THE ANXIETY OF PRESENCE: CHARLES DICKENS AND THE SELF IN TIME

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

2007

UMI Number: 3283182

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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by

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In my dissertation, I investigate Charles Dickens' treatment of the relationship between one's existence in time and one's individual sense of identity, concentrating primarily on five of Dickens' later novels: Bleak House (1853), Little Dorrit (1857), A Tale of Two Cities (1859), Great Expectations (1861), and Our Mutual Friend (1865). Specifically, I focus on Dickens' quasi-philosophical analysis and portrayal of individual existence in time, rather than his narratological manipulation of time. In his later novels, Dickens consistently connected the manifold problems of society—including greed, corruption, institutionalized abuses, and social stasis—to the fact that human beings tend to misunderstand the nature of their existence. Dickens' characters initially tend to embrace the value systems and points of view of society or other smaller groups, which divide up temporal existence and concentrate only on the present and immediate, rather than maintaining their distinct perceptions of themselves and their existence in time. Through his fiction, Dickens seems to advocate a reevaluation of one's existence in time through a reflection on the past and the future, for such contemplation is the only means by which to fully understand one's existence and the nature of moral action. In so doing, Dickens seemed to anticipate several elements of existential philosophy, particularly from the

works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

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Introduction

"I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future": Charles Dickens and the Anxiety of Presence

I. Charles Dickens: "Mr. Popular Sentiment"?

One of the major critical objections to Charles Dickens' work has long been the seeming lack of philosophical depth to his work. Dickens' critics have tended to insist that—beneath the unique vision of the world, beneath the memorable characters, beneath the seemingly insightful analysis of life in the modern metropolis—there is, ultimately, nothing truly profound, nothing truly "deep," to be located there. Critics seem to contend that, unlike other European and American novelists of the mid-nineteenth century—including such luminaries as George Eliot, William Thackeray, Thomas Hardy, Honoré de Balzac, Herman Melville, Henry James, and Fyodor Dostoevsky—Dickens was incapable of formulating anything as intellectually rigorous as a consistent introspective philosophy of life or humanity, or, at any rate, anything more insightful than his novels' overt—and to *some* critics, somewhat banal—themes of generosity to one's fellow man and justice to all regardless of class. Admittedly, critics have begrudgingly allowed that Dickens' work is important, but only for his ability to draw attention to social ills, and for the cultural impact derived from the impressive number of his readers and admirers among both the general public and the literary cognoscenti. However, Dickens' inclusion on the lists of great authors does not belie the fact that most critics have trouble considering Dickens as a *mature* author of *serious* literature. Essentially, Dickens has

long held a reputation in literary circles of being singularly "unintellectual" (Raleigh 46), and even, for some less charitable readers, of being downright "stupid" at times, despite the obviously unique vision he held of society and human existence.

This caustic critical reaction to Dickens' work and his place in the canon of English literature can be traced back to Dickens' own lifetime, when contemporary critics—even those who had been so breathlessly adoring of his first few novels like Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby—readily complained of his maudlin writing style, his grotesque and macabre depiction of English life, and the unsettlingly dark tone of his later novels. However, it was during the period towards the end of Dickens' life and immediately following his death that this response seemed to culminate, and critics would venture en masse to question his intellectual rigor maliciously. For example, we find that Thomas Carlyle—a close friend and inspiration for Dickens and the individual to whom he dedicated Hard Times—did not think much of Dickens as an intellectual. In fact, although Carlyle gave Dickens much encouragement, he preeminently believed that Dickens' vision was mistaken:

> His theory of life was entirely wrong. He thought men ought to be buttered up, and the world made soft and accommodating for them, and all sorts of fellows have turkey for their Christmas dinner. . . . Dickens had not written anything which would be found of much use in solving the problems of life. But he was worth a penny to read of an evening before going to bed, which was about what a read of him cost you. (qtd. in Collins, Dickens: the Critical Heritage 204)

Essentially, despite their close relationship, Carlyle ultimately chose to see Dickens as a popular entertainer—an entertainer who completely misunderstood the realities of life or the possibilities for his work.

There are numerous other examples of Dickens' contemporaries having a somewhat derogatory view of his intellectual capacities. Of course, we have the infamous example provided by the young Henry James who, in a review of Dickens' penultimate novel, Our Mutual Friend, observed that Dickens had for a long time been "forcing himself" (853), and he had long relied on "the fantastic," which was "his great resource . . . while his fancy was lively and vigorous," but which had long since been exhausted and become "a very poor business" (854). This is not the extent of James' criticism, however, as his ultimate intent is to fix "the limit of Mr. Dickens's insight" (856). James lambastes Dickens for his relative lack of perspicacity observing that:

> . . . we are convinced that it is one of the chief conditions of his genius not to see beneath the surface of things. If we might hazard a definition of his literary character, we should, accordingly, call him the greatest of superficial novelists. We are aware that this definition confines him to an inferior rank in the department of letters which he adorns; but we accept this consequence of our proposition. It were, in our opinion, an offence against humanity to place Mr. Dickens among the greatest novelists. For, to repeat what we have already intimated, he has created nothing but figure. (856)

Clearly, James felt that Dickens' great flaw was that he was incapable of peering beneath man's surface and plumbing his psychological depths, noting: "He has added nothing to

our understanding of human character" (856). Moreover, James felt that Dickens could not see past the surface of *life*, for, while he may have been capable of making cute observations regarding mankind's peccadilloes, he was no great thinker when it came to the human condition:

> Mr. Dickens is a great observer and a great humorist, but he is nothing of a philosopher. Some people may hereupon say, so much the better; we say, so much the worse. For a novelist very soon has need of a little philosophy. He must know *man* as well as *men*, and to know man is to be a philosopher. . . . That is, the author must understand what he is talking about. (857)

Essentially, James echoes Carlyle's opinion that Dickens was merely a popular entertainer—a writer of blockbuster novels, but no serious thinker; for James, to accord Dickens the status of a great nineteenth century intellectual was tantamount to lessening the entire canon's substance.

James' eviscerating criticism of Dickens' seemingly weak intellectual prowess was by no means the last or the most vicious attack on Dickens' authorial character. In fact, James' accusation of shallowness would become somewhat commonplace, as there was a considerable critical backlash to Dickens' work in the wake of his death. George Henry Lewes' assessment of Dickens' life and career was likewise devastating, particularly in that Lewes had been familiarly acquainted with Dickens. Lewes' appraisal of Dickens' *character* was favorable—as was common among those who knew him—as Lewes noted: "He was then, as to the last, a delightful companion, full of sagacity as well as animal spirits" (70). However, Lewes ultimately observed that Dickens did not have a

particularly arresting intellect, as evidenced by Dickens' bookshelves—Lewes felt that "a man's library expresses much of his hidden life" (70)—on which Lewes trenchantly observed "were ranged nothing but three-volume novels and books of travel, all obviously the presentation copies from authors and publishers, with none of the treasures of the bookstall" (70). Thus, Lewes "came away more impressed with the fulness of life and energy than with any sense of distinction" (sic), thereby convinced that Dickens seemingly "remained completely outside philosophy, science, and the higher literature, and was too unaffected a man to pretend to feel any interest in them" (70). His appraisal of Dickens' work was not so generous. Lewes observes:

> Only the cultivated who are made fastidious by cultivation paused to consider the pervading commonness of the works, and remarked that they are wholly without glimpses of a nobler life; and that the writer presents an almost unique example of a mind of singular force in which, so to speak, sensations never passed into ideas. Dickens sees and feels, but the logic of feeling seems the only logic he can manage. Thought is strangely absent from his works. I do not suppose a single thoughtful remark on life or character could be found throughout the twenty volumes. Not only is there a marked absence of the reflective tendency, but one sees no indication of the past life of humanity having ever occupied him; keenly as he observes the objects before him, he never connects his observations into a general expression, never seems interested in general relations of things. Compared with that of Fielding or Thackeray, his was merely an *animal* intelligence, *i.e.*, restricted to perceptions. . . . (69)

The best that Lewes eventually allows—perhaps out of guilt for such an eviscerating account of his dead acquaintance's career—is that Dickens "gave us his best" and that "there was no lazy indulgence, no trading on great renown, no 'scumbling' in his work" (71).

This impression of Dickens as something of an anti-intellectual—or, at the very least, a writer of great influence but little substance, or, as Anthony Trollope so cruelly characterized him in The Warden, "Mr. Popular Sentiment"—has remained prevalent until today, and can be seen quite readily in twentieth-century responses to Dickens' work. The common observation among Dickens' critics has been that Dickens was a decidedly uneducated representative of bourgeois culture, sometimes at its most vulgar extremes, as supposedly can be seen in Dickens' aesthetic sense or his position as a public intellectual and, from that privileged place, his reaction to many Victorian-era progressive social movements, or his regrettable jingoism. Indeed, the litany of Dickens' faults upon which critics harp is almost as lengthy as one of his novels: they bemoan the crass sentiment, the anti-realism of his grotesquerie, the sham plots, the unbelievably pat resolution of each novel, the simplistic understanding of good and evil, the seemingly childlike reluctance to portray mature male-female relations, the somewhat mercenary quality of his work by which art was made to service entertainment, the fact that "his morality throve upon class distinctions even when it claimed to supersede them" (House 152), etc. Yet, at the same time, critics acknowledge that he cannot be dismissed, predominantly because of his uncanny ability to sometimes understand the hidden undercurrents of society, and because of the sheer power and originality of his imagination, although both of these unique talents are often attributed to some impressive

"animal instinct" akin to what Lewes described. Many critics have seemed to follow the reading of F.R. Leavis, who famously omitted Dickens from his vision of the "Great Tradition" of English literature, observing that Dickens may have been a "great genius . . . permanently among the classics," but his genius was not a *proper* genius, but rather, "the genius . . . of a great entertainer" (Great 31). Leavis suggests that Dickens was not a serious thinker, and, as a result, "the adult mind doesn't as a rule find in Dickens a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness" (Great 32).[1] As a result, Leavis refused to place Dickens among the likes of George Eliot or Joseph Conrad, writers whose fictional works are more deeply imbued with an explicit philosophy or understanding of the history of human ideas. The famed Marxist critic Raymond Williams agrees with Leavis' assessment of Dickens' oeuvre, suggesting—while he rather stiffly delineates the seven means by which writers of fiction engage with serious ideas—that Dickens "never really argues ideas, in either a representative or exploring way" (82). This is because:

> There is frequent mimicry of well-known ideas and tendencies, but this is set against a warm attachment to certain other ideas and tendencies. Nobody could ever feel, reading Dickens, that he is listening to a debate, though we may very often feel that we are reading an *account* of a debate by a passionately committed and polemical reporter. (82)

Humphry House likewise concurs with this sentiment, as he suggests that Dickens "did not understand enough of any philosophy even to be able to guy it successfully" (205). Jerome Hamilton Buckley also assumes this position on Dickens' intellectual merits,

[1] This was, of course, with the exception of Hard Times, which seems to cleave to Leavis' quasi-Marxist sensibility.

albeit more diplomatically, as he chooses to emphasize the possible influence of Dickens' bourgeois background on his intellectual development, which is, of course, not a compliment:

> Indeed, he had no coherent theology to sanction his art and no positive concept of government to reinforce his political satire. Yet he brought to the early Victorian novel a rich imagination kindled by a deep though ill-defined moral consciousness and a broadly "liberal" view of social and economic conditions. . . . For all his superb individual endowments, he was distinctly a child of his time, suspicious of ecstasy, contemptuous of flight from the present into a remote Utopia or the glamour of a "romantic" past. His emotion, lapsing at times tearfully into shameless sentimentalism, sprang from the moral heart of an English middle class; it bore no kinship to the cultivated passions of a European romanticism. (The Victorian Temper 28)

Even Philip Collins, who founded his academic career on the analysis of Dickens' personal canon, echoes Leavis' assertion of Dickens' bifurcated genius, caught in the split between a supposed underdeveloped intellect and an instinctual ability to see the truth behind human interactions, when he notes: "Dickens was a homespun thinker, not always well-informed about the subjects on which he summarily pronounced, and not much given to reflection" (Dickens and Education 218). Collins insists on the natural simplicity of Dickens' "philosophy," noting that:

> Many of his ideas need not be traced to Carlyle or the Romantic ethos, or to any source more recondite than common sense and a good heart. . . . He

> was sometimes ignorant, prejudiced and stupid, but at least he avoids the characteristic intellectual vice of being cranky. . . . Dickens's ideas and understanding are often limited, but they are generally pointing towards the truth, not galloping logically towards nonsense. (218)

For many readers, this characterization of Dickens' work and intellectual rigor must seem, at least, a bit too cozy, and, at worst, quite mistaken. Surely, to deem a writer philosophical or "deep," does not require that he write dense prose, quote philosophers of antiquity, or indulge in ponderous and pedantic analyses of the human condition. As we know, Dickens would not have been capable of doing such a thing, as he had little or no acquaintance with classical literature (Johnson 1131). However, as many readers have certainly felt, there is something beneath the surface of Dickens' novels, particularly the later novels: what Graham Greene referred to as "the secret prose, that sense of a mind speaking to itself with no one there to listen" (53)—in other words, something for the reader to find that is more profound, more interesting, less overt and accessible, perhaps, than Dickens' famous concern with contemporary Victorian social issues.

Hilary Schor has noted that the real attraction in the later novels is "the power of imagination each unleashes, and the amazingly wide ends (social, cultural, legal, moral) each pursues" (75). If it is not already clear, I concur wholeheartedly with this notion, and, to Schor's list, I would also add "philosophical" as one of the ends that Dickens pursues in his later novels. More specifically, my aim in the following pages will be to depict how Dickens gradually began to develop—and eventually realized in the second half of his career, beginning with the initial spark of inspiration provided by the quasi-metaphysical tale, "A Christmas Carol"—a vision of life and existence, or, in other

words, a philosophy that might be placed alongside what we find in the so-called "novelists of ideas," such as Laurence Sterne, George Eliot, or Virginia Woolf. In fact, I would suggest that Dickens developed a philosophy of existence that was so far ahead of his time that he managed to anticipate several elements of the existentialist movement, nearly one hundred years before it would come to fruition in the early twentieth century.

A reading of Dickens' later works shows that he came to have quite a developed idea of the nature of human existence. This does not necessarily imply that Dickens had any developed thoughts on such heady subjects as ontology, metaphysics, or hermeneutics, cloaked in a sophisticated, exclusive language, as a "real" philosopher might have; rather, Dickens' ideas are rooted in a more commonplace scheme and accessible to a general audience: he couches his ideas in a deceptively simple depiction of everyday existence. As Dickens developed as an author, he began to understand that the problems one finds in the world—including the exploitation of the less fortunate and the common pursuits of consumerism—did not originate in particular laws, or particular bad governments, or the malignant desires of single vicious individuals. Rather, these problems are endemic to the human condition because they derive from the human need for acceptance. Dickens understood that human beings are inherently social animals, and that they are defined by their interactions with others. However, Dickens felt that some people tend to take this need a bit too far; they cast everything aside—all independent beliefs, pursuits, and principles—for the values of others in society, only so that they might find the false peace of being accepted. Ultimately, Dickens seemed to believe that individuals become overwhelmed by the values and restrictions of society, and these weak-minded individuals develop a peculiar form of myopia by which they cannot see—

or refuse to see—the emptiness of their lives, the arbitrariness of society's rules and values, the evanescence of worldly goods and social status, and the effects of their actions. In Dickens' vision of society, most people live only for the approval of others and the satisfaction of temporary desires. Ultimately, Dickens felt that most individuals become only what society wants them to be—they take on a false and contrived identity. The existence of each individual is thereby shaped to conform to the demands of society. From this warped perspective, individuals pursue only their own immediate desires, and they act without consideration for the consequences of their actions—out of this arise the nightmarish worlds of the later novels, such as Little Dorrit and Our Mutual Friend. Dickens depicts this existential state of affairs in virtually every one of his later novels, as his characters must continually try to come to grips with their senses of themselves and the influence of society on them and their decisions.

This limited self-understanding is most clearly manifested in the manner in which Dickens' characters are very much out of touch with their temporality. As we see in all of Dickens' later novels, Dickens characters have an ostensibly discordant understanding of their existence in time. Most of these characters—particularly those who have succeeded, or hope to succeed, in society's opinion—suffer under the same delusion that they exist only in the present time, and that they can maintain their privileged state for eternity; this is the dominant mode by which the majority of Dickens' characters understand their temporal existence in the world of Dickens' works. On the other hand, some of these characters are stuck in the past, laboring under the misapprehension that they have been able to freeze themselves in a single moment of happiness—or, in certain masochistic occasions, misery—which is really, to some extent, another example of the previous

delusion in that they act as if they can sustain existence eternally in a single moment or space of time. Most characters have no consideration of the future; they act without thinking of the mass consequences of their acts. More specifically, most of Dickens' characters deny their own personal futures—namely, death—and believe they can stave off their personal demises by living in a sort of eternal present. All of these delusions serve to reinforce the false identities that Dickens' characters develop; moreover, these existential fallacies allow the characters to continue behaving in the irresponsible fashion that has created the dark and dangerous world that we find in each of the later novels. In short, the social ills for which Dickens is so well-known for attacking are inextricably bound to the existential infirmities through which Dickens believed most human beings suffer.

Dickens was not content to simply point the finger of blame, for he also offers a way out of the muddle he describes. In each novel, we find how the protagonist—from David Copperfield and Arthur Clennam to Pip and Eugene Wrayburn—is consistently confronted with his or her own existential crisis. Although these characters find varying forms of acceptance and success in the world after buying into all of society's values, they still feel a profound sense of emptiness in their lives. No matter how much they buy or collect, no matter how powerful they become in society, these characters cannot find happiness. They sense that, beneath all of the glamour that society seems to promise, there is ultimately no real meaning. These characters come to this acute realization, and discover that they must find a real purpose to their existence, for everything prior to this point has been exposed as a colossal untruth. For these characters, their only recourse is to try to find their real selves, their real identities, independent of society, because who

they previously believed themselves to be has been shown to be a fiction; now, after this realization, these characters must find out what their purposes are in life. Dickens seems to suggest that these answers can only be found in a complete reevaluation of one's life, from the beginning to its inevitable end—essentially, through a reassessment of one's existence in time, one's temporality.

In this regard, Dickens has a great deal in common with the philosophical works of several existentialists—Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus in particular. In general, I think it is clear that the type of philosophical speculation that Dickens pursues closely resembles the early twentieth century philosophical "school" known as existentialism, particularly when the latter—which is, admittedly, not always easy to pin down—is defined as "a type of philosophizing which endeavors to analyze the basic structures of human existence and to call individuals to an awareness of their existence in its essential freedom" (Molina 2). More specifically, each of these philosophers whom I have just mentioned contemplated the deleterious effect of society's influence on one's identity; moreover, each of these philosophers speculated that one needs to undergo a process of reclaiming time—namely, coming to grips with one's existence within time—so as finally to realize "authentic" existence and discover one's true identity or self. Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus all share a distrust of society and its influence on the individual. This should not be much of a surprise, for, at its heart, existentialism is an individualistic philosophy, as it emphasizes the choices, actions, desires, needs, and existences of isolated individuals, threatened by a universe populated with a multitude of forces that threaten to undermine that individuality. As Sartre states in the early essay,

"L'Existentialisme est une humanisme" (1947), despite existentialism's ill-founded reputation as a "negative" philosophy, bordering on nihilism, it is actually the most humanistic of philosophies: " . . . what can be said from the very beginning is that by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth implies a human setting and a human subjectivity" ("Humanism" 32). For all of these philosophers who are generally grouped together as "existentialists," society—or other individuals—jeopardize individuals' capacity to think and act on their own: existence-with-others is a corrosive force because it places the expectations and values of other entities on the individual. According to these philosophers, existence-with-others also tends to skew one's understanding of existence, focusing it only on temporary material issues, frozen in the present. As we will see, this view runs counter to reality, for it attempts to dismiss the fact of man's temporality.

