posturing. Dickens repeatedly refers to his statuesque attitude until the close of the scene, when Jasper 'dissolves his attitude, and they go out together' (Ch. 2). That slow and 'hungry' fixation of Jasper's gaze echoes Bradley Headstone's methodically slow manner 'that would be better described as one of lying in wait' (Bk 2, Ch. 1). Nevertheless, the description of Jasper suggests that he is adopting a pose, while Headstone's description reveals his true interior fixation.

Headstone's obsessiveness is shown in his drawn-out conversation with Roger 'Rogue' Riderhood after once more being tauntingly led around London by Eugene:

So slow were the schoolmaster's thoughts, and so indistinct his purposes when they were but tributary to the one absorbing purpose – or rather when, like dark trees under a stormy sky, they only lined the long vista at

the end of which he saw those two figures of Wrayburn and Lizzie on which his eyes were fixed – that at least a good half-mile was traversed before he spoke again. (Bk 3, Ch. 11)

The long suspension with its awkward syntax of accumulated clauses shows that everything is subordinate to his obsessive internal gaze upon those two figures. As with Jasper, Headstone's external paralysis is figuratively depicted; however, it also obviously indicates his interior paralysis as well. As seen in Chapter Five, Dickens's similitic language can indicate the mind-style of a character, fixing a character's interiority into a certain mould of thought, and Headstone follows this trend. His thoughts are precisely like trees lining the 'long vista,' etc. That image of foreboding watchfulness is the essence of his thought process. Meanwhile, with Jasper, there is an element of performance in his frozen attitude. His fixed gaze can be interpreted as sinister, especially with the use of the word 'hungry'; but it is not easy to read more into his barely breathing posture, which is qualified by doubly approximating language: he gazes 'as if in a kind of fascination attendant on his strong interest' in a beloved nephew. In the end, Jasper 'dissolves his attitude,' showing that he, the character, is the one in control of the frozen imagery. The narrator of *Edwin Drood* seems to relinquish the control he holds over the character description. This impression is supported by the fact that the chapter is written in the present tense, like many of the chapters with Jasper in *Edwin Drood*.

Like *Bleak House*, both *Edwin Drood* and *Our Mutual Friend* alternate between present and past tenses; but unlike *Bleak House*, the narration is always in the third person in both tenses. It is difficult to assess the effect of the present tense in *Our Mutual Friend*: it is not often used and seems to be mainly for scenes of heightened emotion or suspense, but it is also used for the facetious social dinners; different tenses do not appear to be reserved for specific characters. In *Edwin Drood*, on the other hand,

Jasper noticeably appears mainly in chapters with the present tense. In these instances, the present-tense narrative achieves a sense of immediacy: the similitude language reflects merely external observation where the narrator cannot necessarily access the interiority of the characters. John Mullan comments, 'Whenever we have access to John Jasper's consciousness we are in the present tense; where he is seen only from the outside, we go to the past.'<sup>17</sup> It is true that the effect of the characters' passions, Jasper's included, is more immediate in the present tense; however, I argue that the present tense only intensifies the helpless feeling of being an outside observer of Jasper, since (as will briefly be discussed in [Section iii](#)) the reader is privy only once to Jasper's actual thoughts. In *Our Mutual Friend*, meanwhile, the similitude language of the past tense narrative maintains the narrator's control over the character description, confirming Headstone's interiority. For example, the mechanical imagery of his 'thoroughly decent' schoolmaster clothing reveals Headstone's awkwardness in adapting to his environment: 'He was never seen in any other dress, and yet there was a certain stiffness in his manner of wearing this, as if there were a want of adaptation between him and it, recalling some mechanics in their holiday clothes.' If Dickens had stopped there, the only implication might be that Headstone, having laboriously risen from a lower-class situation, feels uncomfortable in his now respectable position. The formal stiffness of the clothes and Headstone's own stiffness in fitting into them cleverly plays into a reflection on this attitude. However, the comparison is extended to identify Headstone with the figurative machinery: 'He had acquired mechanically a great store of teacher's knowledge. He could do mental arithmetic mechanically, sing at sight mechanically, blow various wind instruments mechanically, even play the great church organ mechanically' (Bk 2, Ch. 1).

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<sup>17</sup> Mullan, *The Artful Dickens*, p. 93.

His efforts to conform to societal expectations are caricaturised by the mechanical imagery. In *Edwin Drood*, Jasper as choirmaster echoes Headstone's mechanical fulfilment of his role, especially in the connection with music. The narrator comments on Jasper's isolation after Edwin's disappearance:

Constantly exercising an Art which brought him into mechanical harmony with others, and which could not have been pursued unless he and they had been in the nicest mechanical relations and unison, it is curious to consider that the spirit of the man was in moral accordance or interchange with nothing around him. (Ch. 23)

While Headstone's mechanical behaviour reveals his determination to fit into his station (he 'had toiled hard' to get what he had and 'had to hold it now that it was gotten') and repress a side of himself that he prefers 'to be forgotten' (Bk 2, Ch. 1), Jasper's outward 'mechanical harmony with others' is only an external appearance, which the narrator is quick to point out. In fact, he lives apart from others, even before his nephew's disappearance (cf. Ch. 2, Ch. 23). Jasper's mechanical harmony is a façade, and thus the figurative image hides rather than reveals his true character.

Furthermore, if the reader is not meant to fathom Jasper's thoughts or motives, the narrator also makes it clear that Jasper's thoughts are not evident to the other characters. When Jasper and Mr Septimus Crisparkle meet 'daily under the Cathedral roof' after Edwin's disappearance they remain a mystery one to the other even after half a year has gone by:

It is not likely that they ever met, though so often, without the thoughts of each reverting to the subject. It is not likely that they ever met, though so often, without a sensation on the part of each that the other was a perplexing secret to him. Jasper as the denouncer and pursuer of Neville Landless, and Mr Crisparkle as his consistent advocate and protector, must at least have stood sufficiently in opposition, to have speculated with keen interest each on the steadiness and next direction of the other's designs. (Ch. 23)

The hypothetical framing of the passage with the phrases *it is not likely that* and *must at least have* shows that the thoughts of both are guesswork on the part of the narrator.

However, Crisparkle himself is not, in fact, a mystery: the reader has direct access to his thoughts, in this moment as elsewhere. Questioning what Jasper might be thinking about Rosa's departure, 'Mr Crisparkle could not determine this in his mind' (Ch. 23).

Meanwhile, Jasper's 'determined reticence' (Ch. 23) leaves his thoughts undecipherable.

Thus, the reader knows what Crisparkle is 'speculating' about Jasper, but like Crisparkle, the reader cannot 'determine in his mind' what Jasper himself is thinking.

The description of Jasper is confirmed as being deliberately opaque and necessary to the mystery of the novel.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, there is no mystery behind Headstone's ambition and murderous passion, and certainly no mystery behind the similes used to describe him. In his nightly pursuit of Eugene, for example, Headstone is described figuratively 'like a haggard head suspended in the air: so completely did the force of his expression cancel his figure' (Bk 3, Ch. 10). The likeness is extended when Headstone is described as a 'haggard head' going upstairs, etc. (Bk 3, Ch. 11). The grotesqueness and the repetition of the image thus has a caricaturising effect. Like Mr Boundery in *Hard Times* or Mr Pancks in *Little Dorrit* the repetition of the image puts Headstone at the mercy, as it were, of the narrator's description. It is not that Dickens becomes fixed on a certain image, but rather that the characters themselves have a fixed frame of mind. Headstone's fixedness of purpose is evident even to other characters. When Riderhood sees Headstone's figurative 'haggard head' he knows that it is a true depiction of his inner state, telling him: "And wishing that your elth may be better than your looks, which your inside must be bad indeed if it's on the footing of your out" (Bk 3, Ch. 11). Headstone's inside *is* 'on the footing of his out': it is revealed by the similitic language and it is

obvious to another character as well. Like Riderhood, and unlike Crisparkle in his observation of Jasper, the reader can easily determine Headstone's motives and thoughts. Meaning to throw suspicion on Riderhood for Eugene's (attempted) murder, Headstone has captured every detail of Riderhood's dress, which is 'exactly reproduced in the dress he now wore.' Moreover, '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 [...] as if they were his own' (Bk 4, Ch. 1). He appears more at home in these clothes than in his schoolmaster's dress – reminding the reader of the above description of Headstone as a 'mechanic in holiday clothes' (Bk 2, Ch. 1). Riderhood sees through Headstone's ruse and uses the evidence of the discarded clothes to blackmail him. In this attempt to control his own appearance, Headstone is as little able to hide his interiority as he is when his character is figuratively depicted. The descriptions will accurately, 'revengefully' reveal his motivations.