Out of this conflict arises the notion of "anxiety" or "anguish" as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre have described it—the individual's recognition of the need to break away from the influence of the world and discover his or her true self, unblemished by society's judgment. According to these writers, the sensation known as "anxiety" or "anguish" is the self's call to itself to realize its "authentic" existence, as differentiated from the "false" existence of society—namely, who the self *is*, independent of other individuals. This self-discovery coincides with a reassessment of one's temporal existence; this involves a process of understanding one's temporality the way it truly is, freed from the present-oriented limitations of the world. They must learn to see themselves as evolving beings, partly comprised of their past selves and their future possibilities. They must learn to reclaim their temporality—to exist, in Kierkegaard's

words, in the "*Fullness of Time*" ("Philosophical Fragments" 161). Perhaps more importantly, one can only approach "true" understanding of one's "authenticity," by coming to an understanding of death, the end of existence, or, more specifically, one must truly accept the reality and inevitability of one's death—or, in Heidegger and Sartre's terminology, they must learn to accept the nothingness of existence, for, as Heidegger suggests:

> In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: that they are beings—and not nothing. . . . For human existence, the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather, it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such. ("What" 103-4)

According to these philosophers, only then can one truly understand oneself and one's place in the world. I would argue that Dickens' characters seem to follow this exact process, as their stories recount how they escape from immersion in the world's values by way of a reevaluation of their temporality, ultimately culminating with an acceptance of death and a subsequent discovery of the moral values one might derive from "authentic" understanding.[2] This process is what I have termed Dickens' "anxiety of presence"—the realization and acceptance of the responsibility for individuals to discover their true selves in time and consequently to discover the purpose for that existence in the present—or "presence" as it might more commonly be understood according to existentialism.

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[2] Admittedly, the "moral" aspect of this argument is a significant departure from existentialism proper, which denies the reality of all value systems—as inspired by Nietzsche, the original so-called existentialist—but I would argue that this is, in some ways, the means by which Dickens' vision would seem to surpass that of the later existentialists. I pursue this point more explicitly in my fourth chapter.

That evidence of Dickens' philosophical bent should center on questions regarding time should not come as much of a surprise, for the nature of time and its relationship to the human condition has long been a source of study for many thinkers, including Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Gottfried Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Isaac Newton, G. W. F. Hegel, Edmund Husserl, Henri Bergson, and Emmanuel Lévinas. Moreover, it was not out of character for a Victorian novelist to speculate on the relationship between time and the individual, for as Jerome Buckley suggested in his thorough examination of the subject, The Triumph of Time, the preoccupation with time and its meaning became almost obsessive for the period's most important writers, including Carlyle, Eliot, Hardy, and Alfred Tennyson (2). Of course, being a novelist, Dickens' approach is far different from that of traditional philosophers; as Wendell V. Harris has suggested, when one considers the means by which a novelist might broach the stern questions of philosophy, one finds—as in the cases of writers like William Faulkner, Joseph Conrad, and Dickens—that the novelist rarely chooses to address these questions directly, as a philosopher might, but rather, "The novelist is of course neither mere architect of structure nor philosopher manqué, but whatever of each lies in him is very likely to be met in his use of the rhetorical possibilities of time" (129). Admittedly, Dickens did not speculate on the metaphysical reality of time, as Aristotle, for instance, might have. But, that is not necessarily the novelist's job, as Dickens undoubtedly knew all too well. However, that does not preclude the possibility that Dickens speculated about profound philosophical matters: we cannot ignore the evidence that Dickens purposely sought to address issues of temporality and how individuals strive

to understand their temporal existence, particularly in relation to their understandings of their own identities and their purposes in the world.

In a decidedly mistaken essay, the critic John Henry Raleigh ventured quite the opposite point, suggesting that Dickens was completely unconcerned with the nature of time—and, by extension, the relationship between existence and time—and, even if he were, that his efforts at understanding it were pedestrian at best. In the essay, after Raleigh divides time up into very strict categories, he singles Dickens out for his seemingly remarkable anti-intellectual understanding of time:

> There is little if any in Dickens of the elaborate speculation on time that we associate with Sterne at one end of the scale, and with Proust, Joyce, and Mann, at the other. Only occasionally does he employ the notion of the psychological relativity of time, as, for example, in Barnaby Rudge, where he makes the point that time for Barnaby, the idiot, does not really exist, nor does it for the dazed John Willet, after the rioters have sacked the Maypole. Again, in Hard Times, he remarks on this relativity in relation to human growth. . . . But these kinds of observations are rare. (130)

Obviously, this cannot be further from the truth, as I will endeavor to demonstrate in the following chapters. Rather, it cannot be argued plausibly that Dickens did not have *something* to say about time. As many an astute reader might have noticed, time has an ostensible presence in Dickens' work. In fact, Dickens seems to pay a great deal more attention to time and its passing than most authors might choose to do: the abundance of Dickens' references to time provide ample testament to this. Moreover, one of the unique

characteristics of Dickens' work is that, in the world of his novels, time is not simply a sort of metaphysical entity, for it has a real, physical presence. Time is frequently manifested in a physical form that can be seen, it is sometimes heard, and its impact on the world is felt or witnessed through physical alterations in one's environment. Essentially, time has a noticeable tangibility in Dickens' world. It is not simply an idea; rather, it is also something quite concrete. In many ways, it is *almost* as if Dickens felt or experienced time more profoundly than the average person.

The most obvious example of this physical manifestation is the sheer profusion of clocks and clock-related apparatuses that are found in almost every work. In fact, examples of Dickens' use of clocks are so plentiful that Stephen Franklin justifiably observes that they amount "to a virtual monopoly in English fiction" (3). Practically every novel mentions a clock or a watch, sometimes as symbols suggestive of a particular character's relationship to time, and sometimes simply as a means to provide atmosphere; regardless, they are always revelations of Dickens' own preoccupation with time. For example, there is the "magnificent gold watch, sparkling with jewels" that Fagin eyes at the moment Oliver Twist begins to realize Fagin's actual occupation (107). There is also Master Humphrey's titular clock that holds the manuscripts in which Humphrey delights, and around which Master Humphrey's narrative is structured. In Master Humphrey's frame story, we are given a look inside the clock in St. Paul's Cathedral, the massive time-piece by which London's time is governed; it turns out to be a mechanical monstrosity with "a complicated crowd of wheels and chains in iron and brass,—great, sturdy, rattling engines" measuring time "with one sledge-hammer beat, as if its business were to crush the seconds as they came trooping on, and remorselessly to clear a path

before the Day of Judgment" (107). As Patricia Marks has noted, Nicholas Nickleby's Cheeryble brothers "wear watch chains of gold" indicating their generous nature, while the miserly Gride "owns a clock that represents his penurious spirit" (Marks 24): "A tall grim clock upon the stairs, with long lean hands and famished face, ticked in cautious whispers, and when it struck the time in thin and piping sounds, like an old man's voice, rattled as if 'twere pinched with hunger" (Dickens, Nicholas Nickleby 629). In The Old Curiosity Shop, Quilp's counting-house holds "an eight-day clock which hadn't gone for eighteen years at least and of which the minute-hand had been twisted off for a tooth-pick" (88). Scrooge's Christmas Eve is not simply haunted by ghosts, but also by the clock in his room, whose ticking and tolling send him into "a violent fit of trembling" (85). As Steven Marcus has observed, Dombey and Son "is full of clocks which do not work or work incorrectly or work precisely but somehow tell the wrong time" (332)—the most memorable of which is the clock in Dr. Blimber's hall that communicates personally with the dying Paul Dombey, continuously asking, "How, is, my, lit, tle, friend" (Dickens, Dombey and Son 210). In Little Dorrit, Arthur Clennam's mother is haunted by her husband's "D.N.F." watch, inscribed with those letters so as to remind her not to forget her husband's transgressions. Great Expectations frequently mentions Jaggers' "massive . . . gold repeater" (206), as well as the most famous instance of this conceit: Miss Havisham's stopped clocks. Finally, in the incomplete Edwin Drood, there is the subversion of this familiar trope in the Cloisterham Cathedral clock whose "hands . . . are torn off" (183). All of these clocks are undoubtedly more than mere allusions to time; generally, they are symbolic of something more specific, such as a particular character's relationship to time or society, or that character's understanding of his or her

identity. As Franklin astutely notes, "Man's temporal attitude is inextricably linked with his moral attitude," and ultimately we find that Dickens' characters must realize "that time is the continuum for the moral exercise of the will, the more they exhibit those features of goodness Dickens associates with Christian behavior" (13). In essence, time is connected to existence, which in turn is connected to morality—this is the chain of ideas that governs the logic and composition of each of the later novels.

Not only is time's tangibility evident in the omnipresent clocks, but its physicality can also be seen in the environment of each novel. Specifically, Dickens often provides concrete images of the passing of time and the impact of time's "work" on the world, all of which emphasize time's connection to the slightest aspect of human life. For instance, there is the ceaseless "drip, drip, drip" of the rain at Bleak House's Chesney Wold, indicative of time's movement regardless of the Dedlocks' anachronistic understanding of the world (21). Or, despite Miss Havisham's best efforts to freeze herself in her traumatic moment, we see that "everything . . . which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its luster, and was faded and yellow"; even Miss Havisham "had withered like the dress, and like the flowers" (Dickens, Great Expectations 57-8). We see further evidence of time's ravages in A Tale of Two Cities' Tellson's Bank, an "old-fashioned place" where "your money came out of, or went into, wormy old wooden drawers, particles of which flew up your nose and down your throat" and "your bank-notes had a musty odour, as if they were fast decomposing into rags again" (55-6). The presence of past time is most evident in Drood's Cloisterham, an "ancient city . . . deriving an earthy flavor throughout, from its Cathedral crypt . . . abounding in vestiges of monastic graves" where "fragments of old wall, saint's chapel, chapter-house, convent

and monastery, have got incongruously or obstructively built into many of its houses and gardens" and "all things in it are of the past" (51-3). Showing the passage of time in changes to the setting is a common authorial technique, but Dickens arguably takes it to another level. Dickens often overloads his settings with details that eventually coalesce into a single idea or trait, which we are meant to identify with a particular character or theme. When he does this with time, it becomes even more evident how real time is for Dickens, as his characters seem to live in a world where they can literally touch, taste, breathe, eat, and see time. By concretizing the abstract idea of time, its passing, or its effects, Dickens seems to emphasize an important observation: time has a real and noticeable place in human existence, and, if one is paying attention, one might notice that it intersects with virtually every aspect of our lives, and our experience with it might have something to teach us.

Admittedly, the placement of Dickens among the later existentialists is not a *wholly* original contention. Some scholars have *hinted* at such a connection, such as Vincent Newey, who briefly acknowledges that Dickens is a "chronicler of existential struggle" (2), before he drops such a line of enquiry altogether so as to focus on an Althusserian-Marxist reading of Dickens' novels. For another example, J. Hillis Miller, in his landmark book, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels, frequently interprets Dickens' characters as being alienated from the world in which they live and which seeks to overwhelm and destroy the characters. Miller posits:

> Each protagonist confronts, from moment to moment, a certain kind of world, a world in which inanimate objects, space and time, other people, and his own inner life have certain given modes of existence. These

> entities are initially, in most cases, distant from the protagonist, inimical, without comprehensible relation to him. The nonhuman world seems menacing and apparently has a secret life of its own, unfriendly to man, while the social world is an inexplicable game or ritual, in which people solemnly enact their parts in an absurd drama governed by mysterious conventions. (328)

Miller continues to observe how Dickens' characters undergo what can only be considered existential crises:

> In this interchange between mind and world there is in Dickens' characters and in the novels themselves as wholes a constant attempt to reach something transcendent, something more real than one's own consciousness or than the too solid everyday material world. . . . Dickens' protagonists, initially creatures of poverty and indigence, are constantly in search of something outside the self, something other than the self, and even something other than human, something which will support and maintain the self without vaporizing and engulfing it. . . . Within this whole a single problem, the search for viable identity, is stated and restated with increasing approximation to the hidden center, Dickens' deepest apprehension of the nature of the world and of the human condition within it. (329)

This description of existence is directly out of existentialism, as similar concepts of the world and life within it can be found quite readily in the work of Camus, Heidegger, and Sartre. However, Miller does not fully follow through with this reading, as he only

casually tosses around comparisons with existentialist themes—while never mentioning them by name—and he only seriously indulges use of these themes at the conclusion of his work, wherein he somewhat incorrectly asserts that Dickens' ultimate message involves "the rejection of the past, the given, and the exterior as sources of selfhood, and a reorientation toward the future and toward the human spirit itself as the only true sources of value" (333). Rather—hopefully not to put too fine of a point on it—although much of Miller's reading toes the line of alleging that Dickens was a proto-existentialist, he ultimately falls short of such a contention, and he chooses to pursue a reading that relies a little too heavily on questioning the ontology of the authorial figure and the mode of the significance of authorship.

For a final example, Mark Spilka and N. M. Lary have written critical works comparing Dickens with traditional or canonical proto-existentialists, Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky. However, these works' arguments do not have much to do with the themes found in existentialism, as the comparisons can more aptly be described as revolving around the commonly explored themes of Dickens' explorations into social doctrine and human psychology. Essentially, although there has been much in the air hinting towards a possible reading of Dickens as a proto-existentialist, every critic who has broached such a comparison has ultimately deserted it and fallen back on a less ambitious reading of Dickens work. Indeed, it seems to be too much to claim that Dickens might be able to rub shoulders with other early writers in the existentialist vein, such as Kierkegaard or Nietzsche.

Curiously enough, it has even been suggested that Dickens' works evoke values that stand *in opposition* to the tenets of existentialism. In an essay primarily designed to

criticize Heidegger—arguably the most *influential* figure in the existentialist movement—and his philosophical project, the philosopher Richard Rorty uses Dickens' supposed bailiwick as the defender of "the little guy," as the perfect contrast for Heidegger's role in philosophy, even going so far as to suggest that Dickens is "a sort of anti-Heidegger" (68). Rorty suggests that Western Civilization has suffered in the twentieth century because of a "sociopolitical pessimism which has afflicted European and American intellectuals . . . which sometimes calls itself 'postmodernism'" (67). The mark of this pessimism is "a conviction that the hopes for greater freedom and equality which mark the recent history of the West were somehow deeply self-deceptive" (67). Rorty asserts that this pessimism springs from the influence of Heidegger and Nietzsche on Western philosophy, transforming it from a science occasionally devoted to the study of free societies and ethical behavior, into an ascetic discipline dedicated to seeing the true essence behind the world, its people, and historical events. Accordingly, philosophy has lost its redemptive quality—a quality it once shared with "the novel of moral protest" (68), of which Dickens was the master craftsman. Rorty claims that Heidegger unwittingly became one of Nietzsche's dreaded "ascetic priests" through "his attempt to encapsulate the West, to sum it up and distance himself from it" (70). According to Rorty, Heidegger's work focused on the abstract, generalizing and simplifying, and ignored the particulars of reality, thereby changing philosophy into a nearly irrelevant and impractical exercise. Rorty suggests that modern-day philosophers should learn something from Dickens' work—particularly its concentration on human minutiae and the concerns of the oppressed individual—in order to expunge the empty post-existentialist qualities from modern philosophy and reintroduce reality, humanity, and

practicality to it. However, as I hope to make clear, while I suggest that Dickens was in many ways among the ranks of existentialists, I believe I will also elucidate certain qualities of existentialism that have been heretofore misunderstood—as can clearly be seen in the previously cited essay—and demonstrate how similar the existentialists may have been to Dickens in turn, particularly in this regard.

On the other hand, before proceeding, I should make a point about what this project is *not*, for that might help to shed some light on my intentions. Clearly, I am discussing Dickens and his notions regarding existence in time, but that is the extent of my investigation into the nature of time. Time in literature is obviously an enormous subject with myriad points of entry and inquiry; some of these overlap with each other, while some others of these have nothing whatsoever to do with each other. I must admit that my project occupies a very small and under-lit corner of this topic, and, as a result, it has very little to do with well known studies of the subject matter; more specifically, this project has little in common with the works of important critics who have dealt with the subject of time in literature, such as George Lukàcs, Paul Ricoeur, Hans Meyerhoff, Georges Poulet, Theodore Ziolkowski, and A. A. Mendilow. This project is not concerned with "time and narrative," and how the author manipulates or presents time so as to engage the reader most effectively, whatever the author's intentions may be. This project is also not concerned with several approaches to how individuals understand or perceive the passage of time—or, in other words, "psychological time," such as has been speculated on by Immanuel Kant, Henri Bergson or John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart—including any conjecture as to whether Dickens saw time as real or fictional, or whether he addressed if human beings perceive time as circular or linear. (Numerous scholarly

articles have already discussed that subject.) This project is also not concerned with several other issues regarding this topic, including the ontological reality of time, the difference between public and private senses of time, or the difference between "clock" time and "natural" or "eternal" time. Essentially, this project is only concerned with what might be termed existential ideas of time, or, more aptly, temporality—namely, the study of the individual identity's development over the course of time, how that identity changes and splinters over the course of time and ultimately becomes divorced from itself, and how that impacts the individual's existence in the world with other human beings.[3]

II. The Early Novels

Although Dickens clearly invested his novels with symbolic references to time from the very beginning, there is little evidence that he developed any sort of mature philosophical understanding of it until the latter half of his career. When we look at the novels that precede A Christmas Carol, we can see that there was little in them regarding time that was as sophisticated as what we might find in later novels like Little Dorrit and Great Expectations. In fact, in his first works, Dickens did not seem to have any notion of

[3] I should also note that when I compare Dickens to existentialists, I do not include all of the writers and philosophers who are traditionally included in the canon of existential literature. Specifically, I have concentrated my argument on a particular branch of existentialism which includes Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Dostoevsky, and Kafka—namely, the "atheist" branch of existentialism that inspired, or is directly or indirectly inspired by Nietzsche's work. Obviously, Kierkegaard does not *properly* belong in such a group, as his work reflected his devout Christianity, but I have chosen to include him because his work has become so bound up with the others, particularly in his influence on Heidegger and Sartre. (Dostoevsky was not an atheist either, but his work was so influential for Nietzsche that it would be hard to disregard the similarities.) Thus, I have been forced to exclude several important figures associated with existentialism, including Simone de Beauvoir, Nikolai Berdyaev, Martin Buber, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, and Jose Ortega y Gasset. Some readers may note that some of these figures have *some* similar ideas to what I focus on, such as the correspondence between Heidegger's "they-self" and Jasper's concept of the "masse-mensch" or Marcel's concept of "functionalized man." However, for the sake of succinctness, I have been forced to limit the amount of focus I give to existentialism per se, which is as large a topic as time in literature threatens to be.

a philosophy of existence at all—or, at any rate, nothing more complicated than his well-known simple dualistic worldview. Rather, if Dickens had anything to say about the concept of time at *that* time, he was more concerned with his present day. Dickens initially seemed to be more interested in chronicling his everyday observations of the world, approaching the writing of these works with the journalistic eye he had developed as a newspaper reporter. This should not be a surprise, nor should we hold it against Dickens, that he was more concerned with imitating reality than questioning it or providing his opinions about it, for he was young, and he was still coming to grips with his authorial purpose and the themes that he would one day address.

Thus, we see how in Dickens' early works—at least through Martin Chuzzlewit—the depiction of the modern day and "real life" was "the sole criterion at this stage of his career" (Miller, Charles Dickens 26). In Sketches by Boz, Dickens seemed determined to record the world as he saw it, serving, as Walter Bagehot noted, as "a special correspondent for posterity" (qtd. in Walder xvii). By all accounts, Dickens' pseudo-anthropological attempt to capture nineteenth-century English society in all of its glory was considered a success, as Dickens' friend and biographer John Forster noted forty years after its initial publication:

> Things are painted literally as they are; and, whatever the picture, whether of every-day vulgar, shabby genteel, or down-right low with neither the condescending air which is affectation, nor the too familiar one which is slang. The book altogether is a perfectly unaffected, unpretentious, honest performance. . . . It was a picture of every-day London at its best and worst, in its humours and enjoyments as well as its sufferings and sins,

> pervaded everywhere not only with the absolute reality of the things depicted. . . . (60-1)

Of course, although we do not have the privilege to go back in time and observe nineteenth century London as it was, as Dickens saw it, with the clear vision of hindsight, we can safely say that Sketches is more reflective of Dickens' abundant imagination than it is of London's reality. Ultimately, it seems, Dickens' ambition to freeze the world in a literary snapshot is proven to be naïve, as his efforts are undermined by the brilliant and overwhelming subjectivity that characterizes his genius.