One simile is almost exactly the same in both novels and shows how Dickens uses simile differently to characterise the two men. In *Our Mutual Friend*, when Riderhood has made his blackmailing intentions clear after the attempted murder, Headstone is at the end of his emotional tether. Approaching Riderhood's lock-house window, Headstone keeps his 'eyes upon the light with a strange intensity, *as if he were taking aim at it*' (Bk 4, Ch. 15; emphasis added). In Chapter Four of this thesis, it was shown how this image was first used by Dickens in an 1854 letter to Frank Stone and then afterwards used repeatedly in *Great Expectations*. The same image is in fact used in his three last novels. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the image reflects Headstone's feelings of powerlessness, as the following passage shows:

In the distance before him lay the place where he had struck the worse than useless blows that mocked him with Lizzie's presence there as Eugene's wife. In the distance behind him, lay the place where the children with

pointing arms had seemed to devote him to the demons in crying out his name. Within there, where the light was, was the man who as to both distances could give him up to ruin. To these limits had his world shrunk. (Bk 4, Ch. 15)

The figurative ‘taking aim’ with his gaze reflects a visible facial expression, yet it is also an externalisation of Headstone’s inability to see anything other than his frustrated pursuit of Lizzie, his failure to kill his rival, and his looming disgrace. The simile shows his impotence when it stops short at ‘taking aim.’ In *Edwin Drood*, the same simile suggests something different. During his night out with Durdles the stonemason, Jasper comes across Mr Crisparkle and Neville Landless and watches them, looking at Neville ‘as though his eye were at the trigger of a loaded rifle, and he had covered him, and were going to fire.’ The normally stolid Durdles is struck by the expression of ‘destructive power’ on Jasper’s face (Ch. 12). As with Headstone, the simile demonstrates the look that can be observed on the character’s face. However, the external description appears to be something only observed by Durdles. Indeed, Jasper ‘bursts into a fit of laughter’ and Durdles is nonplussed by this rapid change of attitude. The initial expression of ‘destructive power’ may only have been Durdles’s observation, after all.

The figurative language, therefore, teases the reader by remaining an external observation and giving us only an ‘implied interiority,’ as Juliet John calls it.<sup>18</sup> Whereas Dickensian mind-style externalises a character’s interiority, in the case of *Edwin Drood* this ‘implied interiority’ is a strategy of the mystery narrative: Jasper’s character is granted a certain independence from the narrator. The similitic imagery cannot be taken as caricature, for it is not obviously exaggerating an aspect of his mind and making it ‘so like as to be almost a caricature.’ Jasper is in control even of his own interiority.

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<sup>18</sup> John, *Dickens’s Villains*, p. 235.



In Headstone's case, the same similitude imagery demonstrates that he is *not* in control: his world has 'shrunk' and his plans have failed. He is not even in control of how much he reveals about himself. When Riderhood wishes that Headstone's "elth may be better than your looks," the schoolmaster is 'Startled by the implication that his face revealed too much of his mind' (Bk 3, Ch. 11). The contrast between the impotence of the one character and the power of the other is linked to their sexual obsession – Headstone with Lizzie and Jasper with Rosa. In the separate 'declaration' scenes of the two novels, the similarity of some similes is qualified by this note of control or lack thereof. As Headstone approaches the place of his meeting with Lizzie, we see that a 'sun-dial on a church-wall has the look, in its useless black shade, of having failed in its business enterprise and stopped payment for ever.' It serves as a caricature of the schoolmaster without being a direct description of him. Just as the sun-dial appears to disadvantage hidden in the shadows, so Headstone also appears to disadvantage 'lurking at a corner,' waiting for Lizzie; he himself feels keenly that he does not look his best, as he tells Lizzie 'You see me at my greatest disadvantage' (Bk 2, Ch. 15). The failure of the 'business enterprise' he is about to embark on, or his proposal to Lizzie, is already (literally) foreshadowed by the sun-dial. Jasper, meanwhile, is far from being at a disadvantage when he declares his obsessive love for Rosa in *Edwin Drood* (in the present tense): 'If he had chosen his time for finding her at a disadvantage, he could have done no better' (all Rosa's protectors being absent). A sun-dial in shadow also appears in this scene, and is in fact, the chapter title: 'Shadow on the Sun-Dial.'<sup>19</sup> Jasper leans against the sun-dial, 'setting, as it were, his black mark upon the very face of day'

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Bridgham has noted the coincidence but does not comment on it except as a way to link the two scenes: 'Indecent Proposals: Plotting Marriage in *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 52.2 (2021), 320–37 (p. 330).

and Rosa's 'flight is arrested by horror as she looks at him' (Ch. 19). The sun-dial does not cast its shadow on Jasper as it does on Headstone. While the sun-dial in *Our Mutual Friend* foreshadows Headstone's failure with Lizzie, in *Edwin Drood*, the reversal of the image symbolises Jasper's power over Rosa, and even apparently over 'the very face of day.' Jasper is in such command of the scene that he dictates how a casual observer will see it as well: "I do not forget how many windows command a view of us," he says, glancing towards them. "I will not touch you again." The windows represent a possible audience for Jasper's performed nonchalance, and he extinguishes Rosa's earlier hope that those very windows might be a means of escape for her: 'many of [the house's] windows command the garden, and she can be seen as well as heard, there, and can shriek in the free air and run away. Such is the wild idea that flutters through her mind' (Ch. 19).

In *Our Mutual Friend*, it is Headstone who seeks help from the windows. Jasper's slight glance is in marked contrast to Headstone's agitation: 'Struggling with himself, and by times looking up at the deserted windows of the houses as if there could be anything written in their grimy panes that would help him, he paced the whole pavement at [Lizzie's] side, before he spoke again' (Bk 2, Ch. 15). The *as if* phrase accurately reflects Headstone's utter helplessness as he tries to communicate his passion for Lizzie, and he also feels helpless before her strength of character:

With much of the dignity of courage, as she recalled her self-reliant life and her right to be free from accountability to this man, she released her arm from his grasp and stood looking full at him. She had never been so handsome in his eyes. A shade came over them while he looked back at her, as if she drew the very light out of them to herself. (Bk 2, Ch. 15)

It is Lizzie who compels Headstone rather than vice versa, and the imagery of shadows and light recalls once again the sun-dial in shadow. Jasper's shadow on the sun-dial, meanwhile, seems to have power over Rosa's face as well the 'face of day.' Earlier in

the novel, when accompanying Rosa's singing by playing the piano, Jasper watches Rosa as she sings, 'and ever and again hinted the one note, as though it were a low whisper from himself' until she 'shrieks out' and puts her hands over her eyes (Ch. 7). She cannot bear him to look at her with his hypnotic gaze, and a merely imagined 'whisper' is enough to overpower her. The whisper in the musical note and the malevolent effect of his shadow paralyzes Rosa with fear.