In The Pickwick Papers, Dickens arguably continued to pursue his quasi-anthropological designs, despite the fact that he antedated the novel's action by ten years, to the time of his late boyhood. Critics have tended to view Pickwick as Dickens' nostalgic return to the world of his youth—the world before the advent of railroads and the First Reform Bill, a world still closely steeped in the traditions of the eighteenth century. However, I think that we should not be so easily misled by Dickens' placement of the novel in 1827, for what Dickens truly strives to realize in the novel is a wholly different type of fiction—to provide a generalized account of English life as it was at *the time of his writing*—although he cloaks his attempt in the conventions of the eighteenth century comic epic/picaresque novel; as George Ford has observed: "Although set in the recent past, Pickwick Papers is really the story of a perpetual present" (438). That this was Dickens' intention is evident from the novel's first pages.[4] The novel begins with the

[4] One might choose to disagree with this interpretation, seeing as how, when Pickwick's first numbers were written, Dickens did not have complete control over the initial directions Pickwick took, as he was only a supporting player in its creation, forced to follow the dictates of the illustrator Robert Seymour, before Seymour finally committed suicide, which freed Dickens to take full command of the project. Therefore, one might ask how Dickens could have known that he would ultimately take over full control of the book. I think in Pickwick's first few chapters we find evidence of the young Dickens' attempt to assert his talent and genius, as he clearly tried to point Pickwick in a direction wherein his gifts might best be put to use.

introduction of Pickwick, who will serve as the reader's guide to English life. Pickwick leads a club whose sole purpose is to venture out into the English countryside and report back on English customs and happenings—much, it seems, like Dickens' own purpose for the novel. Also of significance, we learn that Pickwick is something of an amateur scientist, having "traced to their sources the mighty ponds of Hampstead, and agitated the scientific world with his Theory of Tittlebats" (16). We also discover that Pickwick is highly qualified to delineate the character of the English people, as he is an "observer of human nature" (26). In essence, Pickwick is created to function as the quintessential objective observer. So as to make clear that he seeks to depict a particular zeitgeist, Dickens fixes the beginning of Pickwick's investigations at a particular moment: "That punctual servant of all work, the sun, had just risen, and begun to strike a light on the morning of the thirteenth of May, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-seven" (20). Standing in for the author, Pickwick thus ventures out into the world, prepared to record the English realm and collective character exactly as they are: ". . . with his portmanteau in his hand, his telescope in his great-coat pocket, and his note-book in his waistcoat, ready for the reception of any discoveries worthy of being noted down" (21). At first, Pickwick and his companions collect a good deal of information, as they survive numerous comic misadventures, while assembling various tales with which to provide a panoramic view of English life. However, we find that Dickens could not sustain his "scientific" efforts—or, more precisely, he *chose* not to pursue them further. As the novel proceeds, Pickwick becomes less and less concerned with his ethnographic mission—and his creator likewise seems to tire of his original designs. Pickwick gradually loses the distance necessary to provide an objective account of the English people, and instead he

becomes an active participant in the world he sought to record. His story ceases to be one of exploration and becomes an account of comic accidents and romantic encounters. Ultimately, as Dickens began to discover his true genius—the uniqueness of his vision and his talent for characterization and comedy—he neglected his original designs and shaped Pickwick into the comic epic with which we are now familiar—which, admittedly, was probably for the better.

Some critics have suggested that The Old Curiosity Shop serves as Dickens' earliest venture into time's mysteries. These critics have focused on Nell's famous flight from London with her grandfather, finding that this escape represents "withdrawal from reality into the past" and "the opposition between rural past and urban present" (Franklin 7). Thus, Nell's flight from London "is a flight from the cultural present into the cultural past" (Franklin 8). F. S. Schwarzbach insists, "There is *never any doubt* that this flight from London is also a return to the actual historical past," and that it "can only be interpreted as a conscious rejection of modern urban England, and a search for an older, even mythical, way of life" (emphasis added, 72). Other critics, such as Alexander Welsh, have speculated that The Old Curiosity Shop is Dickens' first serious contemplation of death, as Nell's "pilgrimage . . . makes Little Nell and her grandfather the most obvious sojourners" beyond the mortal coil, and Dickens "subconsciously . . . already realizes that Nell is on her way beyond this life—the life in the city that is defined by death in the final destructive sense" (119), despite John Forster's brazenly naked assertion that it was with *Forster's own* "*valued suggestion*" that Dickens "resolved to try and do something which might be read by people about whom Death had been, with a softened feeling, and with consolation" (Forster 123). The novel lends some

credence to Forster's assertions, as Master Humphrey ruminates how Nell's future might unfold, "holding her solitary way among a crowd of wild grotesque companions; the only pure, fresh, youthful object in the throng" (56)—essentially, there was a point when Dickens did not intend to end Nell's story to end in tragedy. Nevertheless, Philip Rogers also believes that Dickens fixates on the role of death in human experience in The Old Curiosity Shop:

> The novel emphasizes the mortality of men and things: time, represented by portentous sundials, hour glasses, and tolling bells governs the motion of the stream of life, reminding the reader that he, too, is on his way to becoming a curiosity. . . . Nell is not alone in coming to understand Dickens' Truth. All the central characters share Nell's illusion that the Destroyer can be circumvented; like her, too, they are obliged to accept the reality of death. (129)

However, one can only arrive at such a reading by concentrating on the final chapters, which are, admittedly, steeped in the imagery of death, decay, and the memory of others after death. At *that* point, we can say with reasonable assurance that Dickens had clearly decided to kill off his heroine and indulge his subsequent homiletic impulses, and, in so doing, he managed to dredge up his own personal feelings about death, as testified by his correspondence at the time.

Rather, I think that Dickens' true intentions for the better part of the novel were nowhere nearly so complex or high-minded as that; instead, it seems much more sensible that Dickens' design was to study the relationship between reality and fantasy, ultimately making the novel into "a sad Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale" wherein "fairy tale

merges into reality" (Johnson 325). Yes, modern society is something of a horror story, but this is primarily because of its residents' quasi-cannibalistic drive to consume at the expense of others. Despite the previously cited critics' insistence to the contrary, society does not necessarily owe its cruelty and brutality to its *modernity*. We must not forget that Dickens always refused to romanticize the past; in fact, Dickens' position was quite the contrary: for Dickens, there was nothing inherently negative about modernity or inherently positive about the past. Rather, Dickens seems to focus on the difference between the inescapable social existence that one finds in the city and the solitude that one finds in the country. Nell's journey is not an opposition between the city and country per se; rather, it is the opposition between the false self of society and the true self of independence. Thus, Nell's famous retreat is not so much a flight from the modern city, but an attempt at escape from the dangers of existence in society—those dangers that earlier sought to prey on Nell and her grandfather's relative weaknesses (physical frailty and a lack of moral fiber, respectively). The problem with the city is not that it is modern, or that its residents have rejected the values of the past—the problem is that in the city, the physical representation of the social world itself, one is thrown together with other human beings, most of whom have their own desires and will do anything to achieve those desires. As a result, one must either be a social predator or a victim: for Dickens, social existence has always been thus.

This is quite evident from a close reading of the passages describing Nell's departure from London. As the narrator recounts, London springs to life simultaneously with Nell's departure:

> Before they had penetrated very far into the labyrinth of men's abodes which yet lay between them and the outskirts, this aspect began to melt away, and noise and bustle to usurp its place. Some straggling carts and coaches rumbling by, first broke the charm, then others came, then others yet more active, then a crowd. . . . This quarter passed, they came upon the haunts of commerce and great traffic, where many people were resorting, and a business was already rife. (171-2)

As the travelers move along, the city and the crowd both thin away:

> Again this quarter passed, they came upon a straggling neighbourhood, where the mean houses parceled off in rooms, and windows patched with rags and paper, told of the populous poverty that sheltered there. . . . At length these streets, becoming more straggling yet, dwindled and dwindled away, until there were only small garden patches bordering the road, with many a summer-house innocent of paint and built of old timber or some fragments of a boat. . . . (172-3)

Finally, as they are almost completely removed from London's environs and influences, they turn back for one last glimpse of the modern-day Babylon, as it spreads out over the countryside like a rot or infection:

> Then came a turnpike; then fields again with trees and haystacks; then a hill; and on top of that the traveler might stop, and – looking back at old Saint Paul's looming through the smoke, its cross peeping above the cloud (if the day were clear) and glittering in the sun; and casting his eyes upon the Babel out of which it grew until he traced it down to the furthest

> outposts of the invading army of bricks and mortar whose station lay for the present nearly at his feet – might feel at last that he was clear of London. (173)

Here, away from the urban sprawl, Nell and her father find a paradise, both literal and figurative:

> The freshness of the day, the singing of the birds, the beauty of the waving grass, the deep green leaves, the wild flowers, and the exquisite scents and sounds that floated in the air – deep joys to most of us, but most of all to those whose life is in a crowd or who live solitarily in great cities as in the bucket of a human well, – sunk into their breasts and made them very glad. (173-5)

Here, the peace they find is clearly not the comfort of the past, or even that found in nature by the Romantics, but rather, the relief one finds away from society.

One might think that Barnaby Rudge might evince some of Dickens' more complicated ideas about human temporality, as it is Dickens' first historical novel; however, this is not quite the case. Despite the fact that the novel is temporally located in the past—more than fifty years prior to its publication—we find few observations in the novel regarding the nature of existence in time; in fact, we find relatively few speculations on history or its meaning. Rather, in the novel's preface, Dickens very clearly informs his readers that his purpose with the novel has more to do with the present day:

> It is unnecessary to say, that those shameful tumults, while they reflect indelible disgrace upon the time in which they occurred, and all who had

> act or part in them, teach a good lesson. That what we all falsely call a religious cry is easily raised by men who have no religion, and who in their daily practice set at nought the commonest principles of right and wrong; that it is begotten of intolerance and persecution; that it is senseless, besotted, inveterate and unmerciful; all History teaches us. But perhaps we do not know it in our hearts too well, to profit by even so humble an example as the 'No Popery' riots of Seventeen Hundred and Eighty. (40)

In short, Dickens' intention is to warn his audience about the dangers of crowd psychology and mob rule; in this case, history serves only as a catalogue of parallel examples that might serve to instruct individuals in the present day.

However, there is little of the quasi-metaphysical supposition regarding the nature of existence that we find in the later novels. What little there is of philosophical inquiry can be found in a motif running throughout the work that deals with individuals and their capacity to handle change (Franklin 14). In the work, there are several characters who cannot adjust to a swiftly changing world—they adhere religiously to the values and mores of the past. That being said, we should not confuse this reluctance to change with the existential conditions of later characters like Mrs. Clennam and Miss Havisham—which we will discuss in full later—for Barnaby Rudge's theme of change is more concerned with human beings' intransigence in the face of the new and unfamiliar, and their reluctance to take an individual stance on issues or to compromise their preconceived notions—not, as we will see, the more complicated issues presented by later novels, like Great Expectations. This theme centers on the character of Joe Willet,

the proprietor of the Maypole Inn. As the narrator observes, the Maypole is notoriously old:

> The place was said to have been built in the days of King Henry the Eighth; and there was a legend, not only that Queen Elizabeth had slept there one night while upon a hunting excursion, to wit, in a certain oak-panelled room with a deep bay window, but that next morning, while standing on a mounting block before the door with one foot in the stirrup, the virgin monarch had then and there boxed and cuffed an unlucky page for some neglect of duty. (43)

As we learn, this is a source of pride for Willet, who is hesitant to accept change in any form. From that stubbornness, Willet derives a certain sense of comfort:

> It was John Willet's ordinary boast in his more placid moods that if he were slow he was sure; which assertion could, in one sense at least, be by no means gainsaid, seeing that he was in everything unquestionably the reverse of fast, and withal one of the most dogged and positive fellows in existence – always sure that what he thought or said or did was right, and holding it as a thing quite settled and ordained by the laws of nature and Providence, that anybody who said or did or thought otherwise must be inevitably and of necessity wrong. (45)

Of course, Dickens' narrator treats Willet with a sort of contemptuous sarcasm, as it is quite evident that Willet's bullheadedness is not an admirable trait. In fact, Willet's obstinacy is directly related to the mob violence that occurs later in the novel, as Dickens takes great pains to make clear that a disinclination towards change is equivalent to the

unwillingness to understand anything contrary to one's limited preconceived notions, which is thereby closely linked with—and inevitably leads to—the myopia of hatred. That this state of limited understanding is ultimately empty—and not really equal to living in the first place—is evident from Willet's condition when he is finally confronted with change, as his former friends and customers destroy the inn:

> He was perfectly contented to sit there, staring at it, and felt no more indignation or discomfort in his bonds than if they had been robes of honour. So far as he was personally concerned, old Time lay snoring, and the world stood still. (500)

In the end, Willet is left as something of an imbecile, chalking up imaginary debts and drink orders. Of course, Dickens' conclusive point is that Willet is no different than before, for having a limited perspective of the world is no different than having a deluded one.

Admittedly, I do not mean to suggest that there is *no* connection between Dickens' early novels and his later work; far from it, for, in all of these novels, there are certainly the original germs of some of Dickens' later and more profound ideas. Clearly, from Pickwick's earliest pages, we find Dickens' first skeptical approach to understanding society, wherein we find how individuals in society often conform to others' expectations of them, and subsequently reject all sense of individuality for a more comforting group mindset. This treatment of society can be found in every ensuing work, as Dickens' characters—particularly the weak-willed ones—succumb to society's pressure to conform or fall victim to the selfish desires of others. So, too, do we find characters who have problematic relationships with their temporality, to one degree or

another. However, before A Christmas Carol, Dickens only manages to hint at these ideas—in the early stages of his career, he was unable to combine all of these notions into a sustained vision of existence. It would not be until 1843 and the landmark composition of A Christmas Carol, that Dickens finally began to articulate his ideas regarding existence in time.

III. A Christmas Carol: Dickens' Mission Statement?

A Christmas Carol is quite arguably Dickens' first sustained presentation of his interest in time, and—more importantly—his proto-existentialist philosophy of life. Admittedly, the Carol is not the most complex or mature work, as critics have often observed, but it does exhibit an early articulation of all of Dickens' later ideas, and, for that reason, a reading of it may serve as an excellent opportunity to examine briefly how we might see these fairly complicated ideas in Dickens' narrative. I would argue that, A Christmas Carol serves as something of a mission statement for Dickens' later novels, for it depicts the story of one individual who has lost himself to society's values. In the Carol, we see how, despite Scrooge's protestations to the contrary, he senses the inadequacy of his miserly existence, and, to a certain extent, he summons the spirits who will help him to realize what he needs to change. Scrooge must subsequently look to his own temporality to begin to understand his proper self, the self that lurks behind the gruff exterior. Ultimately, by discovering his true self in time, Scrooge also discovers the proper moral behavior that he has ignored for most of his life. Most importantly, through Scrooge's redemption, the rest of the world is redeemed and improved by extension. As Dickens explained: "I converted Mr. Scrooge by teaching him that a Christian heart can

not be shut up in itself, but must live in the Past, the Present, and the Future, and must be a link of this great human chain, and must have sympathy with everything" (qtd. in Ford 439). Essentially, A Christmas Carol shows how Dickens had come to see the inexorable connection between one's self-understanding, one's temporal existence, and one's concept of morality, and thus, the Carol can quite arguably serve as the thesis for Dickens' "mature" works—i.e., Dombey and Son and subsequent works.

I would say that, upon closer inspection, this developing theme is substantially more complex than what Louis Cazamian originally termed Dickens' "Christmas philosophy"—that "vague and sentimental form of Christian socialism" (Cazamian 82)—although there are, of course, some instances of slippage between these principles and the values of Christianity. Much has been made of Dickens' supposed espousal of Christian values—much of which, I think, is misplaced. As Humphry House has noted, Dickens' belief in the possibility of human benevolence seems to coalesce into the "attitude of life" commonly associated with Christmas, a form of existence characterized by "the breakdown for a season of the restraints imposed by normal social life . . . release from cares that dim the affections . . . relaxation of the formality and strictness of business relationships" (52). G. K. Chesterton, who dedicated an entire chapter in his study of Dickens to this theme, has described Dickens' vision of Christmas as relying predominantly on "the note of comfort" and "Christian charity" (118). Subsequent critics have tended to see an amalgam of these various facets of Dickens' concept of Christmas as the preeminent Dickensian vision of ideal human existence; however, as T. A. Jackson has correctly asserted, Dickens' "Father Christmas" status is somewhat undeserved, for "Dickens' repute as a Champion of Christmas rests primarily—in fact, almost

exclusively—on the basis of his Christmas books in general, and his Christmas Carol in particular," although really outside of A Christmas Carol, there is little that truly celebrates the season itself, save for a smattering of scattered occasional stories and essays (291). In reality, Dickens' standing as a "Christian" writer is frequently overstated by critics, who tend to see Christ figures and baptismal scenes in virtually every work. It is true that Dickens was raised as a Christian in a Christian nation, and his values are arguably similar to those of Christianity, but Dickens was by no means devout—and certainly not to the point where he would allow his literary career to be compromised by the requirements of Christian evangelism. Rather, if Dickens made reference to biblical figures or phrases from time to time, it seems more obvious that he was trafficking in a shibboleth of allusions and stories with which his audience was familiar. Or, quite possibly, Dickens' evocation of Christian expressions and biblical citations served as a cover for something else, as House has suggested: "But when he uses Christian imagery in describing things about which he felt deeply it is difficult not to feel that it is a mask to conceal some inability to control or express his emotion" (132). Essentially, Dickens' vision of Christmas was only Christian in that it was *reflective* of Christian values, yet these values are quite arguably present in most other religions and creeds; thus, we should not read too much into Dickens' supposed evangelical spirit.

To return to the story in question: Scrooge quite arguably embodies *all* of humanity, although that has not always seemed to be the case, for critics have often misread the character as *only* representative of the *upper* classes, "a personification of economic man" (Johnson 485), or "an allegorical example of all Dickens hated in the free competition system" (Goldberg 33), albeit for good reason; however, Scrooge is clearly a

more problematical character than that for which Dickens is given credit for creating. I think he is ostensibly more complicated in that, as Harry Stone has suggested, Scrooge is more than "an outrageous miser and ogre," for he is "also an emblem of more ordinary pathology: he is an epitome of all selfish and self-regarding men" (52). True, Scrooge performs the most self-serving behavior, while he voices the most horrible of opinions, including his famous praise for the treatment of the poor by public institutions such as the "prisons . . . the Union workhouses . . . the Treadmill and the Poor Law" (51) and his famous condemnation of Christmas, which is really a denunciation of human companionship: "What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen months presented dead against you?" (Dickens 48). Yet, beneath all of this, there is the suggestion that Scrooge is not an *absolute* monster. Moreover, there is the implication within the tale that Scrooge *himself* has conjured up all of the supernatural occurrences—not, mind you, as merely random hallucinations, but as visions "deeply imbued with meaning" (Holderness 34)—which, if that is true, indicates that Scrooge is, in fact, possessing of "an intense moral imagination" (Holderness 34), despite the narrator's initial insistence that "Scrooge had as little of what is called fancy about him as any man in the City of London" (Dickens 54). Thus, if Scrooge can be called imaginative, even in his "lowest" miserly state, then he has something in common with Dickens' most beloved *heroes*, including such figures as Dick Swiveller, Esther Summerson, Amy Dorrit, and Pip—all singled out for their remarkable imaginative powers. Essentially, it is easy to dismiss Scrooge as some sort of economic bogey man—"Mr. Laissez-faire" (33), as

Michael Goldberg has labeled him—and to read A Christmas Carol as an attack on modern capitalism, but to do so would be to miss Dickens' point entirely, for Scrooge is actually meant to stand in for any one of us, and there is more at stake than the relatively cut-and-dry interaction between the haves and have-nots.

Just as many other human beings have before and since, Scrooge sees the world only by society's values; he only thinks of himself and desires according to what I will later refer to as his "they-self," a Heideggerian term for the restricted identity one derives from existence with others, originally employed in the landmark philosophical treatise Being and Time (1927). As noted earlier, Scrooge has bought into all of society's values: as a result, his comprehension of the universe and his place within it is restricted. As Arthur Patterson has noted, Scrooge's "vision is distorted. . . . due to his obsession with the immediate; Scrooge can see himself, his belongings, and nothing much beyond" (174). In fact, Scrooge's ideal existence is "to be left alone" (Dickens 51) in his temporal vacuum, surrounded by his possessions. To make this clear, Dickens depicts, through Scrooge's physical existence, the constrictions Scrooge has placed on his own character:

> . . . he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always

> about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas. (46)

Regardless of any exterior changes or developments, every day is the same for Scrooge; Scrooge's existence is so limited that nothing distracts him from his daily pursuit of profit:

> External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, nor wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn't know where to have him. The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet, could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often "came down" handsomely, and Scrooge never did. (46)

Furthermore, Scrooge's immediate environment reflects this limited perception of existence, as we find that his home is a somewhat funereal locale, changed by time but not in any other respects, as if its owner refuses to acknowledge the passage of the years:

> They were a gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of building up a yard . . . It was old enough now, and dreary enough, for nobody lived in it but Scrooge, the other rooms being all let out as offices. The yard was so dark that even Scrooge, who knew its every stone, was fain to grope with his hands. The fog and frost so hung about the black old gateway of the house, that it seemed as if the Genius of the Weather sat in mournful meditation on the threshold. (54)

Essentially, it is clear that Scrooge's home is no home at all—it is a place of business, which is quite fitting in that its owner's sole purpose in life *is* business. For Dickens, such a life is really not much of a life at all. Clearly, Scrooge is ripe for some sort of turnaround: he needs his eyes to be opened to life's real purpose, so that he might begin to truly live for the first time.

Significantly, one thing that Scrooge steadfastly refuses to acknowledge is the future, though imminent, occurrence of his death. As we shall see, this reluctance to accept the inevitability of one's own demise—and to live one's life accordingly—is a hallmark trait of the "They," the collection of other individuals who potentially influence the individual in a negative and constrictive way. As we discover immediately, Scrooge has learned nothing from his partner, Marley's, death; although "Scrooge was sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend and sole mourner," we find that Scrooge was still able to make money off the incident, as he "was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent man of business on the very day of the funeral, and solemnised it with an undoubted bargain" (45). Moreover, as I already mentioned, Scrooge lives in his dead partner's house; despite the fact that Scrooge has lived there for a long time, he has never changed anything—"Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood years afterwards, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley" (46)—although not from a sense of nostalgia or regret. Rather, the point is that Scrooge refuses to accept the reality of death; he has ignored the lesson that has been right in front of his face for years—Marley died despite his successful accumulation of goods and wealth. Ultimately, Scrooge will finally be faced with the reality of his own demise, through the auspices of the Ghost of Christmas

Yet to Come, and it is no coincidence that Dickens chooses this encounter to serve as the most dramatic, effective, and jarring lesson that Scrooge receives prior to his redemption.

Clearly, Scrooge has a problematic relationship with temporality. As noted earlier, Scrooge understands his existence in time in the same manner that most of society's denizens understand it: as it relates to the immediate and momentary. For Scrooge and society, time has nothing to do with life, sentiments, achievements, self-improvement, or responsibility; rather, time is the opportunity one has to accumulate and consume. As Robert Patten has observed:

> Scrooge counts by this time, a concrete fact, hard, impersonal, unyielding, shaped in his own image to badger others in the service of his own prosperity. It is the time of notes and bills, equated with money: so many hours for so much pay, and so many days at so much interest per day. Time, for Scrooge, is money; Bob Cratchit's day off with pay is a double deprivation. (167)

Significantly, however, Scrooge is not the only individual who has this limited conception of existence. A Christmas Carol's world is very similar to that of later novels like Bleak House: "Entropic, it is a world slowly choking on its own congealing effluvia" (Patten 171). Like Scrooge, the rest of the world seems to experience the same environmental manifestation of limited insight:

> Meanwhile the fog and darkness thickened so, that people ran about with flaring links . . . The ancient tower of a church, whose gruff old bell was always peeping slily down at Scrooge out of a gothic window in the wall, became invisible, and struck the hours and quarters in the clouds . . . the

> cold became intense. . . . Foggier yet, and colder! Piercing searching, biting cold. (Dickens 52)

In essence, the rest of the world is frozen in the present moment, limited by unnecessary restrictions. Moreover, the fog that cloaks everything in darkness is clearly representative of the limited understanding or vision that the world's occupants have of themselves and their responsibilities. Clearly, Dickens' concern is to *limit* Scrooge's culpability for the world's ills; after all, it is too easy to read Scrooge as a capitalist ogre, because his heartlessness lies at the forefront of the novel's action. But, as one can clearly see, Scrooge is not the only one with a mistaken conception of self and existence: he is not responsible for the mess that the world is in. Granted, Scrooge is *part* of the problem, but he is not the only source of the world's ills: Scrooge did not create society's institutions, he is not blameworthy for the disparity of wealth and privilege. Ultimately, it is quite important that we do not vilify Scrooge, because when Scrooge finds redemption, it will be "more than the transformation of one human being" but also a "plea for society itself to undergo a change of heart" (Johnson 487).

However, before society can rise above the fog of limited insight, Scrooge must free himself from society's values. Louis Cazamian has suggested that ultimately A Christmas Carol shows that the world depicted therein "was the work of radical individualists, and individualism was the enemy against which Dickens swore the most inveterate hostility" (85). I think this is actually not quite Dickens' notion, if only because it is too simplistic: yes, Dickens was against a *certain kind* of individualism, but to say that he was against *all* forms of individuality is to miss the point entirely. Rather, Dickens is opposed to the sort of "individuality" that society seems to encourage—namely, the

pursuit of private property and social status at the expense of others. From this regard, *true* individuality is the ability to think on one's own and not to follow society's values so blindly. On the other hand, we should not make the mistake of insinuating that Dickens wants Scrooge to completely depart from society. Rather, Scrooge must discover his "authentic" self, independent of society's values, and subsequently he must find a proper form of companionship among those of similarly enlightened minds, such as his nephew or the Cratchits.

Scrooge's passage out of delusion can only be realized by facing the reality of his self in time, a confrontation in which a metaphysical mirror of sorts is held up before Scrooge so that he can see how far he has devolved and remember what it was like to be truly individual. As Barbara Hardy has observed:

> Scrooge sees his own image in the most literal fashion, moving back in time and confronting himself at different stages in his process of deterioration. There is his old self, the child, loving and innocent opposite of the unloving old sophist. There is the transitional self, committed to loveless rationalism, but still holding some few warm contacts with the past. There is his mirror-image, the present self who echoes his own words and sentiments but in a context newly charged with feeling. The doubles, like the ghosts, are all potent in different ways, and indeed the ghosts are not only aspects of Christmas but in part at least aspects of Scrooge: his past, his present, and his suggestively anonymous future. (34-5)

This reevaluation of his self in time begins with a reassessment of his past. It is obvious that Scrooge is separated from his past self; he has lost his memory of his childhood

experiences and the lessons that he should have learned from them. However, Scrooge's visit to his childhood is not as simplistic as many critics have chosen to read the event, namely in the speculation that Dickens only wants Scrooge to rediscover "the revived child . . . a battered child" (Anastaplo 62) in his heart—in other words, these critics would have us believe that Scrooge must find the clichéd child, his imagination, in his soul. Of course, my point is that Dickens was not so simple-minded as to suggest that a little imagination could cleanse a corrupt world. Ultimately, Dickens' intention is more intricate than that: Scrooge must "reabsorb" his previous self into his understanding of who he is and reassess his understanding of himself in light of that with the assistance of the Ghost of Christmas Past.

In his description of the Ghost of Christmas Past, Dickens engages in a remarkable tour de force description of the means by which humans understand their past experiences and look back on them from the present. As Robert Patten has observed, this ghost takes on characteristics suggestive of childhood and memory—representations of how an individual experiences the comprehension of his or her past time (175). Dickens obsessively pondered the nature and importance of memory, and he would frequently return to his examination of it, most notably in David Copperfield. Therefore, it should not be surprising that he would be able to so effectively utilize several features of personal remembrance to portray this form of time. The Ghost is described as "like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child's proportions" (Dickens 68). Arguably, childhood is similarly viewed from a later perspective; one can only retrieve the vague recollection of one's younger form, which is contorted and made indistinct by

the incongruity between one's adult sense of self—developed and altered by decades of experience—and the long-lost innocent identity one had as a child: essentially, the child of one's memory is both a child and an adult, an immature form possessing the advanced psyche of the present individual. The Spirit's hands and arms are described as "very long and muscular . . . as if its hold were of uncommon strength" (68); memory's hold on an individual is quite similar, as its reach is long—through the years—and its grasp on an individual's consciousness can be quite powerful. The "bright clear jet of light" (68) that springs from the Spirit's head, by which its form is made visible, is comparable to that quality of memory wherein occasional moments of the past can stand illuminated in our minds as if occurring in the present, piercing through the darkness of the forgotten past. Significantly, when Scrooge attempts to silence the Spirit with its extinguisher cap, he is unable to do so, as "he could not hide the light: which streamed from under it, in an unbroken flood upon the ground" (84). Dickens suggests that, like the Spirit's light, the light of memory cannot be repressed for long; we can shove memories down to the depths of our minds, but they will invariably resurface to trouble us once more. Finally, there is the Spirit's "strangest quality," wherein "the figure fluctuated in its distinctness," its limbs alternately fading in and out of the darkness of Scrooge's room, though reappearing as "itself again; distinct and clear as ever" (68). With this last detail, Dickens unifies the previously disparate details into a singular image, and he presents his final observation on the essence of memory: while many events in our past remain indistinct and confused at various points in our lives, we are sometimes able to recall them fully, and seize a sense of the totality of our experiences, wherein our past selves coalesce into one being.

As Scrooge walks through his past experiences, he discovers the origin of some of his worst behavior. Chief among the sources of Scrooge's mistakes is the obviously contentious relationship Scrooge has with his past. It is apparent that Scrooge rarely reflects on his history and what he might learn from it, choosing rather to "dismiss the recollection of it, gladly, as an unprofitable dream" (81). Thus, despite the fact that Scrooge has the uncommon opportunity to visit his own past, there is the distinct suggestion that an insurmountable distance remains between Scrooge and his own experiences. He walks through the scenes of his youth, "recognizing every gate, and post, and tree," but it is all unreal, for these images "are but shadows of the things that have been" (71). Significantly, Scrooge's past self is also seen as a separate entity, as he finds "a solitary child, neglected by his friends" (71), and "he wept to see his poor forgotten self as he had used to be" (72). In essence, the Scrooge of the present is utterly disconnected from his previous self—his past experiences might as well have happened to someone else. This is the manner in which many of Dickens' later characters understand their own past experiences.

Moreover, in his return to the past, Scrooge must also discover what he once had and has since lost. First, Scrooge must rediscover the pain of true lack of companionship, like what one finds most commonly in the thick of society. Thus, Scrooge sees how he was alone and friendless when he had nothing by which others might profit. In contrast, we see how, at the same time, Scrooge was able to rely on certain authentic relationships and the true sentiment of family—Dickens' ideal community—as personified by his sister. This companionship is later represented in the figures of Scrooge's boss Fezziwig and Scrooge's one-time fiancée, Belle. Importantly, Scrooge must also rediscover his

imagination—as symbolized by his childhood reading and his ability to enjoy a good party—although not *because* that is necessarily the key to authentic existence. Rather, imagination serves as the representation of true individuality—the ability to think for oneself. At some point, it was a well-developed faculty on Scrooge's part, but, as Belle observes, Scrooge "fears the world too much" in that he invested all of his hopes in society's values, and all of his "hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of its sordid reproach," coalescing into one "master-passion, Gain" (79). In short, Scrooge must witness how all the elements of his one-time independence faded away, and, by revisiting them, Scrooge begins to learn how to reincorporate them into his notion of his self.

The description of the Ghost of Christmas Present is notably different from that of its predecessor in that Dickens deluges his readers with concrete details about both the Ghost and its environment—all of which again represent human understanding of a particular aspect of time. Whereas Scrooge has difficulty perceiving the previous Spirit's true form, he is able to note clearly that the Ghost of Christmas Present is "a jolly Giant, glorious to see" (87). Every detail of this Ghost's appearance suggests clarity, and no aspect of its shape is hidden. Though it wears a robe, "this garment hung so loosely on the figure, that its capacious breast was bare, as if disdaining to be warded or concealed by any artifice" (87). Its feet "were also bare" and "on its head it wore no other covering than a holly wreath" (87). Significantly, the Spirit also happens to inhabit a room wherein "a mighty blaze went roaring up the chimney," and the light of this fire is reflected by the various adornments hung around the room "as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there" (86). In fact, the Ghost's purpose seems literally to *be seen*, as

he exhorts Scrooge to "look upon me" (87). In essence, this Ghost is eminently visible to Scrooge, just as the present *seems* to be the most "real" aspect of time. Moreover, whereas the previous Ghost was bathed in deathly gloom and the world through which it guides Scrooge can best be described as Elysian—a world of walking shadows—the Ghost of Christmas Present exists in a vibrant setting of organic life, as "the walls and ceiling were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove" (86). The Spirit itself takes on characteristics associated with the natural world: "Its dark brown curls were long and free: free as its genial face, its sparkling eye, its open hand, its cheery voice" (87). Moreover, the Spirit is surrounded with food, "heaped up on the floor, to form a kind of throne" (86); food can represent many things, and for Dickens it is often a symbol of generosity, but here it clearly signifies sustenance, the means by which organic life survives. Essentially, the Spirit exudes a sensation of life, marked by those characteristics of a natural world, and natural existence, unchecked by mankind—free, flowing, warm, open, and vivacious.

Significantly, through the Ghost of Christmas Present, Dickens notes that "presence"—present existence—is limited and evanescent. The Spirit describes itself as one of a family of "brothers" numbering "more than eighteen hundred," and, towards the end of his night with Scrooge, the Ghost who was initially "very young" grows "older, clearly older" (107). Thus, we see how the Ghost, like the present time, is continuously dying and fading into the past while simultaneously being reborn as a new present. "My life upon this globe, is very brief" (107), the Ghost explains to Scrooge, and we are meant to understand that the life of the present, though so genuine and energetic in our perceptions, is inherently fleeting. This, of course, has an important impact on what we

choose to do with our existence in the present; as clichéd as it may seem now, Dickens felt that people needed to be alerted to this bitter reality of existence before they would be willing to change their behavior.

The contrast between the Ghost of Christmas Present and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is startlingly oppositional, and it is this severe difference that serves to illustrate the difficulty of understanding the future mode of time. Whereas the Present Spirit is clearly visible to Scrooge, the Future Spirit is "shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand" (110). Moreover, while the Present Ghost is quite garrulous, the Future Ghost "neither spoke nor moved" (110). Such is the difference between the present and the future, for while the present seems open to us, the future is dark and uncertain. Significantly, the only thing that Scrooge can truly observe is the Spirit's "spectral hand" (110), which it employs as its sole means of communication. Scrooge is unable to get any concrete information from this Spirit: he is merely "pointed onward" (110), presumably further into the future. Moreover, as the Spirit guides Scrooge through the future, it "did not stay for anything, but went straight on, as to the end just now desired" (123). Dickens seems to suggest that the only thing that can be truly determined about the future is that it is eternally moving forward, stopping for no man.

Most importantly, as the Spirit shows, the future destination for Scrooge—and for us all—is death. As we have seen, Scrooge has consistently attempted to deny death's power over him and the inevitability of its occurrence, not only ignoring those paupers dying around him in London's streets, but also refusing to acknowledge that he will die one day as well. However, throughout the tale, death always seems to be around the

corner, present in every setting and scene. As George Anastaplo has correctly observed: "Death looms large throughout A Christmas Carol, and not only emphatically in its very beginning" (55). In fact, the story begins with death, in the tale's very opening lines, when the narrator famously notes: "Marley was dead: to begin with" (Dickens 45). More importantly, Scrooge's conversion—the purpose for the tale's telling—depends on his confrontation of two future deaths: his own and that of Tiny Tim. Finally, it is no coincidence that the final spirit, the "Ghost of the Future" (111), shows nothing but death scenes. Dickens' point is quite clear: the future holds many uncertainties for us, as suggested by the Ghost's ill-defined figure; some of these possibilities can be altered, and some of them cannot—as Scrooge seems to realize partially, when he hopes that: "Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead . . . But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change" (124)—but in all of them, the one certainty is death. The physical characteristics of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come further emphasizes the connection between death and the future, as it bears a striking resemblance to traditional Western images of Death personified. Essentially, death and the future are one and the same—there is an inevitable convergence between death and every individual's lifetime in the future. But, don't we all already know that death is unavoidable? Of course, Dickens did not believe that people are unaware of death—he simply felt that they do not really accept it, as evidenced by the ways that most people live their lives. His point is that individuals must stop acting as if they will live forever, and accept some of the consequences of death's inevitability.

So what, then, is Scrooge supposed to learn by witnessing these future death scenes? First, Scrooge is forced to recognize the transient nature of the present time. With

the Ghost of the Future, Scrooge sees how quickly time might pass: “Indeed, the Spirit did not stay for anything, but went straight on, as to the end just now desired, until besought by Scrooge to tarry for a moment” (123). The Ghost’s “inexorable finger” always points forward into the future, to the next death scene. Thus is life, Dickens suggests, as we may think that our present good fortunes will never end, but one day the hand of death touches us all.

Second, by way of the last spirit’s influence, Scrooge must realize the absolute vanity of accumulating material goods. All of his life, Scrooge has scraped and scrounged, just like the rest of society; however, when the last spirit shows Scrooge the aftermath of his own death, we find that all of Scrooge’s worldly belongings have fallen into the possession of society’s scavengers, as working class women have stripped his bed clean of its curtains and blankets so as to pawn them. They have even disrobed his body, taking his finest shirt, in which “somebody was fool enough” (117) to bury him. Essentially, Scrooge gradually realizes that ultimately all material goods are worthless, for, when we die, we cannot take them with us.

Finally, Scrooge realizes the true meaning of loneliness, as evidenced by the contrast between his and Tiny Tim’s postmortem. Tiny Tim has a family and his family’s friends to mourn for him; this is no mean thing, for, by this means, Dickens suggests that Tiny Tim’s existence may continue on in the memory of others—which, as we shall see, is an anticipation of Sartre’s treatment of memory and existence—as Tim’s loved ones promise to keep him in mind for the rest of their days: as Bob Cratchit says: “however and whenever we part from one another, I am sure we shall none of us forget poor Tiny Tim” (123). However, Scrooge is utterly alone in death, as we find his corpse “plundered

and bereft, unwatched, unwept, uncared for" (118). As the narrator informs us, Scrooge has no connections upon which to call to remember him in his last days: "He lay, in the dark empty house, with not a man, a woman, or a child, to say that he was kind to me in this or that, and for the memory of one kind word I will be kind to him" (118). In essence, Scrooge's existence is additionally incomplete in that he will not continue to exist in the memory of others. When his acquaintances' hatred for him fades, it will be as if he never existed at all.

All of this serves to put Scrooge's present existence into question. If time is fleeting, then he must put it to better use. If his material goods will eventually be taken from him, then they are basically useless to him, and by extension he must see that the pursuit of all forms of wealth is thus revealed as a pointless, wrongheaded enterprise. Most importantly, Scrooge must realize that we are all, in life *and* death interconnected with each other. If this is true, then each individual has a certain responsibility to others. Because of his sojourn through time, Scrooge finally realizes what Marley had tried to tell him at the beginning of this fateful Christmas Eve:

> "Business!" cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!" (62)

Essentially, because of the nature of existence, the only business the individual has is related to the business of others: our fates are bound to the fates of our co-existing companions in life. Thus, Dickens suggests, it is our task to facilitate the existences of

others in the best way that we can, without impinging on our own freedom to become what we are meant to be. Thus, does Scrooge realize what it truly means to "live in the Past, the Present, and the Future" (126)—namely, to have a unified sense of one's temporal existence, and by extension to have a focused, integrated understanding of one's identity and one's purpose in life.[5]

IV. Objectives

In the following chapters, I will attempt to elaborate on the various ideas I have mentioned above. In the first chapter, I explore Dickens' depiction of society's misunderstanding of temporality and existence. As we have seen in Scrooge's case, Dickens' development of this theme initially depicts how his characters—surrogates for the rest of humanity—are subject to this misperception, before he suggests the means to correct it. Dickens' critique of society as a whole is generally accomplished through the satirical portrayal of certain representative groups, such as businessmen, bureaucrats, or the declining aristocracy. Each of these groups is shown to have its own dominant group mentality and self-interpretation, which each reduce the individual qualities and aspirations of its members down to the group's prescribed value system. Dickens' characters who join these particular groups willingly reject any sense of autonomy or individuality for a limited self-interpretation according to their places within each society or group mentality. As Heidegger would later describe it in Being and Time, these characters embrace an "inauthentic" sense of being known as the "they-self," which is

[5] Interestingly, Kierkegaard describes a nearly identical experience when he relates how the individual realizes his true self in God—the moment of existential disclosure: "It is brief and temporal indeed, like every moment; it is transient as all moments are; it is past, like every moment in the next moment. And yet it is decisive, and filled with the eternal. Such a moment ought to have a distinctive name; let us call it the *Fullness of Time*" ("Philosophical" 161).

drawn from their self-definition according to their place in a larger group, or "They." Although each group has its own unique values and hierarchy, they all seem to share an unspoken naïve belief that they can freeze a moment of time and maintain it as their respective form of existence. Thus, the members of each "They" believe they can live in a seemingly perpetual present time, whereby they can maintain the status quo, which also happens to benefit their worldly needs. As a result, each novel's world initially seems to be stuck in a pattern of stasis; there is no development or positive change, but merely an overwhelming sense of social degeneration. However, the novel's main characters are never condemned to suffer eternally under this misapprehension of existence. As we will see, Dickens' protagonists come to sense the ominous warning of anxiety. They experience what Heidegger terms the "call of care"—the summons to realize their true selves. In this chapter, I will focus on some of the major developments of this theme, particularly how they can be seen in Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, Little Dorrit, Great Expectations, and Our Mutual Friend. I will also explain certain key concepts from the works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus that relate to this theme.