Dickens's own fascination with and amateur practice of mesmerism is well-known.<sup>20</sup> While in his own experience of it, hypnosis was a positive healing force, it is evident that Jasper's own mesmerizing stare is linked to sexual domination and terror.<sup>21</sup> It is also linked in the narrative to a double mode of existence. The mesmerizing gaze of Jasper that has 'some strange power of suddenly including [Rosa's] sketch over the chimney-piece' in chapter two finds an echo in the next chapter in the passage describing Miss Twinkleton's double existence:

As, in some cases [...] of animal magnetism,<sup>22</sup> there are two states of consciousness which never clash, but each of which pursues its separate course as though it were continuous instead of broken [...], so Miss Twinkleton has two distinct and separate phases of being. (Ch. 3)

When she is in her 'scholastic state of existence,' Miss Twinkleton 'is as ignorant as a granite pillar' of the 'sprightly' Miss Twinkleton by night and vice versa (Ch. 3). The description of Miss Twinkleton suggests an analogy for Jasper's own double life. Harry Stone says that Jasper's secrets represent the city of Cloisterham itself with its peaceful

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. William Hughes, 'Preamble: Animal Magnetism - A Farce?', in *That Devil's Trick: Hypnotism and the Victorian Popular Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 1–20 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18mbg3j.4>> [accessed 14 May 2022].

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Fred Kaplan, 'The Sexuality of Power', in *Dickens and Mesmerism: The Hidden Springs of Fiction* (Boston: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 187–215 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x16nr.14>> [accessed 14 May 2022].

<sup>22</sup> Hughes, p. 3: Animal magnetism was the name given in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Austrian doctor Franz Mesmer to his fluid-based theory of clairvoyant treatment. Often called 'mesmerism' it was arguably the basis of many 19<sup>th</sup> century hypnotic practices.

existence hiding the bones of the dead.<sup>23</sup> However, Miss Twinkleton's two states of existence provide a strong clue that Jasper is not so much pretending to be someone he is not as much as he is practically two different people. In his opium-induced state of existence, he may be completely unaware of what he does in his sober moments, and vice versa. In this light, the damning evidence of what the woman overhears him say in the opium den, may not be so damning after all.<sup>24</sup> He comes close to admitting that he murdered Edwin, but he is also clearly in an intoxicated state.

The narrative makes Jasper's two 'phases of being' quite obvious. In one phase, Jasper is calm and in control. In his night-excursion with Durdles, the similitude description of Jasper's house could be a description of himself:

One might fancy that the tide of life was stemmed by Mr Jasper's own Gate House. The murmur of the tide is heard beyond; but no wave passes the archway, over which his lamp burns red behind his curtain, as if the building were a Lighthouse. (Ch. 12)

The alert and watchful nature of the lighthouse is not protective but ominous with its red light and its stemming of the tide of life at its door. On the night of Edwin's disappearance, that red light 'burns steadily' even as the storm rages. This is like Jasper himself. Before going 'up the postern stair' that night, he sings softly, beautifully, and it 'seems as if a false note were not within his power to-night, and as if nothing could hurry or retard him' (Ch. 14). This is a peaceful portrait that contrasts with the raging storm. Indeed, he seems almost to calm the storm with his attitude: the storm lulls by morning: 'with occasional wild charges, like a wounded monster dying, it drops and

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<sup>23</sup> Harry Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1994), p. 378.

<sup>24</sup> In chapter 23, in the opium den, Jasper tells the woman:

'Well; I have told you I did it here hundreds of thousands of times. What do I say? I did it millions and billions of times. I did it so often, and through such vast expanses of time, that when it was really done, it seemed not worth the doing, it was done so soon.'

'That's the journey you have been away upon,' she quietly remarks.

He glares at her as he smokes; and then, his eyes becoming filmy, answers: 'That's the journey.'

sinks; and at full daylight it is dead' (Ch. 14). Its tide of life has been stemmed. Jasper then abandons the calm posture and bursts on the scene of the damage left by the storm: 'All the assembled eyes are turned on Mr Jasper, white, half dressed, panting, and clinging to the rail before the Minor Canon's house' (Ch. 14). The curious synecdoche of 'assembled eyes' points to the performative aspect of Jasper's agitation. He wishes to be observed before the 'assembled eyes' of a theatre of his own making. Harry Stone observes:

John Jasper, like Bradley Headstone, has two divergent aspects to his character, but unlike Headstone, whose passionate aspect lay long suppressed, Jasper's dual nature is schizophrenic and duplicitous. Under his fair, controlled exterior lurks an intense and ever-present iniquity and violence.<sup>25</sup>

However, Headstone's character does not have two divergent aspects. The similitic language makes it clear from the beginning that his forced mechanical attitude manifests an earnest self-repression. This aspect of him is constantly emphasised by similitic caricature. Meanwhile, Jasper's double life is evident from the beginning in that the figurative language repeatedly depicts one or other of these phases. Neither phase can be fully identified through similitic caricature because neither phase is 'so like as to be almost a caricature.' The figurative description is 'anti-caricature' and resists making Jasper a true embodiment of Headstone's 'type.'

### *iii.* Subjective Similes

The different narrative strategies of *Our Mutual Friend* and *Edwin Drood* determine how Dickens uses simile in his last two novels. This is especially evident when the

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<sup>25</sup> Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens*, p. 378.

similic description of a character is mediated through another's subjectivity. In *Our Mutual Friend*, this mediation confirms the narrator's figurative description, whereas in *Edwin Drood*, the independent subjectivity of the character's impression is emphasised. Like the 'assembled eyes' witnessing Jasper's agitation in the passage [quoted above](#), in *Edwin Drood*, the reader mainly sees Jasper through another character's eyes. From the beginning of Jasper's interview with Rosa, discussed above, the reader is privy to Rosa's thoughts and feelings and his are only reflected in how she perceives him:

The moment she sees him from the porch, leaning on the sun-dial, the old horrible feeling of being compelled by him, asserts its hold upon her. She feels that she would even then go back, but that he draws her feet towards him. (Ch. 19)

Throughout the interview, it is her subjective impressions that are referenced (Ch. 19).

The next chapter is set in the past tense. It is clear that it is from Rosa's viewpoint and that she has moved from being subjected to his influence to reflecting on it:

Glancing out at window, even now [...] the sight of the sun-dial on which he had leaned when he declared himself, turned her cold, and made her shrink from it, as though he had invested it with some awful quality from his own nature. (Ch. 20)

Jasper seems to 'invest' the sun-dial, Rosa's portrait, and Rosa herself in her impressions of him with an 'awful quality from his own nature' – and yet it is unclear what *is* his own nature.

Jasper's words during the interview with Rosa presumably reflect his thoughts and feelings; yet they also reveal a fundamentally double-sided nature that is hard to interpret, as when he tells Rosa that he has always loved her even while he acted a part for Edwin's sake. The implication is that it is difficult to know when he is *not* acting a part. He admits his two-sidedness and simultaneously acts it out: 'If anything could make his words more hideous to her than they are in themselves, it would be the contrast between the violence of his looks and delivery, and the composure of his assumed

attitude' (Ch. 19). This 'assumed attitude' is constantly demonstrated by the similitic language in Dickens's characterisation of Jasper. For example, Jasper leaves the Nuns' House 'with no greater show of agitation than is visible in the effigy of Mr Sapsea's father opposite' (Ch. 19). This wooden likeness of Mr Sapsea's father has been described in the beginning as being admired for the 'chastity' of its execution 'and the natural appearance of the little finger, hammer, and pulpit' (Ch. 4). Ironically, Jasper's posturing is not a 'natural appearance'; his words to Rosa, at least, have revealed a threatening passion under his cool façade. The simile is thus purposefully opaque, revealing Jasper's pretence only because it is evidently a mask. Unlike Rosa's portrait which is 'revengefully' like its original, Jasper's various portraits, drawn by the similitic language, are not transparent. As when Durdles observes Jasper's facial expression when looking at Neville 'as though his eye were at the trigger of a loaded rifle,' the reader can only observe and like Crisparkle can only speculate on Jasper's true intentions. Even when Jasper falls into a fit upon hearing that Edwin and Rosa had broken off their engagement before Edwin's disappearance, this reaction is mediated through Mr Grewgious: 'Mr Grewgious saw a lead-coloured face in the easy chair, and on its surface dreadful starting drops or bubbles, as if of steel' (Ch. 15). Jasper is not pretending to faint at the reception of this news, so it is easy to be convinced of Jasper's guilt after this moment. Nevertheless, the narrative subtly refuses to commit to an 'objective' perspective by focusing on Mr Grewgious's point of view – 'Mr Grewgious saw' – and thus Grewgious's subjective suspicions. In this sense, the observations of Rosa, Durdles, Mr Crisparkle, and Mr Grewgious all belong to that audience of 'assembled eyes' in the theatre Jasper creates for himself.