In my second chapter, I examine how this theme relates to the human experience of the past. According to Dickens, an unfortunate side-effect of the widespread acceptance of "they-selves" is the rejection of past selves and experiences—what Heidegger termed the "historical" quality of being—whereby various characters forget who they were and what they valued before their respective rises in society: we have already seen a clear instance of this in A Christmas Carol. This anti-temporal misconnection is clearly depicted as a fundamental contradiction of the nature of

existence, for Dickens suggests that the past state of being can be understood to coexist with the present; this is readily perceived in that the past existence of his characters continually recurs in the present. Dickens' characters attempt to dismiss their past experiences and selves, yet they are constantly reminded of the past and its bearing on the present. In his portrayal of this conflict, Dickens employed a variety of symbols that function as the concrete manifestation of past time, or what Heidegger would later term "historical" material; in essence, these symbols are physical representations of each character's earlier existence. Dickens likewise utilized setting for a similar purpose, thereby anticipating Heidegger's concept of "world-historical sites," wherein an individual's existence leaves an imprint on physical locations. Ultimately, Dickens refutes the notion that the past is dead and gone, for he clearly saw that past time has a co-existence with the present, both in its ostensible material presence and its indisputable formative influence on the present time. I choose to focus my analysis on Little Dorrit, for in this novel we find Dickens' most thorough investigation of this theme, as Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam must seek to overcome the numerous "Theys" around them and find individual purpose and identity through reconciliation with their "historical" selves.

In my third chapter, I will focus on the meaning of death in Dickens' works. Just as Dickens did not believe that the past could be neatly separated from existence in the present time, he likewise seemed to suggest that death, the inevitable future state of an individual, was a crucial element in the determination of one's being. The personal experience of death, including instances of standing witness to another's passing or barely escaping one's own demise, consistently plays a significant role in Dickens' later

novels. In each novel, death scenes function as the instant of self-realization in which the novels' protagonists are given insight into the nature of their existence. I would argue that this is much more complex than the traditional novelistic device of the sickbed/deathbed conversion. Frequently, Dickens' central characters—including Little Dorrit's William and Frederick Dorrit, and Mrs. Clennam; Great Expectations' Pip; and Our Mutual Friend's Eugene Wrayburn and John Harmon—have denied the possibilities of their existence, remaining firmly ensconced in a "They" self-conception. But upon confronting death or the possibility of death, these various characters regain the ability to see themselves and the possibilities for their existence, including their places in the world, their purposes in life, and the needs of others. In suggesting this, Dickens clearly anticipates a major concept in Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus' work, for they all maintain that death is an important element of "authentic" existence. I will concentrate my analysis on Our Mutual Friend, for it is marked by multiple instances of death, near-death, and metaphorical death experiences, all of which disclose each character's "authentic" being to him or her and lead to a rejection of each character's "They" self-interpretation.

Finally, in my concluding chapter, I will return to a focus on the question of morality, which clearly serves as the major divergence between Dickens' novels and existentialist philosophy.[6] According to Heidegger's philosophical project, the realization of "authentic" being is not intended to lead to a higher moral or ethical awareness, for authentic understanding of being is the only purpose of his ontology. Similarly, Sartre is initially wary of establishing a value system as a result of his analysis because one of the hallmarks of his early work is the assertion that existence is absurd and there is no such

[6] With the exception, of course, of Kierkegaard, whose Christian-infused version of existentialism centers ultimately on the moral requirements of existence for the individual. Kierkegaard assigns a moral requirement of paramount importance for the individual to realize his true self in God.

thing as an absolute in the universe, except for the freedom of existence. However, towards the conclusion of L'Être et le néant (1943), Sartre admits that "ontology can not formulate ethical precepts . . . it does, however, allow us to catch a glimpse of what sort of ethics will assume its responsibilities when confronted with *a human reality in situation*" (795); in short, Sartre allows that ontology discloses the relationship of value systems—one of which is morality—to particular human conditions. Later, in "L'Existentialisme est une humanisme," Sartre opens up this ethical implication of his project by acknowledging that existence is characterized by action and "becoming," and that individuals have responsibilities to themselves, to their actions, and not to limit the freedom of the Other ("Humanism" 48-58).

Dickens takes these points much further. He clearly suggests that authentic self-interpretation is derived through a reevaluation of the self in time, which reveals being as a "becoming" from birth to death; therefore, we have a responsibility to ourselves to continue the natural progression of becoming and not to foolishly attempt to keep things exactly as they are according to the dictates of the "They." Likewise, it is of paramount importance that we take responsibility for our actions. Moreover, authentic self-interpretation inevitably leads to authentic interpretation of the world around the individual, just as Heidegger would later suggest; however, Dickens' concept of authentic understanding of being reveals an innate truth at the center of that being: if our being is linked to being with others, across time, then we have a natural duty to assist others in their "becoming," as well.

Thus, for Dickens, the question of one's existence is really a question of one's moral action because the search for one leads to the other. In light of this, the very idea of

"presence"—what it means to have a present state and one's responsibilities within that time—takes on new significance. Dickens' treatment of existence in time is ultimately concerned with what one should do in *any* present time, especially when one is confronted with a world advancing imminently to the next level of knowledge and technology, or when one's present society has forgotten the lessons or trials of the past. Dickens' presentation of this theme is at first pessimistic, but ultimately reaffirming. Mankind is capable of advancing beyond where they are, both technologically and spiritually. Importantly, this occurs on the individual level and not by a mass movement. Dickens ostensibly suggested that one can make changes in one's private world if one is dissatisfied with the present era, and those changes will gradually spread to the wider public world; as such, this posits the possibility of a radicalism more private than public in its character. Specifically, this is accomplished through the foundation of "alternative communities" composed of individuals who have freed themselves from society's limitations. Gradually, these enlightened communities have a positive influence on the rest of society, as their values are absorbed into the mainstream. Interestingly, the individuals around whom these communities form are women, which suggests that Dickens has a much more progressive vision for women than that for which he is usually given credit. More importantly, this theme is ultimately a clear affirmation of all individuals' abilities to shape history and existence.

Chapter 1

Stuck in the "Inauthentic" Present: Dickens' "They-selves" and the Conflict between Individual and Collective Existence

Dickens' characters are almost always in danger. As critics have often noted, Dickens' characters are placed in a hostile world, and they are surrounded by other individuals who seek to exploit them. Throughout Dickens' work, the constant presence of a threat does not change, yet the nature of that threat does. Initially, Dickens' heroes are in danger of bodily harm, as characters such as Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, Kate Nickleby, Smike, Madeline Bray, Nell, the Marchioness, Martin Chuzzlewit, and Mary Graham are threatened with impoverishment, homelessness, and starvation, and—at the very worst—the loss of their lives. However, as Dickens' work matured and grew in complexity and profundity, the main threat to his characters changed as well. Although murder and exploitation still occur in Dickens' later novels, the real drama revolves around the chief threat to the characters' sense of identity and individuality, specifically regarding the possible corruption of the characters by their environment and the individuals with whom they interact.

In the second half of Dickens' career, he clearly had begun to view society in a far more intricate way than that for which he is often given credit. Critics commonly observe that Dickens' treatment of society's problems in his works consistently relied on the familiar subject of the corruption and inadequacy of social institutions. But, of course, the Chancery Court, the Circumlocution Office, and the network of poorhouses are not the

causes of unhappiness; they are merely symptomatic of the real problem. Rather, I think Dickens clearly began to question the very nature of communal existence—namely, the individual's problematic existence with other human beings—and its effects on the state of the individual psyche. As J. Hillis Miller has noted, the characters in Victorian novels find themselves immersed in a "transindividual" or "collective" mind (Form 67), and this community psyche is important because "in most Victorian novels the protagonist comes to know himself and to fulfill himself by way of other people" (Form 5). In general, I would agree with that statement, except with the overly generalized inclusion of Dickens with "most Victorian novelists," for Dickens' treatment of interpersonal relations has as many differences as it does similarities with the works of Thackeray, Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy. In Dickens' novels, there is undoubtedly a communal mind that seems to hold sway over all things: it is an often unspoken compact between the various characters to observe certain rules and restrictions. This communal mind establishes limits for individuals and attempts to enforce them. Moreover, this group mind assigns flat roles to individuals, and if one is to coexist peacefully in society, then one must observe that role's restrictions and must never seek to transcend them.[7] In this way, Dickens clearly understood that modern society turns everyone into a "performer" of sorts, and that "modern identity has become staged identity" (Baumgarten 88).

[7] To some readers, this may seem to tack very closely to the claims that D. A. Miller makes in The Novel and the Police, in which he claims that the novel form serves as a means of enforcing bourgeois ideology, and that while the novel seems to applaud individuality, what it really "secures is a close *imbrication* of individual and social, domestic and institutional, private and public, leisure and work," as it subjects its reader to "a drill in the rhythms of bourgeois industrial culture" (83). Obviously, there is some overlap here, but whereas Miller claims that Dickens likewise involves himself—subconsciously or not—in an attempt to impose bourgeois values on his readers, I actually argue that Dickens merely identifies the forces in society that accomplish this goal, and his aim is to convince his audience that subjection to the status quo is not inevitable.

Unfortunately, these prescriptions conflict with individuals' natural desires and feelings of distinctiveness. Thus, as a result of the effects of these restrictions on the individual, Dickens' vision of society is as a state of absolute misery. As Vincent Newey has noted: "the overall picture [of society] is of discontent and irresolution in both the macrocosm of society and the microcosm of psychological life. . . . Conflict and incompleteness, internal or external, seem a tragic condemnation" (11). Those characters that embrace the will of the community and conform to the community's values tend to feel an emptiness or lack in their lives. For example, we see how characters like Mr. Dombey, David Copperfield, William Dorrit, and Pip slavishly follow the dictates of society, yet their misery continues to increase exponentially. In step with society's shallow values, these characters seek to satisfy worldly desires and accumulate goods, and thereby establish an identity for themselves through society's recognition, but they still feel gradually more empty and worthless as their stories continue. This conflict is most aptly characterized by Pip in Great Expectations:

> We spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us. We were always more or less miserable, and most of our acquaintance were in the same condition. There was a gay fiction among us that we were constantly enjoying ourselves, and a skeleton truth that we never did. (274)

Unfortunately, as Pip notes, this discord is felt by a great number of people in society: "To the best of my belief, our case was in the last aspect a rather common one" (274). Essentially, Dickens came to see society as being a collective lie, wherein everyone acts for others, conforms to society's values, and rejects any possibility of individuality or

uniqueness. There are many examples of ostensibly "self-centered" behavior, but I would argue that the selves that so many characters egotistically serve are false selves that characters perform for public acceptance and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, I do not mean to suggest that Dickens insinuated that individuals should withdraw completely from all forms of community like a hermit. Rather, Dickens sought to persuade his audience to put their faith in society into proper perspective—he wanted his readers to realize that society's rules and regulations were not universal or true, and that one's existence in society should not comprise the totality of one's sense of one self. Ultimately, as we will see in my last chapter, Dickens suggested that one should withdraw from the *social world* and take part in an alternative community that is more conducive to individual growth and independent thinking.

In this regard, I think Dickens clearly had anticipated an important element of the existentialist movement. Dickens gradually understood the problematic nature of what Heidegger and Sartre would term "existence-with-others," for while it is a fundamental and formative aspect of one's existence, it also has the potential to overwhelm one's sense of identity and take too great a part in its formation. I would argue that Dickens clearly depicted how individuals embrace what Heidegger would call a "they-self" interpretation of existence, wherein an individual rejects individuality in favor of a group mentality. Dickens also seemed to understand that to embrace such a limited existence leads to a cycle of objectification, whereby one is objectified by others and in turn objectifies others. This initial misunderstanding of existence lies at the heart of society's problems, for Dickens shows how it is the source of his characters' misdeeds and warped values, which are in turn responsible for the abuse and exploitation of the less fortunate.

Ultimately, Dickens' characters must find a balance in their understanding of themselves in order to counteract the influence of the community.

I. Existentialism and Existence with Others

As is evident to most readers of "existentialist" philosophy, fiction, or drama, the analysis of individual existence is the fundamental aim of this school of thought. For example, although there are many disparities between the philosophies of such writers and thinkers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Rilke, Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre, Camus, and Marcel, they all share what Walter Kaufmann has termed a "perfervid individualism" (11), specifically in the aforementioned writers' tendency to focus on individual existence and the necessity for each individual to craft his or her own philosophical beliefs and approaches to life. Indeed, existentialism may be many things, but, at its core, it is a study of what constitutes the individual and what characterizes that individual's existence. In particular, we find upon closer examination of several of these writers' works that the most problematic question is how an individual must coexist and interact with other individuals, while preserving his or her innate, or "authentic," existence or self. As many existentialists have observed, man is at heart a communal being, and a great deal of what comprises one's existence is one's interactions with other people, and thus communal existence with others is essential to one's individual existence (MacQuarrie 103-4). However, this creates something of a paradox, in that one's "authentic" or private existence is compromised by one's existence with others.[8]

[8] "Authentic" existence is generally characterized as being the mode of existence in which "human stands out as human, in freedom and responsibility" (MacQuarrie 121), whereby human beings can be who they are and pursue their possible achievements and forms of existence, as is most ardently advocated by Nietzsche, for one instance; on the other hand, "inauthentic" existence is whenever "being-with-others

Communal existence is "distorted," in that individuals do not act from their "whole selves" (MacQuarrie 118), for individuals are forced to conform to others' expectations and often play false roles for the benefit of others. In other words, an individual's inauthentic existence is "the life of someone who resolves his 'ambiguity' [of being] by identifying too much, and too easily, with the 'communal character' of his existence. . . . he 'loses' what is unique about himself, and in that sense 'loses' his very self" (Cooper 109). Essentially, existentialists generally concur that participation in the community—or society—is an essential aspect of one's existence, yet it is also a force that undermines one's true self, as one must deny one's "authenticity" in order to coexist comfortably with others. Although existentialists have employed varying forms of terminology and applications for this conflict, this theme figures in virtually all of their works.

Critics have frequently questioned Dostoevsky's status as an existentialist, and he is generally considered to be more of a predecessor to the movement, and his fiction is understood to be no more than an inspiration for some of its central figures, particularly for his influence on Nietzsche and Camus. However, despite Dostoevsky's supposed outsider reputation, his insistent concentration on this theme places him squarely in the ranks of full-fledged existentialists such as Heidegger and Sartre. Dostoevsky's fiction is, in fact, dominated by the conflict between the individual and society, and each novel can readily be construed as an account of individuals attempting to preserve their "authentic" existences against the pressure to conform to society's values and communal behavior. Dostoevsky's protagonists typically exist on the margins of society; although many of

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suppresses the genuinely human and personal" (MacQuarrie 121)—in short, a state of conformity or falseness to one's self. As David Cooper has observed: "The character of authenticity in the relevant sense is not badly captured . . . in such colloquialisms as 'doing your own thing' and 'being your own man'" (109).

them are petit bourgeois or intellectuals, they are generally not accepted fully by polite society, and from their excluded positions outside of society they develop their own sets of values and morality—sometimes admirable, as in the cases of Alyosha Karamazov or The Idiot's Prince Myshkin, and sometimes despicable, as in the cases of Crime and Punishment's Raskolnikov, The Devils' Verkhovensky, or The Idiot's Rogozhin. These characters consistently find themselves in a world teeming with conformist individuals who seek to exploit, malign, or ridicule their uniqueness, all for their own personal gain. Indeed, before Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre speculated on the hostile nature of existence-with-others, Dostoevsky had already depicted a universe that threatens one's identity and independence. Moreover, although Dostoevsky's protagonists are often pressed to conform and become members of the victimizing elite, they very rarely opt to succumb to society's pressure. As Donald Fanger has noted: "His heroes are not only outside the dominant classes; they despise them. Their great expectations, like their lost illusions, are not social" (134). Rather, although they meet alternately with quiet success and tragic disgrace—like Alyosha Karamazov and Prince Myshkin, respectively—Dostoevsky's heroes choose to follow their own path and rebel against the status quo.

Although Dostoevsky is often read and praised more for his discussion of this subject in his later and darker works, he was clearly preoccupied with this conflict throughout his career, including in his very earliest novels. For example, in The Double (1846), Dostoevsky's second full-length novel, we discover the story of Mr. Golyadkin, a small-time bureaucrat who is deeply troubled by the need for social acceptance. Golyadkin is haunted by his doppelganger, Mr. Golyadkin Junior, a mirror image of himself who, unlike "Golyadkin Sr." (the original), finds social success and acceptance.

Critics have tended to read this novel literally as a revolutionary study of schizophrenia, split-personalities, and depression, but I think it can be read more accurately as an early example of this theme, for it is society's collective rejection and scorn that initially inspires Golyadkin's paranoid delusion. Notes from Underground (1864) is possibly Dostoevsky's most well known pursuit of this theme; its protagonist is a confessed "sick man" (15) who suffers from an imagined malady clearly derived from his independence, for "to think too much is a disease, a real, actual disease" (17). It is no wonder that Walter Kaufmann's analysis of Dostoevsky's "existentialism" centers on this novel for it is an account of a frustrated individual, surrounded by sycophants and victimizers, raging against the oppressive uniformity he sees around him.

The rest of Dostoevsky's works are likewise characterized by the conflict between individuality and conformity. Crime and Punishment (1866) describes another aspect of this theme, as we see the explosive possibilities when one's sense of individuality can be corrupted by the pressures and abuses of the world, as in the case of Raskolnikov and his obsession with Napoleon. The Idiot (1868) describes the saintly Prince Myshkin, who develops a belief in the saving power of love and beauty, although he is eventually destroyed by his misplaced trust in those around him. A similarly tragic end likewise awaits Stavrogin in The Devils (1871-2), a misunderstood character who finds it impossible to properly fit in with any community—the young anarchists with whom he consorts, or the upper crust of St. Petersburg frequented by his mother—and eventually commits suicide because he lacks a place in which to belong. Essentially, in Dostoevsky's work, the independent individual is always in danger from those around

him, for other individuals seek either to exploit his heroes, or convince them to conform to society's status quo.[9]

Arguably, these sentiments can be reiterated in an analysis of Franz Kafka's novels, for, despite their incompleteness, they are all well-developed accounts of individuals in conflict with society. In each novel, we witness the slow decline of the main character, as he slides into greater feelings of alienation from society and paranoia that his very humanity will ultimately be stripped away. Critics have tended to interpret Kafka's novels as critiques of bureaucracy and the modern state, but I think it is quite evident that each novel's social construct—The Trial's Court, the eponymous location of The Castle—is more a symptom of society's real problem than its cause. Thus, like Dostoevsky, as well as Dickens before him, Kafka's novels center on the struggle of each individual to maintain his or her independence. Unfortunately, Kafka seemed to see this as a lost battle. His protagonists are virtually alone in the world, as everyone around them in society seems to share the secret that the protagonists seek to uncover. For example, the town's residents in The Castle refuse to provide K. with any information or advice while they block his efforts to proceed to the Castle or to the Superintendent Klamm's office to discover his purpose there. In The Trial, Joseph K. seems to be the only person who does not know the reason for his trial or the means by which he must defend himself.

[9] Undoubtedly, when critics have observed the similarity between Dickens and Dostoevsky's works, they have most likely made the connection because of their similarly dark treatments of this theme. However, whether Dickens had any *real* influence on Dostoevsky in regard to this is questionable. It is well known that Dostoevsky had long been a fan of Dickens' work—even to the point, as is well known, that he named the figure of Nellie Valkovsky of The Insulted and Injured after Dickens' Little Nell—but to what degree is still uncertain. In fact, as Donald Fanger has shown, there is no direct evidence that Dostoevsky read any of Dickens' works *after* David Copperfield (250). Therefore, whether or not the Dickens of Great Expectations—the Dickens that most closely resembles Dostoevsky—inspired the later works of Dostoevsky directly is open to debate.

Moreover, Kafka's protagonists gradually descend into a state bereft of all human dignity, wherein their identities, rights, and humanity are left totally in question. For example, we see in The Metamorphosis how—without rhyme or reason—Gregor Samsa literally loses his humanity and becomes a cockroach; subsequently, he is gradually neglected and cast out by his family because of his shameful appearance—all that remains for him, bereft of human dignity, is death. Moreover, in The Trial, Joseph K. is most upset about his "execution" because of its inhuman nature, as he notes that he dies "like a dog," and he feels that "the shame of it must outlive him" (Kafka 229). Essentially, Kafka and Dickens share a concern for the humanity of individuals, and this forms the strongest connection between their works. It is no surprise that their treatment of society always returns to the individual, for they both sought to attack "dehumanization, or the reduction of humanity to thinghood" (Spilka 85), which they both seem to see as a byproduct of existence in modern society.