In *Edwin Drood*, Dickens mediates his figurative description through different characters, and this is evident in the case of Mr Crisparkle. When Crisparkle first meets

Neville and Helena Landless, after they are described as having ‘a certain air upon them of hunter and huntress; yet withal a certain air of being the objects of the chase, rather than the followers,’ the following passage indicates that the ‘rough mental notes made in the first five minutes by Mr Crisparkle, would have read thus, *verbatim*’ (Ch. 6). These are Crisparkle’s own observations, and indeed his ‘notes’ continue in the next paragraph. What might be presumably an omniscient narrator’s more ‘objective’ description of Neville and Helena becomes Crisparkle’s subjective impression of them. Crisparkle’s thoughts also mediate the similitic treatment of Mr Honeythunder. The activity of Honeythunder’s ‘Haven of Philanthropy’ is elaborately compared to the activity of pugilists, with the pugilists coming off much better than the philanthropists for the analogy. That this is Crisparkle’s own analogy is evident when we read, ‘Mr Crisparkle was so completely lost in musing on these similarities and dissimilarities [...] that his name was twice called before he heard it’ (Ch. 17). In this way the narrative prepares the reader to interpret any further figurative analogy as Crisparkle’s own observation. Indeed, the description of Honeythunder’s oratorical stunts, his ‘platform folding of his arms, and his platform nod of abhorrent reflection after each short sentence of a word,’ is clearly a reflection of Crisparkle’s own thoughts; for he then exposes this ‘platform’ behaviour to Honeythunder’s face:

‘I hoped when I came in here that I might be under no necessity of commenting on the introduction of platform manners or platform manoeuvres. But you have given me such a specimen of both, that I should be a fit subject for both if I remained silent respecting them.’ (Ch. 17)

He cannot *remain* silent, implying that he has been silently making the same observations as the narrator ostensibly has. Honeythunder appears to be a certain Dickensian ‘type.’ There are echoes of Mr Bounderby in *Hard Times*, for example. However, whereas Bounderby is definitively exposed as a ‘windbag’ through the



unmediated similitic language in the narrative, the extra layer of Mr Crisparkle's personal observations in *Edwin Drood* limits the caricaturising effect of simile. Both Crisparkle and Honeythunder, by this token, are as independent of the narrator as Jasper himself is.

Meanwhile, in *Our Mutual Friend*, another character's subjective impression is only a reflection of the narrator's own similitic description. Gaffer Hexam is described as a 'hook-nosed man, and with that and his bright eyes and his ruffled head, [he] bore a certain likeness to a roused bird of prey.' Riderhood then confirms this 'certain likeness' by calling out to him in the boat, "I a'most think you're like the wulturs, pardner, and scent 'em out!" (i.e. corpses in the water, one of which he has in tow) (Bk 1, Ch. 1). He simply repeats what has already been described. Moreover, the likeness is repeated independently of Riderhood's impressions. When Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn come to Gaffer's home, he is seen as 'a figure at the red fire' who 'raised its ruffled head, and looked like a bird of prey' (Ch. 3). In other words, the caricature of Gaffer, linked as it is to his mode of subsistence, exists independently of Riderhood's subjective impression. The likenesses to a bird of prey or to a scavenger bird is occupationally appropriate for Gaffer's scavenging of the Thames, and it is a likeness that permeates even the structure and plot of the book. The chapter-titles take up the likeness: 'Tracking the Bird of Prey' and 'The Bird of Prey brought down' – where Gaffer Hexam's death foils Riderhood's plot to pin the Harmon murder on him – and 'More Birds of Prey' where John Rokesmith (Harmon) forces Riderhood to admit the falseness of his accusation against Gaffer Hexam. The book-title 'Birds of a Feather' also links the image of birds to different plotlines, such as the scheming of the Lammles and Mr Wegg. In this way, Dickens shows the narrative's proprietorship of the figurative analogy.

Indeed, Dickens takes pains in *Our Mutual Friend* to show that his characters cannot see what he sees. As Gaffer Hexam and his daughter Lizzie tow the body behind, it seems to be alive and struggling: 'A neophyte might have fancied that the ripples passing over it were dreadfully like faint changes of expression on a sightless face; but Gaffer was no neophyte and had no fancies' (Bk 1, Ch. 1). Dickens's reference to a 'neophyte' hints at the initiation into some religious or magical rites of fancy. Gaffer – not an initiate into these artistic rites – cannot imagine such things. In *Edwin Drood*, however, the opening passage shows that John Jasper *is* a 'neophyte' in terms of imaginative fancies – although drug-induced. As he looks at the people around him in the opium den, 'He notices that the woman has opium-smoked herself into a strange likeness of the Chinaman. His form of cheek, eye, and temple, and his color, are repeated in her.' Jasper is the one drawing that likeness; and the similitic language that follows is closely linked to his intent observation of the woman: 'As he watches the spasmodic shoots and darts that break out of her face and limbs, like fitful lightning out of a dark sky, some contagion in them seizes upon him.' He needs to sit down until he has recovered from 'this unclean spirit of imitation' (Ch. 1). Jasper, like Mr Crisparkle, and unlike Gaffer Hexam, is allowed to share in Dickens's own 'spirit of imitation.' It is important to note that this opening scene is the one and only time that the reader is privy to Jasper's own thoughts. Perhaps the reader is thus catching a true glimpse of one, at least, of Jasper's two phases of existence. Thereafter, as amply discussed above, his interior remains a mystery undeciphered by way he is described.

iv. Conclusion: Relinquishing an Authorial Signature

Dickens shows with this last novel that he is willing to relinquish ownership of his authorial signature in terms of his similitic language. The similes are not exclusive to Dickens's narrator-persona, shared as they are by other subjective consciousnesses. They also resist the extravagant truth-telling quality of caricature that marks his character-descriptions in previous novels. If characters in previous novels have seemed somehow stuck in their mind-styles, Dickens experiments at the last with similitic characterisation to allow his characters some flexibility. Opaque figurative language or layers of consciousness within the narrative grant his characters more autonomy.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, the similitic descriptions show us the reality beneath the façade. Indeed, the novel's plot revolves around putting on appearances (as the name Veneering represents) and revealing true motives. It is not so much mystery as social commentary. In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the similes precisely serve the mystery of the narrative, teasing us with the sense of what we cannot know about a person. In a sense, *Edwin Drood* is Dickens's final exploration of the sentiment he expressed in *A Tale of Two Cities*: 'A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other' (Bk 1, Ch. 3). Philip Collins has argued that Dickens's last two novels are not meant to be 'whodunnits' but 'psychological studies' of Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend* and John Jasper in *Edwin Drood*.<sup>26</sup> He is not wrong with regards to *Our Mutual Friend*: there is literally no mystery about the attempted murder of Eugene – and very little about the identify of John Rokesmith. However, Collins is not necessarily picking up on all of the narrative clues in *Edwin Drood* when he argues, 'Jasper has killed Edwin, and we are never

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<sup>26</sup> Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, p. 284.

intended to doubt it, and that the “mysteries” elsewhere in the novel are of less interest than the psychology of the known murderer.<sup>27</sup> He insists that ‘It would be a very stupid and inattentive reader who could fail to see that John Jasper is a wicked man, that he has “cause, and will, and strength, and means” to kill Edwin.’<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, attentive readers *have* offered counter-evidence to Jasper being the murderer. The debate about ‘whodunnit’ in *Edwin Drood* continues – a debate that Pete Orford has summarised in his book on *Charles Dickens’s Unfinished Novel and Our Endless Attempts to End It* (2018).<sup>29</sup> The unending debate is one which Dickensian simile, for once, is not willing to offer a definitive conclusion.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>29</sup> Pete Orford, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood: Charles Dickens’s Unfinished Novel and Our Endless Attempts to End It* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books Ltd., 2018); Pete Orford writes about some of these approaches as well in ‘The Mystery of Edwin Drood’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Robert L. Patten, John O. Jordan, and Catherine Waters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 299–311.