The individual and the threat of existence-with-others is likewise an important theme in Kierkegaard's philosophy. In fact, if Kierkegaard sought to achieve anything in his work, it was to explicate the importance of individuality in existence: he "saw his entire life's work directed to the attainment of one over-riding goal, namely the rehabilitation of the dignity of the individual" (Lescoe 47). Kierkegaard's concern for the status of the individual arguably begins in the so-called Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846), in which he famously declares that "Subjectivity is Truth" (209)—an assertion intended primarily as a response to the rationalism of Hegel, which Kierkegaard felt robbed human existence of what made it truly valuable. As Kenneth Hamilton explains:

> Linking the concept of the individual with that of subjectivity, Kierkegaard pointed out that Hegel's philosophy, which wished to put religious truth under the control of "objective" reason, also abolished man's essential humanity. A race of animals gifted with reason was what the age had come to accept as being final, objective truth. The result was that the human search for quality within existence—and, with it, human growth in understanding through experiencing joyfulness and suffering (existential pathos)—was being explained away and replaced by subhuman categories of a quantitative type. (68)

However, Kierkegaard's concept of "subjectivity" is not just a response to Hegelianism, for, on another level, subjectivity may also be seen as "*taking seriously the concept of existence as applied to the thinker*" (Wyschogrod 27). Significantly, the achievement of subjectivity involves more than one noteworthy act of realization, but rather can be understood as a continuous and ongoing procedure wherein "the human existential position is in a constant state of flux, constantly advancing to or retreating from inwardness, constantly making itself in the process" (Wyschogrod 34). To a certain extent, the rest of Kierkegaard's career would be dedicated to demonstrating the means by which "subjectivity" might be achieved and subsequently to prove that "to become subjective should be the highest task assigned to every human being, just as the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for the subjective person or, more correctly, comes into existence for the one who becomes subjective" (Concluding 163).

Kierkegaard spelled out his beliefs more specifically—and in less abstract terms—in a later literary review titled "The Present Age" (1846). In this essay,

Kierkegaard raises the question of the individual's role in the late nineteenth century: a concept which he felt was slowly dissolving in a most rational era. "The present age tends toward a mathematical equality in which it takes so and so many to make one individual," Kierkegaard elaborates, "Formerly the outstanding individual could allow himself everything and the individual in the masses nothing at all. Now everyone knows that so and so many make an individual, and quite consistently people add themselves together . . . for the most trivial purposes. Simply in order to put a passing whim into practice . . ." ("Present" 260). Kierkegaard describes a "leveling process" (261), through which human beings reject all senses of distinctiveness and responsibility for a false existence as *just another* member of the human race. This type of false existence is characterized as the "crowd" (sometimes translated as the "public"): "In order that everything should be reduced to the same level it is first of all necessary to procure a phantom, a spirit, a monstrous abstraction, an all-embracing something which is nothing, a mirage—and that phantom is *the public*" (265). Kierkegaard suggests that the "crowd" directly affects the status of the individual in the modern age, for, like a corrosive element, it wears away at the ability of the individual to think and act independently: "The public is a body, more numerous than all the peoples together, but it is a body which can never be reviewed; it cannot even be represented, because it is an abstraction. Nevertheless, when the age is reflective and passionless and destroys everything concrete, the public becomes everything and is supposed to include everything" (265). The "crowd" overwhelms the individual and convinces him or her to relinquish all reflection, action, agency, designs, and dreams; mankind is encouraged to conform to accepted public opinion—to go along so as to get along:

> More and more individuals, owing to their bloodless indolence, will aspire to be nothing at all—in order to become the public, that abstract whole formed in the most ludicrous way, by all participants becoming a third party (an onlooker). This indolent mass which understands nothing and does nothing itself, this gallery, is on the look-out for distraction and soon abandons itself to the idea that everything that anyone does is done in order to give it (the public) something to gossip about. That indolent mass sits with its legs crossed wearing an air of superiority, and anyone who tries to work, whether king, official, school teacher or the better type of journalist, the poet or the artist, has to struggle to drag the public along with it . . . If there is some one superior to the rest, perhaps even a great man, the dog is set on him and the fun begins. (267-8)

In essence, the crowd *is*—by its very nature—untruth, because it denies the subjectivity and independence of the individual, which constitutes the fundamental truth of existence (Hamilton 71).

In The Sickness unto Death (1849), Kierkegaard continued his attacks on the "crowd." Kierkegaard saw the world as a place that is inherently hostile to the individual—hostile to anyone who is, or thinks, or acts, differently—for "a self is the last thing the world cares about and the most dangerous thing of all for a person to show signs of having" and "the greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all . . . by becoming a number instead of a self, just another man" (32-3). Kierkegaard described a process whereby an individual is "tricked out of its self by 'the others'": "Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular

matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man" (33-4). It is very easy to exist as this "mass man" because with that acceptance of the "crowd" mentality, one discovers the material fruits of the secular world:

> Now this form of despair goes practically unnoticed in the world. Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world. Here there is no delay, no difficulty with his self and its infinitizing; he is as smooth as a rolling stone, as *courant* [passable] as a circulating coin. He is so far from being regarded as a person in despair that he is just what a human being is supposed to be. . . . Because a man is in this kind of despair, he can very well live on in temporality, indeed, actually all the better, can appear to be a man, be publicly acclaimed, honored, and esteemed, be absorbed in all the temporal goals. In fact, what is called the secular mentality consists simply of such men who, so to speak, mortgage themselves to the world. (34-5)

Ultimately, Kierkegaard suggests that this leveling process can "only be stopped by the individual's attaining the religious courage which springs from his individual religious isolation" ("Present" 261)—the "leap of faith" that he eventually described in The Sickness unto Death.

As is well known, Nietzsche's philosophy is concentrated on the notion of independence, and his aims included casting aside every dominant ideology that he observed in intellectual and public life. Beyond Good and Evil (1886) is exclusively dedicated to this task, while other works, including Thus Spake Zarathustra (1883-5), On the Genealogy of Morals (1887), and Twilight of the Idols (1889) likewise take up the cause. Nietzsche chose to attack all systems of thought because in them he sensed a tendency to "level" (Beyond 40) humanity and establish a world wherein everyone is mediocre and unexceptional, as all humanity slavishly follows arbitrary rules and restrictions. Therefore, many of Nietzsche's works directly criticize established philosophy and religion, for he saw in them a deadening impulse to eliminate individuality and uniqueness in the human race, both of which he felt to be natural to humanity, for "almost every morality which has been taught, revered, and preached, turns on the contrary precisely *against* the vital instincts" (Twilight 23). Nietzsche consistently contended that the purpose of human life is actually the opposite of what Schopenhauer and Christianity had earlier insisted it to be. Rather, Nietzsche's vision of ideal human life was steadfast adherence to individuality, a refusal to conform to established values, and the willingness to be different; as Nietzsche suggested, life is defined by:

> Having the will to be responsible to oneself. Maintaining the distance which divides us off from each other. Becoming more indifferent towards hardship, harshness, privation, even life itself. Being prepared to sacrifice people to one's cause—onself included. (Twilight 64-5)

Nietzsche's language may be somewhat bellicose, as he seemingly suggests that we are all supposed to be versions of Julius Caesar or Napoleon—thus, it is no wonder he has

been so misunderstood during the last century—but at heart his philosophy is actually more relativist than proto-fascist, as it may seem, in the sense that one needs to be oneself and not conform to the will of others.

However, Nietzsche did not simply view the creation and development of philosophy and religion as the only errors of man's history. Rather, although Nietzsche spent a great deal of time attacking systems of thought, he ultimately saw them as symptomatic of a larger problem. Nietzsche makes quite clear that he felt all forms of conformity—including communal thought, established opinion, or identification with any group—to be contrary to human nature, and thus bordering on insanity, as he notes that "madness is rare in individuals—but in groups, political parties, nations, epochs, it is the rule" (Beyond 70). This form of insanity is due to what Nietzsche termed man's "herd-instinct" (Genealogy 13) or "herd mentality," by which human beings have a natural impulse to gather together and develop a group personality and a system of rules and values wherein each individual's unspoken goal is to follow the community's rules as closely as possible and thereby avoid standing out from the pack. Therefore, Nietzsche railed against what he had understood to be the development of mankind into "a diminished, almost ludicrous species, a herd animal, something good-natured, sickly, and mediocre" (Beyond 57). Nietzsche may have seen Christianity as the culmination of all negative and restrictive thought, but it was clearly not the origin of mankind's deluded willingness to accept conformity over uniqueness, as he observes: "In every age, for as long as there have been humans, there have also been human herds (family groups, congregations, tribes, peoples, nations, churches) and always a great many followers in proportion to the small number of commanders" (Beyond 85). In fact, Nietzsche saw this

willingness to conform to mass opinion to be the part of mankind's nature that has prevented mankind from becoming all that he might be—the Superman/Overman about which Zarathustra preaches—and in Nietzsche's analysis of human civilization, he concludes that "Human development has been so strangely restricted—so laggardly, protracted, often regressing and turning round and round—because the herd instinct of obedience is inherited best, and at the cost of the skill in commanding" (Beyond 85). As a result, Nietzsche saw mankind as having developed into a collection of communities and governments (though not necessarily governments of nations), all of which use fear and condemnation to diminish the specter of individuality and maintain control and order. Accordingly, Nietzsche claims that all systems of morality, virtue, and value derive from this development in human history, including the very idea of "good" and "evil," for "the enduring, dominating, and fundamental overall feeling of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to a 'below'—*that* is the origin of the opposition between 'good' and 'bad' (Genealogy 13). Nietzsche's "ascetic ideal"—through which man is convinced to monitor and limit himself in adherence to the "three splendid slogans" of "poverty, humility, chastity" (Genealogy 88)—and his well known Hegelian "master" and "slave" moralities are the means by which the community and its government limit individual endeavors. Since Nietzsche saw one's purpose in life to be "the will to power," whereby "a living being wants above all else to *release* its strength" (Beyond 15), follow his or her passions and instincts, and realize his or her possibilities, he suggests that "the *basic principle of society*" and all of its restrictions is "to *deny* life" (Beyond 152). As Nietzsche affirmed time and again in his works, his philosophical mission was—like that of his invented prophet, Zarathustra—to illuminate this particular error and assist other

"free spirits" like himself to become "the *sovereign individual*, the individual who resembles no one but himself, who has once again broken away from the morality of custom, the autonomous supramoral individual . . . the man with his own independent, enduring will" (Genealogy 41).

Nietzsche's influence on Heidegger is well known, particularly in this focus on individualism and one's struggle to maintain independence against society's pressure to conform. In Heidegger's major work, Being and Time, he developed his own term for the flattening influence of the communal mind—the "they-self"—no doubt partly inspired by Nietzsche's "herd" concept.[10] In his study of human existence, Heidegger focused a great deal on the idea of "being-with-one-another," the characteristic of existence defined by one's (Dasein's) coexistence and interactions with other individuals. According to Heidegger, this aspect of existence is subject to misinterpretation, as the co-belonging with other entities can take an exclusive place in Dasein's understanding of itself because "Dasein . . . stands in subjection to Others" (Being 164). The misconstruction of "being-with-one-another" as such is what Heidegger comes to call the "they-self" (Being 164), which is Dasein's understanding of itself *only* from the perspective of "being-with-one-another": the "they-self" is "Dasein's tendency to interpret itself and its ideas in terms of opinions that it unthinkingly takes over from the public realm," which effectively eliminates any serious reflection regarding self-awareness or the individual's potential for action in the world (Chanter 98). The "They"—the collection of other individuals in Dasein's world—takes away everything that distinguishes Dasein as an independent entity, for "They-being" is characterized by "averageness" (Heidegger, Being 164-5), a

[10] I will most frequently employ the term, "they-self," through the rest of my argument because it most aptly captures this concept of the communal self, although there are clearly other labels that I might use.

general flattening of all entities into a homogeneous whole; under this "averageness," anything essential to individual Dasein is lost: "Every kind of priority gets noiselessly suppressed . . . everything that is primordial gets glossed over . . . everything gained by a struggle becomes just something to be manipulated" (Being 165). Moreover, the "They" takes on any sense of responsibility inherent to Dasein—a responsibility that would define Dasein's independence or uniqueness—as "it can be answerable for everything most easily" (Being 165). Ultimately, the "They's" worst characteristic is that it appeals to Dasein's "tendency to take things easily and make them easy" (Being 165), notably in its lessening of Dasein's heaviest burden, the question of self and existence, which results in an "inauthentic" understanding of being.

Importantly, the "They" mentality is frozen in the present time. It is concerned only with things associated with the present, and thus it interprets existence only through a perspective focused on the immediate. As Heidegger notes, the "They" completely disregards the past, for "in awaiting the next new thing, it has already forgotten the old one" (Being 443). From a certain perspective, the "They" experiences time as a continually repeating present, which eliminates possibilities for existence to what is already realized at the moment. "Lost in the making present of the 'today'," Heidegger observes, the "They" "understands the 'past' in terms of the 'Present'" (Being 443). Thus, as we will see in the subsequent chapter, the "They" sees the past as already done or complete and not having any relevant bearing on present existence. Likewise, as we will see in my third chapter, the "They" offers a false escape from the possibility of one's own death. This "escape" is attractive to human beings because they fear death, but also, more abstractly, human beings also "are said to be afraid ordinarily of the full awareness

that they determine what it means to be a human being" (Schmitt 218). Since Heidegger suggests that one's confrontation with the possibility of one's ultimate demise is the essential means by which one's individuality and identity are defined, the "They's" fictitious flight from death allows Dasein to continue to have a comfortable but false "inauthentic" understanding of oneself. This mistaken understanding of existence, in which existence within time is divided, runs counter to what Heidegger understood as temporality, the heart of "authentic" existence, whereby all temporal states are interconnected and, to a certain extent, coexistent:

> This phenomenon has the unity of a future which makes present in the process of having been; we designate it as "*temporality*." Only in so far as Dasein has the definite character of temporality, is the authentic potentiality-for-Being-a-whole of anticipatory resoluteness . . . made possible for Dasein itself. (Being 374)

In other words:

> This formulation stresses both that the ecstases (past, present, future) are to be understood as essentially united to one another . . . Heidegger interprets the past and future not as derivative versions of the present—not as a past that once was present, nor as a future that is yet to become present. . . . each ecstasis has its own dynamic, and each ecstasis is also a dimension of each of the other ecstases. (Chanter 126)

Ultimately, it was Heidegger's goal to illuminate the widespread misunderstanding by which the present is divided from temporality and overprivileged by the "They," which would hopefully allow individuals to rethink the realities of existence.

Just as Nietzsche was a great influence on Heidegger, Heidegger in turn was very influential for Sartre, who is perhaps the best known of the existentialists, as well as the movement's only *self-acknowledged* member (Kaufmann 21). In fact, Sartre intended L'Être et le néant—the work frequently considered to be existentialism's magnum opus—as a continuation of Heidegger's own classic work (Safranski 347), although Sartre would recast much of Heidegger's terminology and complicate or refute many of Heidegger's overly neat and convenient conclusions. For example, Sartre's work incorporates numerous elements of Heidegger's "They," yet he insists that it is a misnomer, for "the original relation of the Other and my consciousness is not the *you* and *me*; it is the *we*" (Being 332), and thus Heidegger's terminology "can be of absolutely no use to us in resolving the psychological, concrete problem of the recognition of the Other" (Being 334). However, regardless of Sartre's apparent disagreement with his German friend, Sartre's work clearly bears much resemblance to Heidegger's philosophy.

Heidegger's influence is most evident in Sartre's development of the concept of "Bad Faith." According to Sartre, Bad Faith is a state of inauthentic existence to which most human beings are subject; it takes many forms—any occasion when individuals are not "being themselves" and perform for others, but it is basically an instance in which an individual "negates" himself and willingly becomes objectified by the Other (Being 87). Sartre provides multiple examples to illustrate this condition, such as a woman as she prepares for a sexual encounter and—most infamously—a homosexual male; Sartre finds that these are instances wherein human beings become something for others, such as objects or types, or they are moments when human beings are in denial about their true motivations or desires. It is a refusal to realize one's potential being or actions and, by

extension, one's ability to "exercise absolute freedom" (Lescoe 321). In essence, Bad Faith is equivalent to "living a lie." Ultimately, Sartre concludes that "the goal of bad faith . . . is to put oneself out of reach; it is an escape" (110). Just as in the case of Heidegger's "they-selves," Bad Faith is a false means of fleeing the difficulty of discovering one's true self and the possibilities of one's being. Bad Faith is a means of avoiding "anguish" regarding our freedom of being and the possibility of not being, as Sartre notes: ". . . we flee from anguish by attempting to apprehend ourselves from without as an Other or as *a thing*. . . . I flee in order not to know, but I cannot avoid knowing that I am fleeing" (Being 82-3). However, despite Bad Faith's ostensibly negative connotation, Sartre admits that this is a natural human characteristic, for "human reality, in its most immediate being, in the intra-structure of the pre-reflective *cogito*, must be what it is not and not be what it is" (Being 112), according to what Sartre understands to be the cyclical nature of being and nothingness.

Moreover, Sartre believed that communal existence is also inherently objectifying. Sartre describes existence-with-others as evincing the same cyclical nature of being and nothingness, for an individual is always either objectifying others or being objectified by others. As Sartre notes, the introduction of the Other into my existence forces a recognition that I am not the only subject in the world, and thus it initiates a sequence in which I must recognize that I am an object for others: "By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other" (Being 302). Essentially, understanding that I coexist with other subjective individuals leads me to understand that I am an object in the world for other subjective individuals. On the other hand, other

people can likewise be objects for my existence, for "at least one of the modalities of the Other's presence to me is *object-ness*," which constitutes the "fundamental relation between the Other and myself" (Being 340). Communal existence is inherently a cycle of negation, whereby an individual objectifies others and others objectify the individual. Therefore, Sartre famously claims: "Whatever our acts may be, in fact, we must accomplish them in a world where there are already others and where I am *de trop* in relation to others" (Being 531). By saying that we are "de trop" with others, Sartre suggests that our existence is so closely connected to existence-with-others that it cannot be discounted in one's self-determination. As Sartre notes: "What does not vary is the necessity for him [man] to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there. The limits are neither subjective nor objective, or, rather, they have an objective and a subjective side" (Humanism 52). On the other hand, there is also a negative context to the expression, whereby it is understood that it is existence-with-others from which all problems of Bad Faith and anguish originate. However, unlike Heidegger and Nietzsche—both of whom suggest that an individual can counteract the influence of others—Sartre offers no solutions, for he simply claims that existence-with-others is a foundational, albeit paradoxical, relation of the individual to his or her existence.

Sartre's creative works echo this concern with existence-with-others. The play Huis Clos (1944)—or, as it is translated in English, No Exit—may seem on the surface to be a depiction of Sartre's vision of the afterlife, yet Sartre really chooses to portray his visualization of the nature of existence-with-others. In the play, we find how three individuals have all been consigned to Hell; however, in Sartre's unique vision, Hell

consists of a single hotel room in which three individuals are stuck together, forced to objectify or be objectified by each other, each in turn serving as "alternately torturer and tortured" (Brosman 76). Each of the characters is locked into a proscribed role, and, although each attempts to deny that identity, the judgment of the other inmates continues to remind them of their limited character. As Dorothy McCall has observed, the play illustrates how "the look becomes Hell when the other refuses the image of myself I want him to see" (113). Thus, Sartre depicts the torment of being viewed by the Other; as Garcin, the sadist and coward, realizes: "Yes, now's the moment; I'm looking at this thing on the mantelpiece, and I understand that I'm in hell. . . . They knew I'd stand at the fireplace stroking this thing of bronze, with all those eyes intent on me. Devouring me" (Sartre, No Exit 45). Essentially, the horror of existence-with-others is that it robs the individual of his sense of self—his agency and identity are denied because he becomes just another object.

In another play, Les Mouches (1943), or The Flies, attempts to represent a somewhat different aspect of this problem, for Sartre's version of Orestes' return to Argos is not as explicitly ontological as Huis Clos is in its approach to the issue of communal existence. However, what we find in the play is a picture of a society whose members have all succumbed to a mass delusion, not unlike what we will find in Dickens' depiction of the Victorian bourgeoisie. In Sartre's Argos, the people all suffer under the punishment of the gods, cursed both with an ever-present swarm of flies and a sense of collective guilt. Orestes alone seeks to escape from society's values and rules. He briefly allows himself to be convinced to act as the other Argosians act—encapsulated as: "So that is the Right Thing. To live at peace – always at perfect peace. I see. Always

to say 'Excuse me,' and 'Thank you.'" (90)—yet he comes to realize the true meaning of individuality and how it can be an explosive force. He tells Electra, "I'll turn into an ax and hew those walls asunder, I'll rip open the bellies of those stolid houses and there will steam up from the gashes a stench of rotting food and incenses. I'll be an iron wedge driven into the city, like a wedge rammed into the heart of an oak tree" (91). Rather than succumbing to society's influence and accepting the yoke of the gods, Orestes gradually understands that freedom and individuality are crucial aspects of existence. In fact, as Orestes discovers, the human realization of free action is the source of "their sense of human dignity" (No Exit 103). As Catharine Brosman has observed, through Orestes' struggle, Sartre develops a fundamental insight into the place of freedom in human existence: "It is not a feature of man, it *is* man, and condemns him to live as a stranger, in exile, without excuse, and to invent his values" (74). This notion is elaborated most articulately through the argument between Orestes and Zeus himself, via an intermediary statue, wherein Orestes ascertains and informs his "creator" that: "I am my freedom. No sooner had you created me than I ceased to be yours" (No Exit 117). Essentially, Orestes realizes Sartre's central point regarding human existence: one need not behave according to the dictates of society, for "authentic" existence is tantamount to free and independent self-identification. Moreover, although those dictates are cloaked in the fearsome rhetoric of religion or the law, the independent-minded individual need not worry, for ultimately they have no power over the individual, or, to be more specific, society's dictates have no power over the individual because they have no basis in reality.

In another play, Les Mains sales (1948)—translated as Dirty Hands—we find another example of Sartre's predominantly negative vision of communal existence. In

this play, we discover the conflict raging within the character Hugo, a bourgeois intellectual who joins an Eastern European quasi-communist party so as to be given an identity with which he can be comfortable. Hugo attempts to convince himself he needs the sanctuary of a proscribed role in society: "I have to protect myself. By installing other thoughts in my head. Assignments: 'Do this. Go. Stop. Say such and such.' I need to obey. To obey, just like that. To eat, sleep, obey" (No Exit 172). This is because Hugo is uncomfortable with who he really is: "he has joined the Party not to liberate other men, but to escape from his own freedom into a strict discipline that will rid him of his hated self" (McCall 58). As Hugo confesses to Hœderer, the party boss: "I am in the party to forget myself" (174). Essentially, Hugo is deluded into believing that conformity to a group mind is tantamount to protection and safety. However, Hugo comes to understand that there is ultimately no substance to an identity that one derives from existence-with-others; although he has made a comfortable life for himself, he finally comprehends that it is a thoroughly false existence: "All that is here: lies. . . . I live in a stage set" (182).

We find further evidence of this approach to communal existence in Sartre's novel sequence Les Chemins de la liberté—The Roads to Freedom—composed of the novels L'Âge de raison (1947), Le Sursis (1947), La Mort dans l'âme (1951), and the unfinished Drôle d'amitié, or, as it probably would have been titled, La Dernière Chance (Brosman 69). In these novels, which take place immediately before and after the Nazi occupation of France, we encounter numerous characters who are all alienated from themselves, their places in the world, the world around them, and even their own bodies; all of these betray the extreme state of self-consciousness under which all of Sartre's characters suffer. This is most clear in the characters' unwavering discomfort in their own

skins: one character remarks that she has "a horror of people who are not conscious of their bodies" (Age 71), another character sees his own physical form as "a large and embarrassing parcel" (71), while another character admits that she cannot look at herself in the mirror, for "she disliked her body" (86). It can also be seen in the amount of attention Sartre pays to gazes and looks, specifically in the means by which characters are objectified and denied their freedom (Brosman 60). Essentially, Sartre sees this ubiquitous sense of estrangement as a natural byproduct of existence-with-others.

This conflict is most clear in the somewhat "negative" figure of Daniel, a quasi-nihilistic homosexual whose story runs through the three complete novels.[11] Daniel is a character who is dominated by his self-hatred; rather than owning his independence and difference, Daniel "has chosen shame and . . . begs for others' judgment so that he may be given a definition, reduced to the thinglike state he craves, and thus freed from the burden of responsibility and guilt" (Brosman 57). Clearly, Daniel has embraced a Heideggerian "they-self," as many other characters in the novel have, and, by extension, many individuals in Sartre's conception of the world—he is the paradigm of what it means to live in "Bad Faith." Sartre's description of Daniel's character makes this common internal conflict immediately clear:

> His was a hard, forbidding character, but underneath it all was a shrinking victim pleading for mercy. It was odd, he thought, that a man could hate himself as though he were someone else. Not that that was really true: whatever he might do, there was only one Daniel. When he despised himself he had the feeling of detachment from his own being, as though he

[11] It should be noted that the character of Daniel is clearly supposed to mirror the earlier mentioned example of the homosexual that Sartre develops in L'Être et le néant.

> were poised like an impartial judge above a noisome turmoil; then suddenly he found himself plunging downwards, caught again in his own toils. (Age 109)

Tortured by his homosexuality, Daniel is also remarkable for his extreme self-consciousness under the gaze of the Other; it is as if he feels that everyone around him can see through his bourgeois façade to the real Daniel underneath:

> The green abundance of the grass border was there, unseen, unnamed, a plenitude of presence in his vision, it's coming, *it's coming*. It clove him like a scythe, amazing, awful, and delightful. At long last the husk bursts and opens, I am myself for all eternity, homosexual, mean, coward. *They* see me—no, not even that: *it* sees me. He was *the object* of looking. A look that searched him to the depths, pierced him like a knife-thrust, and was not his own look; an impenetrable look, the embodiment of night, awaiting him in his deepest self and condemning him to be himself, coward, hypocrite, pederast, for all eternity. Himself, quivering beneath that look, and defying it. That look! The night! As if night was the look. I am *seen*. Transparent, transparent, transfixed. (Reprieve 135-6)

As a means of counteracting his inauthenticity, Daniel attempts to perform an act that might make everyone else experience his misery. He makes halfhearted attempts at various actions that may bestow upon him a sense of agency, such as drowning his cats in the Seine or interfering in Mathieu and Marcelle's relationship; he does these things so that he might be able to say proudly to himself, "It is *I* who am free" (Age 115). But ultimately, Daniel realizes that his arrogance is no more than "an impersonal pride," for

he "was no longer a person" (Age 115), but only the empty role to which he feels society has limited him. After trying and failing to define himself in opposition to society's limited gaze, Daniel attempts to flee from all forms of observation. Daniel seeks to lose himself in Paris's crowds, convinced that anonymity will free him from his guilt regarding who he is. He seeks out Paris's sordid side streets, intent on disappearing from humanity altogether: "He turned into the rue Réaumur. A man could lose himself there, it was just a mere tunnel standing open to the sky, a vast antechamber. . . . Daniel's vision, now released, sped between those pierced cliffs towards the patch of pink and stagnant sky that they enclosed on the horizon" (Age 162). Later, after Daniel fails to commit suicide—one more effort at owning himself and his actions—he again flees into the Parisian masses: "Daniel ran out into the street. . . . He must run, he must get away as far as possible, immerse himself in noise and light, in a throng of people, he must become a man among his fellows and feel the eyes of other men upon him" (Age 354-5). Eventually, towards the end of the first novel, Daniel cannot handle the responsibility for his own actions, for his own existence, and he screams for the chance to lay the burden of liability at someone else's door:

> . . . with all his might he longed to loathe himself, he would never find so good an opportunity. 'Beast!—coward and comedian: beast!' For an instant he thought he would succeed, but no—these were mere words. He ought to have—Ah, no matter who it was, he would have accepted any person's judgment, no matter whose, so it were not his own, not that ghastly self-contempt, that utterly futile, weak, moribund self-contempt, which seemed at every moment on the point of self-annihilation, but

> always survived. If only someone knew, if he could feel upon him the weight of *someone else's* contempt. (Age 357)

In The Reprieve, the second novel in the series, Daniel continues to exist in Bad Faith. He has married Marcelle, only because he despises Mathieu, despite the facts that she disgusts him and that the falseness of his marriage only reminds him of his existential inauthenticity in general. Daniel bemoans his dual existence, as he is drawn between the self he projects for society, and the true interior of which he is ashamed. He laments:

> Why can't I *be* what I am, *be* a pederast, villain, coward, a loathsome object that doesn't even manage to exist? He set his knees together, laid his hands on his thighs, and almost laughed aloud at the thought of how respectable he must look. He shrugged his shoulders: idiot! He was sick of thinking what he looked like, sick of looking at himself—especially as, when I look at myself, I am two people. Just *to be*. In the dark, at random! To be homosexual just as the oak is oak. To extinguish myself. Extinguish the inner eye. (Reprieve 133)

Daniel so hates himself that he yearns for some apocalyptic event, courtesy of Nazi Germany, to destroy his world: ". . . he gripped his stick and thought: 'Oh God, if only war would come!' . . . 'That translucent sky—they will smash it with their own hands. The hatred! And the terror. And I—how I shall wallow in that sea of hatred!'" (Reprieve 47). Ultimately, as the German army begins the takeover of Paris, Daniel rushes to embrace the enemies of France, sensing a victory for himself over his torturous dual existence: "Something came hurtling down from the sky—the ancient law! Fallen the society that had judged him, erased the sentence . . . 'Here are new judges,' he thought,

'here is the new law!'" (Troubled 105). What this really reveals is how genuine and well-founded Daniel's inauthenticity is: he has no values or heritage to defend—he is loyal to nothing. Moreover, where he sees freedom and a new existence, the reader sees the ironic truth; Daniel rejoices at the overthrow of one "They," only to embrace a new one—he is doomed to continue to hide his true self, if it even exists. Furthermore, as history has shown, Daniel's choice of liberator is doubly ironic, as Nazi Germany was no more accepting of homosexuals than any other nation—in fact, the Nazis rounded up and imprisoned or executed homosexuals. Sartre's point is clear: one who exists in Bad Faith can only free oneself after realizing in the first place that he is not being honest with himself. Until that point, the man in Bad Faith will continue to hate himself, to be tortured by the gaze of others, and to find a hell in other people.

Clearly, as all of these examples show, existentialism can be rightly understood as an intellectual struggle against uniformity, conformity, and flatness (MacQuarrie 122). The various philosophers and writers previously mentioned all have different forms of terminology, points of concentration, and conclusions, yet I would argue that, underneath all of their rhetoric and systems of thought, they all wrestle with the same conflict. Human beings are at heart social animals, and although the community is an essential and formative part of existence, it also has many derogative effects on individuality, which is also an essential part of man's being. Thus, we see that existence—as it is interpreted by existentialists—is characterized by a paradoxical cycle wherein man needs the community but ultimately must find his own unique place. Otherwise, an individual might become trapped in a prefabricated performative identity, through which an

individual becomes what others want him or her to be, and thereby denies the very essence of his or her existence.

I would argue that Dickens clearly anticipated this vision of existence in his "mature" novels, and that they each function as "existentialist" texts in their depiction of this struggle, at least as much as Sartre's fiction. Dickens grounds the abstract reasoning of existentialism in the real world, as he provides numerous examples of how these errors in judgment affect an individual's self-perception, and in turn how this leads to larger social problems. In the following sections, I will trace how Dickens explored this theme through his different novels, focusing only on those that represent particularly significant developments in this theme, although, as I have noted, every novel after A Christmas Carol clearly shows evidence of it to a certain degree.

II. Dombey and Son: A New Picture of Social Existence

Dombey and Son is a clear departure from Dickens' earlier works for various reasons. Dickens still confronts the same human vices of greed and deception, but in Dombey his presentation of these old issues is remarkably more complicated and profound. Significantly, Dickens' study of human malevolence through his "villainous"—or, more aptly, negative—characters reaches a new depth in that the dark side of human nature is no longer simply ascribed to some inherent evil streak, but rather to the characters' personal value of worldly success and status, which is wholly dependent on their willingness to forgo individual thinking and to conform to the empty principles of the community—or, what I will term the "They," after Heidegger's concept. Indeed, with very rare exceptions, in the composition of Dombey and all of his

subsequent novels, Dickens would no longer employ those stock villainous characters that one might find in early novels—monsters such as Bill Sikes, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Quilp, and Pecksniff—who are greedy, malicious, and murderous simply because the narrative requires them to be so. Rather, as one can see with his creation of Mr. Dombey, Dickens attempted to provide some rationale for his characters' misdeeds, and his study of this mindset would almost always hinge on the characters' relative understanding of themselves and their existence-with-others. In other words, Dickens seems to realize, well in advance of the existentialist movement, that evil has a traceable source, as it clearly originates from the choice to submit to society's values, as opposed to what one knows or feels to be inherently right. Dombey and Son provides some of the earliest evidence that Dickens made this connection, and sought to employ his fiction in its analysis, particularly in his depiction of the titular "villain" and arch-capitalist.

Dombey's wealth and his belief in the power of money do not alone make him a villain. It is easy to read the novel in such a way—a simplistic view of Dickens' work as a parable of Mammonism's dangers—and thus it is not surprising that the novel has been consistently rendered as such over the last century and a half. But, such a reading is too facile and limited, for it overlooks the central traits of Dombey's character. Dombeyism, the doctrine that "Money . . . can do anything" (152), is not simply "the callous inhumanity of an economic doctrine" that forms the novel's "dominant principle" (Johnson 630), as Edgar Johnson has famously suggested; rather, it is merely a symptom of Dombey's real error. What, in fact, does Dombey do for money *alone* throughout the course of the novel? He asserts that "it is powerful" (Dickens 583), and he is fully aware that his lofty position depends upon his wealth, yet financial gain never lies at the heart of

his misdeeds. Dombey's cold mistreatment of Florence, his frustrated efforts at Paul's education, his attempted exile of Walter Gay, and his misalliance with Edith all spring from completely different motives. As the narrator opines during a brief and homiletic aside, Dombey's pride, particularly in his status and reputation, is his "master-vice" (737), and not mere greed. Dombey's original sin is the embrace of the inauthentic self of his position in society. Like the later and more ostensible examples of the Veneerings, Dombey's perception of his identity—his self—is limited to his function in society. Dombey is nothing but his public persona; he exists purely on the surface, playing out his role as the central figure in society. He is almost completely bereft of any private character, and for this reason he is incapable of genuine feeling. When Dombey feels any emotion, it is merely a performance of what someone in his position is *supposed* to feel—his feelings and actions have no foundation in the person he really is beneath the layers of his public role.

Dombey's misdeeds all derive from the fact that he acts out his role in society and that he is not guided by any private set of ethics or values. He relies only on society's materialistic principles, which suggest that his status holds priority over everything else. At the novel's onset, he has already been christened as the paragon of the world's virtues, and it is from his place at the pinnacle of civilized society that his negative traits derive. Accruing capital is secondary to the protection of his status, as is made quite clear from his introduction:

> The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or

> against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, *to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre*. (50, emphasis added)

Clearly, what is crucial about this passage is not that Dombey prides himself on the wares or riches hauled in those ships' holds, but that those ships and their movements represent his existence at the center of all things. Indeed, at the novel's beginning, Dombey quite rightly is the axis upon which society turns, and it is not too farfetched for him to suppose that "A.D. . . . stood for anno Dombei" (50), for he is the only God of the material world. Dombey certainly believes in the notion of his own greatness within society, and possibly to the extent that he is so magnificent that he might transcend earthly existence, as he observes that "Dombey and Son know neither time, nor place, nor season, but bear them all down" (611). Of course, as we find through the course of the novel, there are a great many places where that loftily apotheosized firm does not hold sway, namely in the hearts of his daughter—who loves him out of her goodness and sense of duty, and not out of admiration—and his second wife, Edith, who never felt anything at all for him or his power.

Dombey's appearance to society is his favorite possession, and the only thing with which he has any concern. "I hope I know, Louisa," he chides his sister, "how to bear myself before the world" (58), for his understanding of the deportment and bearing necessary in the face of society is practically a natural trait in his mind: he is Dombey, and public appearance is his essence. His faith in his worldly importance colors all the events in his life, making all family, social, and business occurrences into assessments or verifications of his significance. Thus, Dombey does not greet Paul's birth as a normal

father might, but rather as a continuation of his personal legacy, through the promise that Paul "has to accomplish a destiny" (52). By extension, Dombey's ego is only vulnerable to the caprices of social opinion, as he is most angered by any questioning of his status, or his appearance to others, for that has become the thing by which he is solely defined. Upon the brief realization that he is not omnipotent, and that his son's welfare depends on other human beings who happen to be from a lower stratum of society, such as the Toodles, Dombey is given over to one of his exceedingly rare exhibitions of emotion, as:

> It was a rude shock to his sense of property in his child, that these people – the mere dust of the earth, as he thought them – should be necessary to him . . . he wiped blinding tears from his eyes as he paced up and down his room; and often said, with an emotion of which he would not, for the world, have had a witness, 'Poor little fellow!' (70)

Lest anyone think that Dombey might have a heart, Dickens makes quite clear that Dombey is not worried about his son's safety, but rather "that he pitied himself through the child" (71): his torment derives from the fact that his reputation is, or may be, besmirched through his connection to a lower class family, and perhaps as well by the faint realization that society's boundaries are not impermeable, for the lowest and the highest in society share an inherent link.

Furthermore, Dombey's relationship with Edith is not a typical romance, courtship, or marriage, as it reflects no exercise of emotion but for his pride in his standing. When Dombey initially imagines the aftereffects of his marriage to Edith, he does not foresee happy moments in their lifetime together, as a normal spouse might;

rather, the only thing that Dombey considers is how it might reflect on him and his firm. The narrator observes that:

> It flattered [Dombey] to think how [Edith's haughtiness and coldness] deferred to him . . . and seemed to have no will apart from his. It flattered him to picture to himself, this proud and stately woman doing the honours of his house, and chilling his guests after his own manner. The dignity of Dombey and Son would be heightened and maintained, indeed, in such hands. (509)

Dombey rightly identifies his wife's cold exterior, recognizing in her a person like himself, a person without an interior and private existence: "he had imagined that the proud character of his second wife would have added to his own – would have merged into it, and exalted his greatness" (648). Of course, this combination would seem to belie the very concept of marriage, but, for Dombey, interpersonal connection is never a consideration or priority, for what matters most is maintaining appearances before the world. When Dombey's quarrels with Edith escalate, he likewise does not approach them as a spurned fiancé, husband, or loved one might, but rather as if she were assaulting his *public image* through her defiance. Significantly, he does not become incensed because he feels that she is attacking him or his character personally; rather, he sees Edith's resistance to his will as a rejection of the quasi-deity, "Dombey and Son." As Dombey informs Edith, she must succumb to his will if only because: "I have made you my wife. You bear my name. You are associated with my position and my reputation" (651). As far as Dombey is concerned, he has married Edith to improve his status in society; her refusal to acquiesce to his demands, along with society's murmured condemnation of the

marriage (society gossips: "if Dombey must marry, he had better have married somebody nearer his own age, not quite so handsome, and a little better off" (602)) is an early harbinger of Dombey's ultimate fate: society and public opinion can be fickle, and at any time the uppermost member of it may be cast down from his perch.

Dombey's treatment of his wife and family likewise illuminates another danger one might encounter when one draws one's identity solely through one's appearance to others. Dombey is nothing but his exterior presence, the person whom others believe him to be; therefore, Dickens makes it quite clear that Dombey senses that he is nothing but an object for others to perceive, and in turn he sees others only as objects in his world on which he might rely for his sense of identity. Thus, Dombey acquires, exploits, and disposes of others purely according to how that might improve his standing or appearance in society. The relationship that Dombey thereby holds with others is substantially more complex than an example of capitalism's evil effects, as so many Marxist critics have tended to understand this novel's themes, for Dombey does not seek to make money, obtain property, or exercise power through his exploitation of others. Rather, it is a natural byproduct of Dombey's self-definition according to his existence-with-others, which clearly anticipates Sartre's later hypothesis regarding the self's relation to Others, whereby an individual exists in an eternal cycle of objectifying Others and being objectified by Others. Therefore, when Dombey drives Paul to an early death, it is only because he seeks to hasten his further ascension in the world. When Dombey mistreats Florence, it is only because he sees her as a source of shame while he senses a possible crack in his crapulous façade. Finally, when Dombey "purchases" Edith and seeks to control her, it is only because he sees her as part and parcel of his public image, and he is

desperate to maintain his public prestige. Dombey's misdeeds, although inexcusable, are directly related to the founding of his identity in his public relations with the world, as well as his lack of a private self.