## Conclusion: The Importance of Being Similic

### *i.* Challenging the Limits of Imagination

Dickens's deliberate and experimental use of simile distinguishes his authorial signature from the beginning of his career to the end, as this thesis has demonstrated – from the initial discussion of Dickens's transition from reporter to famous author to the last chapter's examination of characterization in his final two novels. Dickens's similic language is an effective measure of how his style developed through decades of writing. Although simile has received insufficient attention in Dickens scholarship until recently – and never in a full-length study as in this thesis – it is very involved in several aspects of Dickens's style that have often been discussed. His exaggeration, his showmanship, his humour, and his caricatures, to name only some aspects of Dickens's style, can all be assessed through his use of simile. The aim of this conclusion is to emphasise the thorough exploration in this thesis of simile in the works of Dickens – which include his early reporting, his novels, and his letters. After a general overview in the first section, the second section will review the development of simile of the Dickensian quality according to the stages of his career. The third section will consider what benefits a consideration of Dickensian simile holds for literary and linguistic research.

The first significant finding from examining similic language in all of Dickens's works is that if similes in his earlier works point to an exuberant and apparently attention-grabbing strategy, similes in his later works are more consistently and carefully crafted to create that peculiarly 'Dickensian' characterization that is unique to his style:

larger-than-life character traits that seem to capture the entirety of a character's essence. This characterising – indeed *caricaturising* – use of simile already begins to take shape in *Dombey and Son*, the novel that has been typically identified as the first of Dickens's more mature works. For example, when the decrepit Mrs Skewton's languid attitude in her wheeled chair is compared to Cleopatra reclining in her galley (Ch. 21), she is thereafter frequently called Cleopatra. Mrs Skewton does not actually need the wheeled chair and only uses it in order to recline 'with careful carelessness, after the Cleopatra model' (Ch. 21). Thus, turning that first similitic comparison into a case of identity, captures not only her permanent physical attitude of reclining – '(which she never varied)' (Ch. 21) – but also the entire psychology of this woman as she constantly seeks to appear youthful and beautiful. Nevertheless, as the last chapter has shown, although this caricaturising language typically reveals the motivations of characters in a transparent, even brutal way, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens has recourse to similitic description to show that a character's motivations can also remain a mystery, as in the case of John Jasper.

Whether it is to display his linguistic prowess, or to reveal (or not) a character's motivations, Dickens gives simile preferential treatment in his narrative style. This is more obviously shown when Dickens gives occasional nods to simile in his fiction by naming it explicitly. The narrator of *A Christmas Carol*, for example, questions the appropriateness of the idiom *dead as a door-nail*, but says that 'the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it' (Stave I). Dickens's tongue-in-cheek commentary, [discussed in Chapter Three](#), has already 'disturbed' the simile. By pointing to the accepted absurdity of the idiom, Dickens shows that simile is not necessarily explanatory or clarifying. Further, he himself will often use hyperbolic or absurd similitic imagery to show that something is 'much easier to

be imagined than described,'<sup>1</sup> as a reporter might say. This is shown in the description of Captain Cuttle in *Dombey and Son*:

The Captain was one of those timber-looking men, suits of oak as well as hearts, whom it is almost impossible for the liveliest imagination to separate from any part of their dress, however insignificant. Accordingly, when Walter knocked at the door, and the Captain instantly poked his head out of one of his little front windows, and hailed him, with the hard glazed hat already on it, and the shirt-collar like a sail, and the wide suit of blue, all standing as usual, Walter was as fully persuaded that he was always in that state, as if the Captain had been a bird and those had been his feathers.

Unlike a reporter, who would stop at the 'impossibility' of describing a situation – and indeed unlike Dickens's own use of similar journalistic phraseology when he was a reporter – Dickens's description of Captain Cuttle illustrates the imaginative 'impossibility' of separating Cuttle himself from his external appearance by comparing him to a bird perpetually attached to its feathers. Although the simile belongs to young Walter Gay in this passage, sometimes Dickens mischievously shows the limited imagination of his own characters when it comes to creative comparison-making. Mr Jarndyce in *Bleak House* describes his friend Mr Boythorn as being of tremendous stature, 'with his head thrown back like an old soldier [...], his hands like a clean blacksmith's, and his lungs! There's no simile for his lungs. Talking, laughing, or snoring, they make the beams of the house shake.' Esther Summerson and her companions then observe that 'Mr Jarndyce sat enjoying the image of his friend Boythorn' (Ch. 9). Jarndyce has found relatively easy comparisons for his friend's head and hands, but 'there's no simile for his lungs,' which are literally Boythorn's most speaking attributes. The enjoyment Jarndyce derives from contemplating his friend's image is likely tied to Boythorn's thunderous voice as his most characteristic trait. Jarndyce's enjoyment is a kind of negative enjoyment in this sense, pointing to the

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<sup>1</sup> Dickens, I, 'Horatio Sparkins,' p. 353.

impossibility of conveying a certain impression. Much as Mr Peggotty is at a loss to find an appropriate simile for Mrs Gummidge in *David Copperfield* (Ch. 51) ([quoted at the beginning of the thesis](#)), Mr Jarndyce links similitic imagery with hyperbolic impossibility of description. Nonetheless, where the characters fail, their creator rarely does.

Dickens challenges the limits of imagination that his characters demonstrate by offering similes that go far beyond ‘hands like a clean blacksmith’s.’ While still basing himself in the realm of what is familiar to his reader, he so distorts what is familiar as to make one’s head whirl like the spectator atop of Todgers’s in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. As noted [in the Introduction](#), Dorothy Van Ghent calls the similitic language in the Todgers’s passage ‘conservative,’ but the illusions the similes create are not – from the description of the Monument<sup>2</sup> that can be seen nearby ‘with every hair erect upon his golden head, as if the doings of the city frightened him’ to the chimney-pots ‘of a crook-backed shape [that] appeared to be maliciously holding themselves askew, that they might shut the prospect out and baffle Todgers’s.’ The imaginary viewer becomes ‘quite scared’ by the ‘hosts of objects’ he sees (Ch. 9). Dickens’s similes do not overtly compare the target reality to a separate source as a typically clarifying simile would do. The Monument is not standing erect, ‘like an old soldier,’ for example. The transformative effect that scares the spectator on Todgers’s roof would normally be called personification, or (more popularly in Dickens scholarship) animation or humanisation. Nevertheless, Dickens achieves this by using the similitic *as if* and *appeared*, making the figurative language ultimately a simile that uses as its source ‘human characteristics’ to describe

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<sup>2</sup> The Monument to the Great Fire of London, built 1671-77, stands 62 metres high at the junction of Fish Street Hill and Monument Street at the northern end of London Bridge: the spiky flames of the gilded urn at the top are the hairs ‘erect upon his golden head.’



the shapes and appearance of the target objects being viewed. Simile is thus essential to Dickens's audacious and idiosyncratic style.

While the frequency of simile is mainly consistent across Dickens's novels, with a few containing many more examples than others (cf. [Figure 1](#)), the chronological approach of this thesis has shown an evolution in Dickensian simile as it developed from the hyperbolic flair of his 'signature and brand' in the earliest of the *Sketches* to his final experimentation with similitic characterisation in *Edwin Drood*. Whether as a species of self-conscious showmanship or as a layered narrative strategy, simile is crucial to our understanding of the stages of Dickens's career, which the following section of this conclusion will review.

## ii. Dickens's Similitic Style Through the Years

For his prolific use of simile as such, Dickens was not unusual among Victorian writers in an 'age of analogy,' as shown [in the Introduction](#). However, from his earliest works, he exploits simile in unusual ways to reconfigure apparently unremarkable everyday realities. He pretends to take literally the accepted absurdity of such idiomatic similes as *dead as a door-nail* and by taking up other sayings to suit his own analogical purposes – as in the following passage from 'Greenwich Fair' (1835) in *Sketches by Boz*:

If the Parks be 'the lungs of London,' we wonder what Greenwich Fair is – a periodical breaking out, we suppose, a sort of spring-rash: a three days' fever, which cools the blood for six months afterwards, and at the expiration of which London is restored to its old habits of plodding industry, as suddenly and completely as if nothing had ever happened to disturb them. (p. 112)

Dickens builds facetiously on a saying of Sir William Pitt the Elder that MP William Wyndham had made popular in his 1808 speech on preserving Hyde Park from property

development.<sup>3</sup> William Pitt's pre-Victorian analogy of the parks being the lungs of London is typical of the Victorian scientific sensibility, which sought to explain new ideas through analogies with the known scientific world: as the lungs provide oxygen to the body, so the vegetation of the parks provides oxygen to the city. Dickens, meanwhile, twists the analogy to focus on an aberration in the human body, satirising Greenwich Fair as a rash or fever in the city's system. For most people, this visceral description draws on a common and unpleasant embodied experience, creating an image that is hard to un-see or even 'un-feel': the city not only functions on a scientific level, it also suffers from an itchy rash.

The example from 'Greenwich Fair' shows how Dickens's self-conscious exaggeration marked his early similitic style. This and the graphic nature of the comparison in earlier work caused some contemporary reviewers to consider his style 'vulgar' as was discussed [in Chapter Three](#). The prescriptivists of the era would have considered Dickens vulgar in a pejorative sense. However, in a positive sense, Dickens was vulgar in that his style was popular, and he knew it. He dared to describe people's common experiences, even the unpleasant pimply ones. He was only too aware of the rules, as seen from the many times Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* was copied and parodied in his work, and he was also probably aware of the negative criticism of certain similes which might 'offend the shade of Lindley Murray.'<sup>4</sup> Dickens's attitude towards Murray's prescriptivism has been discussed at length [in Chapter Three](#): what is important to note here is that Dickens's similitic style challenges what Murray considered the virtue of a good simile: 'The advantage of this figure arises from the illustration

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<sup>3</sup> William Wyndham, *Hyde Park* (London: House of Commons, 30 June 1808), Commons and Lords Hansard, the Official Report of debates in Parliament <[https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1808/jun/30/hyde-park#S1V0011P0\\_18080630\\_HOC\\_13](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1808/jun/30/hyde-park#S1V0011P0_18080630_HOC_13)> [accessed 1 May 2023].

<sup>4</sup> 'ART. III.-The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit', p. 76.

which the simile employed gives to the principal object; from the clearer view of it which it presents.<sup>5</sup> Dickens was prepared to be unconventional, shown by the inelegance of some comparisons and the frequent distortion of the ‘principal object’ of the comparison effected by his similes.

Dickens’s unconventional use of simile was a bid for popularity in his earliest writings. As discussed in Chapter Two, he followed the trend of similitic language in the comic writing of the day, but his own comparisons surpassed the facetiousness of his fellow writers in this regard. In a contemporary critique of the first number of *The Pickwick Papers*, one reviewer writes, “‘Boz’ is a rising writer; in his prosperous navigation he has but one shoal to beware of – extravagance. Yet even extravagance may be pardoned in him, when he makes it so laugh-provoking.”<sup>6</sup> The laugh-provoking extravagance must refer to style rather than plot since this is a response to the first number of *The Pickwick Papers*. The extravagance of his language can thus be discovered in passages such as the first description of Mr Pickwick:

There sat the man who had traced to their source the mighty ponds of Hampstead, and agitated the scientific world with his Theory of Tittlebats, as calm and unmoved as the deep waters of the one on a frosty day, or as a solitary specimen of the other in the inmost recesses of an earthen jar. (Ch. 1)

Besides employing the mock-grandiose phrase ‘mighty ponds,’ Dickens also comically exposes the ‘grand’ scientific pursuits of the Pickwickians by using them as sources for an odd comparison. Dickens’s similes served his commitment to popular entertainment.

Especially in the earlier novels, Dickens’s desire to entertain led to a certain ambivalence in his similitic style. People were entertained by comic extravagance, but

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<sup>5</sup> Murray, p. 216.

<sup>6</sup> ‘The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, Containing a Faithful Record of the Perambulations, Perils, Travels, Adventures, and Sporting Transactions of the Corresponding Members’, *The Metropolitan Magazine, 1833-1840*, 16.61 (1836), 15 <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/posthumous-papers-pickwick-club-containing/docview/6023035/se-2>> [accessed 21 October 2022].

they also loved the sentimental melodrama of the time, and Dickens catered to this form of entertainment as well. The drastic shift that can be seen between the comic-ridiculous and the tragic-melodramatic in early Dickens has been often noted but not connected to a particular linguistic phenomenon. G. K. Chesterton tied this dichotomy to what he considered Dickens's evident showmanship: 'Dickens had [...] the faults of the little boy who is kept up too late at night. The boy in such a case exhibits a psychological paradox; he is a little too irritable because he is a little too happy.'<sup>7</sup> Chesterton's explanation makes it seem that Dickens's extremes of hilarity and pathos are almost beyond his control. However, an analysis of simile in the early works shows a deliberate stylistic shift. When Dickens is catering to a melodramatic quality of writing, the similes in those passages reflect the 'stock' or cliché nature of the genre. He is careful not to use far-fetched comparisons when he is painting a sad or tragic picture, as when little Oliver in *Oliver Twist* is described as being so pale that he 'looked like death' (Ch. 19, quoted [in Chapter Two](#)). Unless the stylistic shift is seen as deliberate, it is difficult to reconcile such passages with Dickens's own parody of melodrama in these early books – as when the Crummles family in *Nicholas Nickleby* obviously relishes the typical roles in melodramatic theatre of the time. As noted [in Chapter Two](#), Mrs Crummles walks towards Nicholas and Smike 'as tragic actresses cross when they obey a stage direction' (Ch 23). It is because Dickens knew how to write according to melodramatic conventions that he could also parody them.

When Dickens's own bombastic style itself became a trend, which hack writers copied and parodied in their turn, he began to be even more experimental as he took ownership of what had become an authorial trademark. Thus, Dickens's later similes

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<sup>7</sup> Chesterton, p. 27.

style increasingly mingles the comic with the pathetic aspects of his fiction in purposefully incongruent ways: the extremes meet in such examples of the ‘grimly ludicrous’ that have been discussed in Chapter Six. *Great Expectations* is a prime example. Pip describes in an almost charming way the abusive manner in which he was brought up by his sister, Mrs Joe Gargery:

I think my sister must have had some general idea that I was a young offender whom an Accoucheur Policeman had taken up (on my birthday) and delivered over to her, to be dealt with according to the outraged majesty of the law. I was always treated as if I had insisted on being born in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion, and morality, and against the dissuading arguments of my best friends. Even when I was taken to have a new suit of clothes, the tailor had orders to make them like a kind of Reformatory, and on no account to let me have the free use of my limbs. (Bk 1, Ch. 4)

Pip attributes his smaller self’s natural discomfort in the stiff Sunday-best clothes of the era to his sister’s intense dislike of him, showing how much her attitude affected his childhood. Even if the older Pip can use humorous comparisons to describe the treatment of his younger self, the trauma is real. In adulthood, the narrator remarks upon his attitude upon hearing of his sister’s death: ‘Whatever my fortunes might have been, I could scarcely have recalled my sister with much tenderness.’ As Pip returns home for the funeral, ‘the times when I was a little helpless creature, and my sister did not spare me, vividly returned’ (Bk 2, Ch. 16). [In Chapter Six](#), it was shown how the tone shifts after these ruminations to a comically grotesque description of the funeral procession. This constant intermingling of the grim with the ludicrous is what characterises Dickens’s similitic style in *Great Expectations* and other later works. A bizarre or humorous simile will undermine an ugly reality being portrayed. It is one reason that it is difficult to show Dickens’s humour in film adaptations; for *what* he is describing may not be amusing at all, but it is the *way* he describes it that provides that essential touch of incongruous humour.

An 1858 review, quoted [in Chapter Six](#), criticises Dickens's humorous style as an 'easy mode of being amusing' – and some of Dickens's early, more spontaneous similes, might fall under this category. However, Dickens's deliberate blending of the comic with the horrible in later years shows a macabre humour that is carefully controlled. The review goes on to offer this facetious argument:

It was once observed of a certain family, that all its members were distinguished by having straight hair and curly teeth. If this remarkable phrase had occurred to Mr Dickens, he would have deduced the whole character and conduct of the owners of such peculiarities from these two circumstances. There is a whimsicality about the combination which might, and no doubt would, have been worked backwards and forwards in a thousand ways [...] In *Dombey and Son*, Mr Carker's teeth are made to shine and glare, and act as eyes which could see in the dark, and go through every sort of wonderful performance. If the infirmity to which we have referred were attributed to the hero of a novel, his teeth would wriggle like a nest of vipers, or sprawl like toads, or curl in contempt over his lips, as if they were making confidential remarks to the straight hair.<sup>8</sup>

Dickens's use of humorous simile is evidently parodied here with the use of *like* and *as if*. However, it is doubtful that Dickens would have described teeth in this way. Teeth cannot wriggle or curl; and Dickens's similes usually reflect the physical reality of the target of the comparison, even if in a fantastical way. The example taken from *Dombey and Son* shows that Dickens is playing with the brightness of Carker's toothsome smile when he uses words like *glare*. It also emphasises the aggressive, predatory nature of Carker's bite, as mentioned [in Chapter Five](#). Teeth bite – they do not wriggle.

Dickensian simile emphasises real physical traits even if it exaggerates or distorts them. Moreover, certain comparisons seem to have seized Dickens's imagination and 'haunted' him from the moment they first occurred to him, as discussed [in Chapter Four](#). They are not simply flashes of easy wit. Chapter Four has explored Dickens's need to

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<sup>8</sup> 'A House to Let', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 6.165 (1858), 644–45 (p. 644) <<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/house-let/docview/9468788/se-2>> [accessed 30 March 2023].

rehearse or ‘try out’ his similitude inventiveness in his letters. This is evident in the case of *American Notes and Pictures From Italy*, which take whole passages from his letters to John Forster and other correspondents; but the chapter also discussed some hitherto unexplored examples of similes from his letters that reappeared in the novels.

Significantly, the comparison of someone’s intent gaze to the act of aiming with an invisible gun, which occurs in at least three novels (*Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*), first appeared in a letter to Frank Stone in 1854 (cf. [Chapter Four](#)). There is an inevitability, an irresistibility to Dickens’s similes that shows in his insistence on an image: Dickens will not let the reader give up on the association either. It is not evidence of an ‘easy mode of being amusing’ but of driving home a point. If an association becomes attached to someone or something as a fixture of their way of being, it becomes the only way of looking at that person or thing.

That sense of objectivity is even more pronounced when Dickens extends and repeats a similitude description to create a ‘Dickensian mind-style,’ discussed in Chapter Five. Dickensian mind-style is how I have defined Dickens’s repetition of a similitude description that externalises a fixed mind-set. The repetition is not thereby a ‘dreary joke’ as John Carey has said,<sup>9</sup> but rather it shows how his similitude comparisons are guided by something ‘invariable’ in the target reality. Roger Fowler’s original conceptualisation of the term *mind-style* is broad enough to include the Dickensian configuration, for Fowler uses it to ‘refer to any distinctive linguistic presentation of an individual mental self’ which may ‘present the topics on which a character reflects, or display preoccupations, prejudices, perspectives and values [...] of which s/he may be quite unaware.’<sup>10</sup> By attaching a figurative label to a character, Dickens uses a

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<sup>9</sup> Carey, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> Fowler, p. 103.

‘distinctive linguistic presentation’ of the character’s attitudes and motivations – and many times with the satirical distance that shows that the characters themselves are ‘quite unaware’ of their evident interiority. In *Hard Times*, Mr Boundery’s bullying imposition of his false humility is shown in the repeated ‘windiness’ of his figurative description, as illustrated [in Chapter Six](#). In *Our Mutual Friend*, Mrs Podsnap’s overbearing, territorial attitude is shown in the repeated description of her as a rocking-horse that rocks over everything in her way, as noted [in Chapter Seven](#).

It is one of Dickens’s idiosyncrasies to turn his own subjective fanciful impressions into a somehow objective description of someone or something. As was considered [in Chapter Three](#), he will use the impersonal phrase ‘one might fancy’ to introduce some imaginative description when it is, of course, he himself who is fancying. This inherently subjective fancifulness may be the reason that the similitude style of Dickens’s narrator-persona begins to belong in the later novels to other characters in the narrative. For example, Dickens transfers the self-consciousness of his similitude language to David in *David Copperfield* and then in an exaggerated way to Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. In *David Copperfield*, the similitude descriptions are clearly personal impressions, as when David says, ‘I have an impression on my mind which I cannot distinguish from actual remembrance, of the touch of Peggotty’s forefinger as she used to hold it out to me, and of its being roughened by needlework, like a pocket nutmeg-grater.’ The narrator emphasises this similitude description by saying that it ‘may be fancy,’ but he is sure that ‘the power of observation in numbers of very young children [is] quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy’ (Ch. 2). Dickens’s fancy is thereby neatly transferred to David as a child. Meanwhile, Esther’s use of simile is often accompanied by apologetic or self-effacing language, as when she hastens to say that a description has not originated with her. Esther observes that Mrs Jellyby ‘had a curious



habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if – I am quoting Richard again – [she] could see nothing nearer than Africa!’ (Ch. 4). She is almost painfully self-aware of her use of the figurative language, which she insists are Richard Carson’s words anyway. [As seen in Chapter Five](#), the image is in fact one of those that seems to ‘haunt’ Dickens, so often does he use it. In this way, Dickens’s own fanciful impressions can be mediated through layers of characters’ perceptions.

Finally, as has been discussed at length in Chapter Seven, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens shows that simile is a mysterious hybrid of a subjective-objective narrative strategy. The key character whose inner thoughts are never revealed except once, John Jasper, is often described by the narrator and other characters, but in such a way that the similitic language, while based on an objective target reality, does not reveal his essential attitude or motivations and is limited to an external perception of him. In his previous novels, culminating in *Our Mutual Friend*, the narrator’s use of simile displays the characters’ interiority for all to see. The paranoia and obsession of Jasper’s double from *Our Mutual Friend*, Bradley Headstone, is evident in the way that he is described, while Jasper remains a mystery – the most that simile reveals about him being his performative nature. The narrative of *Edwin Drood* undermines reader’s expectations of Dickens’s typical similitic language, with its caricaturising effect or its creation of Dickensian mind-style. Thus, simile in Dickens shows us Dickens when he is ‘Boz,’ when he is ‘Dickens,’ and when he is mysteriously *not* Dickens. If in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, his final, unfinished novel, Dickens could subvert the nature of what readers had come to expect of his typical similitic description, it is wonderful to imagine how much further he might have experimented with simile if his career had not ended prematurely.

iii. Similic Insights for Future Study

This single-author study of simile is, first of all, significant for Dickens scholarship in that it shows the development of his style over time and points quantitatively to his preferential use of the trope. The quantitative research into Dickens's simile is necessary to support what might be only intuitive statements about his prolific use of simile – or, indeed, to counter statements to the contrary. In *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, J. Hillis Miller argued that in his last novels, Dickens ‘comes increasingly to dispense with the “as if,” and to merge reality and the narrator’s consciousness of it.’<sup>11</sup> Hillis Miller insists that Dickens moves from similic to metaphorical language, dispensing with an explicit marker of comparison to merge everything on an unreal plane. Nevertheless, it is not true that Dickens dispenses with *as if* in his later novels. The frequency of *as if* in Dickens's novels is higher on average from *Dombey and Son* onwards; and, apart from *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend* is the novel with the highest frequency of *as if* (cf. [Figure 8](#)). I agree with Hillis Miller that dispensing with *as if* and other similic markers may undermine the ‘objective reality’ of the novel by eliminating any obvious comparison between a target reality and a figurative source. Thus, the fact that Dickens does *not* dispense with *as if* and other similic markers in *Our Mutual Friend* means that those similes offer an explicit distinction between the target and the source of each bizarre comparison. The ‘objective reality’ of the novel is not undermined by the fantastic language: if anything it is enhanced by a vision of things that is humorously suggested rather imposed on the reader. In other words, the Dickensian *as if* – and his many other similic constructions – is not an anachronistic capitulation to literary deconstruction, but rather, more simply, a different way of

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<sup>11</sup> Hillis Miller, pp. 306–7.

looking at the (fictional) reality. It is true that Dickensian similes sometimes morph into an almost literal identification of something or someone with the initial source of comparison, but this does not mean that there are no Dickensian similes to begin with.

As indicated by Hillis Miller's argument that Dickens uses more metaphorical language in *Our Mutual Friend*, the difference between simile and metaphor can also be addressed by this thesis. This thesis benefits more general literary and linguistic studies by pushing for the expansion of the definition of simile and its effects as distinct from metaphor. In his book *Metaphor*, David Punter classifies simile simplistically as a type of metaphor: 'It has sometimes been supposed that simile is a different figure of speech from metaphor; but in fact it is a sub-species of metaphor, which is distinct only in that it keeps the notion of comparison explicit.'<sup>12</sup> The explicit nature of simile is precisely the reason that it *is* a different figure of speech from metaphor and has very different effects. Dickens's use of simile, for example, ensures that the target of the comparison is still part of everyday reality, even if he is exploring grotesque aberrations of it. Indeed, it is the singularity of what Dickens has noticed about this reality that configures the strangeness of the source. He reveals the accepted absurdity of the everyday mud on Holborn Hill when he describes it as he does in the opening of *Bleak House*: 'As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, [...] wandering like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill' (Ch. 1). This is the significance of preferring simile to metaphor, for the mapping of metaphor generally imposes the source domain on the target. Using the metaphor LOVE IS WAR, to use a simplistic example, demands that love be described only in terms of war, or the author will be accused of mixing metaphors. In the mapping

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<sup>12</sup> David Punter, *Metaphor* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 3.

of simile, meanwhile, the target domain determines what source is used, for the source is meant to highlight some salient part of the target.<sup>13</sup> It is for this reason Mr Peggotty is ‘at a loss for a sufficiently-approving simile’ for Mrs Gummidge in *David Copperfield* (Ch. 51). He is observing the reality of Mrs Gummidge’s helpfulness – and it is this that must direct his source for the comparison. The implication is that she is so helpful that there is no source good enough to indicate how helpful she is. It is another kind of violation of Israel, Harding, and Tobin’s Superlative Source Constraint (SSC), [discussed in Chapter Three](#), where a source is used hyperbolically as the ‘paragon’ of a certain aspect (‘clear as crystal’ where crystal, or glass, is the clearest possible substance).<sup>14</sup> In Mrs Gummidge’s case, she herself is the ‘paragon’ of usefulness rather than any source that she could be compared with. Mr Peggotty demonstrates the normal process of ordinary similitic language: the observation of reality is the starting point and the ‘fanciful observer’ finds a way (or not) to transmit the impression of that reality.

Analysing Dickens’s similes provides insight into how similitic structure can be manipulated. Israel, Harding, and Tobin’s article ‘On Simile’ is useful in its insistence on expanding the definition of simile to mean any explicit figurative comparison,<sup>15</sup> and this thesis offers to expand the compass of similitic language even further. Paradoxically, in the case of Mr Peggotty’s attempt to describe Mrs Gummidge, even when the explicit comparison is only implicit, there is an implied similitic possibility, and this counts as similitic language in my analysis. In the [above-quoted passage](#) from the early sketch ‘Greenwich Fair,’ it might appear that Dickens is using metaphorical language: ‘if the Parks *be* the lungs of London’ ... ‘what *is* Greenwich Fair.’ However, the periphrastic

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<sup>13</sup> Dancygier and Sweetser, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> Israel, Harding, and Tobin, pp. 126–27.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

phrases *we wonder* and *we suppose*, and the specific linguistic markers *sort of*, *as x as y*, *as if* all point to the elaborate *similic* structure that underpins the graphic image of a city-wide ‘breaking out.’ Stretching the original analogy *ad absurdum*, he also exploits the analytical nature of simile. While metaphor presents the reader with an implicit mapping which cannot be avoided (‘the parks *are* the lungs of London’), simile invites the reader to evaluate the figurative mapping by pointing to the act of comparison itself (‘a periodical breaking out, *we suppose*, a *sort of* spring rash’). With the explicit linguistic markers, Dickens invites readers to evaluate his comparison. This thesis thus demonstrates, through the work of one author, that there are countless permutations of explicit figurative comparison. That said, one future project will be precisely to count and collect those permutations and make them available as a dataset for concordance searches for *simile*. One of the limitations of using the linguistic tools available has been the unpredictability of Dickens’s use of *similic* structure. I needed to record manually each example that did not use a typical structure using *like x*, *as x as y*, or *as if*. For future research into simile in literature, it would be useful to have such a dataset with examples of all kinds of *similic* phrases.

Dickens’s use of simile challenges what might be the typical understanding of simile as simply a comparison made using the word *as* or *like*, or as a direct illustration that tends to clarify the nature of a new experience by drawing on something more familiar. Dickensian simile is versatile, using all manner of phraseology explicitly to associate one domain with another. This insight into *similic* language challenges studies of simile that appear limited to the classical use of *like* or *as*. For example, Catherine Haught’s experiments to analyse the cognitive processing of metaphor and simile use only the *like x* model for simile, and I argue that the results are very limited as a consequence. Her findings are useful in that they show that metaphors are processed

differently from similes; however, the results relegate simile to the level of literal comparison because of the inflexibility of the similitic term being used, and it is denied the creativity of metaphor. Dickens's similitic descriptions, meanwhile, convince his readers that it 'would not be wonderful' to see a Megalosaurus in the middle of London (*Bleak House*), a country inn sleeping in the sun (*Barnaby Rudge*), factory machinery morphing into 'melancholy-mad elephants' (*Hard Times*), or relentless rocking-horse mamas keeping their daughters in check (*Our Mutual Friend*). All of these become the normal creatures of Dickens's world – and the world of those readers willing to follow his imaginative lead. His use of simile seems less a tactic to introduce readers to his world as much as a way to show the infinite possibilities of ordinary associative language. 'Let me show you how it's done,' might be Dickens's refrain as he demonstrates his similitic flair. Dickens shows how simile can defamiliarise target and source alike, and create hyperbole that is larger than life and larger even than the superlative in Israel, Harding, and Tobin's Superlative Source Constraint. Dickens's imaginary begins from what has been irresistibly suggested to him through his own keen observation of the everyday bizarre.

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