What ultimately crystallizes Dickens' depiction of Dombey's "master-vice" is Dombey's perpetual need to turn to public opinion in the dark times of his life. Significantly, when Dombey encounters any missteps in his life, he does not pursue the solace of family and friends, nor does he drown himself in the hedonistic pleasures of material existence, nor does he indulge in some quiet self-reflection. Rather, Dombey turns to "the World" and seeks society's recognition and acceptance to help him through his identity crises. Yet, as noted earlier, for one to define oneself solely according to the opinion of others is a dangerous thing, for when society turns against such an individual, nothing remains of that person's identity. Thus, whereas Dombey once drew power and certainty from the World's opinion of him, when the World inevitably turns away from him, Dombey becomes obsessed with how he is perceived. As Dickens' narrator observes:

> The world. What the world thinks of him, how it looks at him, what it sees in him, and what it says – this is the haunting demon of his mind. It is everywhere where he is; and, worse than that, it is everywhere where he is not. It comes out with him among his servants, and yet he leaves it whispering behind; he sees it pointing after him in the street; it is waiting for him in his counting-house; it leers over the shoulders of rich men among the merchants; it goes beckoning and babbling among the crowd; it always anticipates him, in every place; and is always busiest, he knows,

> when he has gone away. When he is shut up in his room at night, it is in his house, outside it, audible in footsteps on the pavement, visible in print upon the table, steaming to and fro on railroads and in ships; restless and busy everywhere, with nothing else but him. (809)

In the wake of his public disgrace, Dombey becomes a disturbed and haunted man, terrified of what people say about him and how gossip and society's judgment of him slowly reshape his identity. He remains locked in his room with his ghosts, and while the rest of the human race bustles on without him, we find "Mr. Dombey and the world are alone together" (816). Indeed, I think that Dombey experiences just the same sort of torture that Garcin undergoes in Sartre's Huis Clos, when he is tormented merely by the knowledge that others are judging him and remaking his identity in his absence, before he realizes that "Hell is—other people" (No Exit 45). In Dombey's case, Dickens makes quite clear that Dombey's existence is false and empty, as he exhibits the very worst characteristics of the novel's "They," and it is ultimately this limited self-conception that leads to his misdeeds and his near destruction.

However, Dombey is not the only character with a limited understanding of his existence, for Major Joe Bagstock's character displays another feature of this developing theme. Like many later characters, in particular the unctuous Uriah Heep, "Joey B" serves as a sickening reminder of the character one develops out of "inauthentic" communal existence. Bagstock has no real identity of his own, as he simply apes society's opinions. In order to maintain and improve his social status, he becomes a parasite, latching on to society's paragon, Dombey. Bagstock seems to sense Dombey's inherent lack of security in his identity, and instead of providing friendship, Bagstock

simply tells Dombey whatever he wants to hear. As Dickens hinted to Hablôt K. Brown, Bagstock is "the incarnation of selfishness and small revenge, a kind of comic Mephistophelean power in the book" (Letters 5.34), for he merely echoes Dombey's assertions and intentions, thereby providing Dombey with the justification for continuing in his misbegotten way, as well as the reassurance that social opinion will sanction Dombey's actions.

When Bagstock first meets Dombey, he appeals to Dombey's sense of his own importance admitting that, "I envy you," and he professes sheer admiration for the entity of "Dombey & Son": "it's a great name . . . that is known and honoured in the British possessions abroad . . . a name, Sir, that a man is proud to recognize . . . by the Lord, it's a great name!" (188). Meanwhile Bagstock downplays his own place in society, proclaiming himself to be "an old campaigner . . . a smoke-dried, sun-burnt, used-up, invalided old dog . . . a plain old soldier . . . a blunt old blade" who is wholly incapable of flattery: "No flattery in him, Sir. Nothing like it" (188). Dombey immediately recognizes Bagstock's value, for Bagstock manages to praise Dombey unabashedly, but in such a way as to make it seem like the plain truth; of course, Dombey mistakes Bagstock's obsequiousness for an ability to recognize value, believing that "besides being quite a military man he was really something more, as he had a very admirable idea of the importance of things unconnected with his own profession" (190). Dombey appreciates Bagstock's supposed worldly sophistication, and he believes it qualifies the Major as a suitable companion: "He was a man of the world, and knew some great people . . . and Mr Dombey was disposed to regard him as a choice spirit who shone in society . . . his station was undeniable" (346). Of course, Dombey is careful to choose a friend who does

not represent a threat to his own importance, and Bagstock certainly meets such a demand, for, although Bagstock is "well accustomed to a life of leisure, and to such places as that they were about to visit," he has "an air of gentlemanly ease about him that mixed well enough with [Dombey's] own City character, and *did not compete with it at all*" (346, emphasis added).

However, Bagstock's intentions are quite clearly self-centered, as we find that he sees his connection to Dombey as a ladder by which he might ascend in the world, and he quickly resorts to bragging of his connection to "Dombey in the City" (200) as a means of asserting his own self-worth. As Richard Levine has noted, Bagstock's self-centered motivation "is more akin to self-preservation" than it is to simple greed, for "given the nature of the society in which he operates . . . he can translate self-preservation into a parasitic emulation of people like Dombey" (158). Moreover, as is expected, when Dombey's collapse occurs, Bagstock quickly distances himself from the fallen industrial giant:

> To Major Bagstock, the bankruptcy was quite a calamity. The Major was not a sympathetic character – his attention being wholly concentrated on J.B. . . . he had so paraded his friend Dombey at the club; had so flourished him at the heads of the members in general, and so put them down by continual assertion of his riches; that the club, being but human, was delighted to retort upon the Major, by asking him, with a show of great concern, whether this tremendous smash had been at all expected, and how his friend Dombey bore it. To such questions, the Major, waxing very purple, would reply that it was a bad world . . . that Joe had been

> deceived, Sir, taken in, hoodwinked, blindfolded, but was broad awake again and staring; . . . (910)

Indeed, Bagstock was never Dombey's friend, but another individual concerned with his appearance to others, and, through his sycophantic attachment to Dombey, he is able to objectify and use him to improve his own standing. Essentially, Bagstock represents the absolute conniving and self-involved character that one must possess to succeed in society, which is certainly ugly enough for the reader to see and is even more obvious through Dickens' grotesque imagery of Bagstock's ferociously sanguine countenance. Furthermore, what makes the depiction of Bagstock even more sinister is the implication—through hints at Bagstock's worldly travels and peregrinations through the upper reaches of society—that most individuals in society are much like him: unreliable, petty, obsequious, and absolutely self-centered.

Admittedly, Bagstock is one in a long line of characters of this type—such as Lord Chester and Pecksniff—but when he is paired with a character such as Dombey, we see the true nature of his disingenuous nature: he exists in a matrix of deceptive individuals whose shared but unspoken purpose is to get ahead in others' estimation and strengthen their socially-derived identities. What, then, is the picture one has of society and the world upon reading this novel full of Dombeys and Bagtsocks, as well as other self-serving and deluded characters like Carker, Mrs. Skewton, and "Biler" Toodles? Mr. Morfin's oration on the subject of "Habit" most aptly encapsulates the novel's theme; as Michael Greenstein has noted, the metaphor contrasts "those polarities at the heart of Dombey and Son," including "we and they, routine and leisure, business and humanity, firmness and flexible change, permanent and temporary" (153). Morfin's sermon on

"Habit" is yet another view of society as populated by individuals conforming to the roles they are assigned and forcibly limiting their conceptions of themselves and the world around them:

> . . . we go on in our clockwork routine, from day to day, and can't make out, or follow, these changes . . . I have good reason to believe that a jog-trot life, the same from day to day, would reconcile one to anything. One don't see anything, one don't hear anything, one don't know anything; that's the fact. We go on taking everything for granted, and so we go on, until whatever we do, good, bad, or indifferent, we do from habit. Habit is all I shall have to report, when I am called upon to plead to my conscience, on my death-bed. (560)

In short, this "Habit," which Morfin claims is possessed by "nine-tenths of the world" is the inclination to "believ[e] that all was right about me" (841). Essentially, through Morfin, Dickens provided some insight into the new direction his work was beginning to take with Dombey and Son. No longer did he simply rail against the problems of society as if they could be solved through legislation, or as if they derived from the actions of bad men; rather, he saw that society was corrupt because the individuals within it chose to focus only on their own small spheres of existence, concerned only with maintaining the present state of things or improving their status among each other, while they ignored the past, the future, and the significance of their actions. In Dombey and Son, society depends on conformity to the expectations and values of others, as well as the sacrifice of true individuality and independent thinking. Yes, the abstract entity "Society" is the problem, as has become a common critical observation; however, it is not simply because

of money, greed, or the dictates of capitalism, for within the novel those things are nothing but empty slogans by which individuals signal their secure status in society. Rather, Dickens' true concern in this novel is clearly the means by which individuals enter into society and become one of the herd, and it is in his next novel, David Copperfield, that Dickens would continue his exploration of this theme with a new focus on the individual in the face of a society that seeks to shape him, control him, and make him one of their own.

III. "The Hero of My Own Life": David Copperfield and the Individual's Search for Identity

David Copperfield is also an examination of the potentially corrupting effects of existence-with-others and how individual identity is undermined through one's subservience to the role one is assigned in society. However, in this novel, Dickens' understanding of this existential struggle is remarkably more complex than what we find in Dombey and Son. First of all, Dickens employs the first-person narrative from David's point of view, which serves to emphasize the significance of an individual's attempt to discover his or her true identity. From the novel's first line, when David wonders whether he is to be the "hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else" (11), Dickens makes it clear that the theme of individual identity is his chief concern in the novel. Dickens clearly sought to question the very nature of individual identity and determine whether or not an individual has an inherent authentic identity—as opposed to a prescribed role in society, or if the individual creates or must find that authentic identity through the various possibilities or potential forms of being available to him or her. In

short, Dickens' question seems to be whether an individual is "self-made or made by others" (Westburg 40).

However, this struggle is more complicated than an account of one individual struggling against the pressure applied by some large collective identity, such as we find in Dombey's depiction of society. In David Copperfield, society is still depicted as a singular "They" with a uniform system of values, while individuals can be classed as either belonging to this collective identity or existing in independent worlds of their own making by refusing to conform to the roles others would prefer that they play. As in all of Dickens' novels, this distinction is presented as a split between "the innocent and the powerful, the born victims and the victimizers" (Stone 263), for those who belong to the "They" preserve their status by taking advantage of others, and the only choice that remains to those who are unwilling to compromise their values and individuality—the "good" or positive characters—is to separate themselves from society, as in the cases of Betsey Trotwood or Tommy Traddles. The innovation seen here is that other characters take on a new importance for the first-person protagonist, as they represent possible selves that David might inhabit. Through David's interactions with other individuals, he begins to understand who he is, not by incorporating aspects of each individual into his character so much as by *rejecting certain negative characteristics* of each individual. This is why we see that David changes a great deal over the course of the novel, but other characters seem to be "committed to their early choices or accidents" (Engel 150). Furthermore, it is quite evident that David's fate is not to choose one identity from the many with which he is presented. J. Hillis Miller is incorrect when he asserts that David's quest "is the search for some relationship to another person which will support his life,

fill up the emptiness within him, and give him a substantial identity" (World 157). Such an interpretation of David's mission is clearly the opposite of what Dickens intended, for it ignores David's resistance against the influences of others, such as the Murdstones and, eventually, Steerforth, while it makes David out to be some sort of empty vessel waiting to be filled. Rather, as we will see, David's quest is to unearth the authentic "David," the "David" that exists *despite* the influences of those around him, the "David" with dreams, fears, and desires of his own. As D. A. Miller has suggested, in this world in which David lives, wherein individuals are consistently "boxed" up, or "pigeonholed," into their proscribed roles, the novel's "essential drama stems from David's desperate attempt not to be boxed in, or confounded with a box, like the other characters" (211-2). Admittedly, David falls victim to "they-self" thinking for a lengthy portion of the novel, as he emulates Steerforth and concerns himself only with that which is temporary and worldly, but ultimately he is able to break free from this controlling misperception.

From the very first moment of David's existence, his identity is thrown into question. David is a "posthumous child" (12) in that his father, the individual from whom he might best learn about his own identity through benevolent teachings or, as is often the case, through self-definition in opposition to a very bad example, is deceased, which thereby denies David a crucial tool in his self-discovery. We learn that before David is born, his aunt already has plans for him, as she has a "presentiment that [David] must be a girl" and this child shall be known as "Betsey Trotwood Copperfield" (16). Aunt Betsey ultimately is revealed as a wonderfully compassionate figure in David's growth, but Dickens' point is already clear: from David's first day on Earth, other individuals attempt to shape and confine his character, making him into an object that they might fit

into their own existences and use to confirm their own existences, whether they are conscious of this or not. Thus, through the rest of the novel, David must be a different self for different individuals, adhering to the various monikers that others pin on him, including Trot, Daisy, Mas'r Davy, and Doady. However, despite all of this, we have the constant of David's fictive authorial voice, which indicates that there is a "real" David with whom the other characters are not fully acquainted, and whom is only fully revealed through the composition of the autobiography-within-the-novel.

The first truly dangerous influences in David's life are the Murdstones, for they seek to instruct him in the limited ways of the world, while they stamp out any hint of individuality in his character. Significantly, the primary adjective with which David describes the Murdstones is their uncompromising nature. When Miss Murdstone first arrives, David's description of her is loaded with adjectives suggestive of her obdurate character, as she is "gloomy-looking" and "dark," while her possessions, are "hard," "steel," "metallic," jail-like, and "shut up like a bite" (52-3). David later speculates on the pair's "firmness" remarking on how it "was the grand quality" by which they are defined:

> Mr Murdstone was firm; nobody in his world was to be so firm as Mr Murdstone; nobody else in his world was to be firm at all, for everybody was to be bent to his firmness. Miss Murdstone was an exception. *She* might be firm, but only by relationship, and in an inferior and tributary degree. (54)

Murdstone clearly represents what we have earlier noted is the paradoxical nature of the individual's acquiescence to the "they-self" mentality; by defining himself solely according to his place in society, his existence-with-others, Murdstone instead opts for a

limited sense of self and the understanding of others as objects within *his* world, which thereby leads him to center all his values around his false social identity and his appearance before the world, as we saw in Dombey's example. Nothing exists for Murdstone outside of his beliefs, and he seeks to submit those around him to this understanding of the world.

Before he has even arrived in David's life, it is clear that he has already succeeded in marshalling his sister to his cause, and he continues to pursue this agenda through his treatment of David and his mother. After Murdstone continually exhorts Clara—David's mother—to "controul yourself, always controul yourself" (49), he seems to succeed in shaping her to fit his world, as David notes that his mother eventually conforms to Murdstone's "firmness" philosophy: "My mother was another exception. *She* might be firm, and must be; but only in bearing their firmness, and firmly believing there was no other firmness upon earth" (54). Clara becomes Murdstone's staunchest defender, as she endorses his treatment of her son, informing Peggotty that:

> If he seems to have been at all stern with a certain person . . . it is solely because he is satisfied that it is for a certain person's benefit. He naturally loves a certain person, on my account; and acts solely for a certain person's good. He is better able to judge of it than I am; for I very well know that I am a weak, light, girlish creature, and that he is a firm, grave, serious man. (115)

Murdstone clearly has an identity already prepared for Clara, for, in Murdstone's conception of the world, his wife must be pretty, foolish, inept, and always submissive to his will. Unfortunately, Clara is rather weak-willed and uncertain of her identity, so she

acquiesces with little resistance and performs her role as Murdstone's "child-wife." Significantly, this "master-slave" marital relationship appears again in David's marriage to Dora, another "child-wife."

However, David is much more reluctant to give up his identity and become the stepson that might fit into Murdstone's world. David is dragged off to church "like a guarded captive brought to a condemned service" (56), while the Murdstones infuse Christianity with the "gloomy taint" (56) of their "firmness." They attempt to teach David in an oppressive manner, ostensibly prizing "factual" rote knowledge over the development of David's imagination, as David is asked to calculate "the number of yards of net in Miss Murdstone's cap, or of the price of Mr Murdstone's dressing-gown" (58), and every lesson is concluded "in the shape of an appalling sum" (59) in which David must determine the final balance of a grocery order. Ostensibly, David is instructed in the "They's" values and thinking process, for if anything, he is trained in rigid, quasi-mathematical thinking, a means of seeing the world in terms of simple irreducible facts—all that matters is to have a correct sum at the end so that one might be in agreement with everyone else. Moreover, David learns to traffic in the "They's" discourse, associating thinking and personal development with money, the great empty shibboleth of society: one needs it to get along and belong in the company of others, and possession of more of it might guarantee a more secure place in that company.[12] Ultimately, Murdstone's pedagogical methods have no effect on David, as he realizes that each exercise is simply

[12] Dickens frequently depicted schooling as a means by which individuality is stamped out of children. The most famous example of this is, of course, Gradgrind's school in Hard Times, where the motto is "Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and room out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them" (9). Significantly, the privileging of Facts comes at the expense of imagination, the means by which Dickens' characters assert their individuality.

a "ridiculous problem that I have no business with, and don't want to have anything at all to do with" (58). David's individualism shines through the shadows Murdstone casts, most notably in his continued employment of his imagination, particularly in his escape to "that blessed little room" (59) containing his father's books—all romances and novels—which serve as David's "only and . . . constant comfort" (60).

More importantly, the Murdstones also attempt to belittle David and rob him of his human dignity in hopes that he might submit to their will. For example, Murdstone compares David to "an obstinate dog or horse" (51) and threatens to beat him. After the altercation in which David takes a bite out of Murdstone's hand, David is forced to wear the infamous sign that reads "*Take care of him. He bites*" (81), which David quite rightly mistakes as a warning about a dog. Later, after David returns home from school, Dickens again employs the association of David with an animal, as Murdstone "ordered me like a dog, and I obeyed like a dog" (119).[13] Undoubtedly, this treatment is intended to remove David's sense of individuality by denying his dignity as a human being, for if David ultimately yields to this dehumanization, then it should be rather easy for Murdstone to negate David's identity and reshape David in his own image. However, Murdstone eventually fails at his mission, as he leaves little of a lasting impression on David other than David's hatred for him. Thus, unsuccessful, Murdstone resorts to eliminating David's existence from the "Murdstone universe" by removing him first to Creakle's school and later to the blacking factory.

Murdstone has little success in his attempt to alter David's identity and make him conform to his world, but he is not the last character to attempt to do so. John Steerforth

[13] I think this passage must have clearly had some influence on Kafka's conclusion to The Trial, which I cited earlier, particularly because of Kafka's well known infatuation with David Copperfield, as he even went so far as to attempt to write his own version of it in Amerika (Spilka 242).

has a rather different effect on David, although his agenda is quite similar to that of Murdstone. Steerforth is clearly representative of the attraction of belonging to the "They." Significantly, it is not money that makes Steerforth so awe-inspiring, as it eventually is made clear that he is a profligate debtor. Rather, Steerforth seems to have an innate power over others because there is a general impression among the other characters that he is superior to them. Essentially, every member of the novel's society enters into an unspoken agreement to acknowledge Steerforth's greatness because they recognize that he belongs to society's "inner circle".

As a member of society's "inner circle"—gentility—Steerforth evinces the very worst characteristics of the "They." He steadfastly believes in social distinctions and the differences between individuals from different social strata. After the teacher, Mr. Mell's firing, Steerforth informs Traddles that he shouldn't worry about Mell, for "his feelings are not like yours" (102), subtly insinuating that those that are lower in society are incapable of experiencing worthwhile or important emotions. When David takes Steerforth to visit the Peggottys, Steerforth takes the opportunity to ridicule them, joking that he enjoys seeing "the natives in their aboriginal condition" (284). At times, Steerforth genuinely believes that they are less than human, as he wonders, "Are they really animals and clods, and beings of another order?" (277), before he finally concludes that: "there's a pretty wide separation between them and us . . . they are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. . . . They are wonderfully virtuous . . . but they have not very fine natures" (277). Not only does Steerforth believe in the differences between classes, but he also sees others only as objects that he might exploit. He uses David for entertainment while at school, and later as the means by which he is introduced to Emily,

whom he also does not hesitate to manipulate. Steerforth admits this himself when he confides to David: “I feel as if you were my property” (274). Clearly, when Steerforth looks at the world, he sees only himself and the means to providing his comfort.

Moreover, Dickens suggests that Steerforth’s myopia extends to his understanding of himself in time. Steerforth seeks only immediate gratification, and the continuation of his current lifestyle. He never reflects on the past or his actions, and he likewise does not consider the possibility or significance of his death. He also has no consideration as to producing anything in the world, finding a useful place in the world, or even completing his education, as he brags to David: “I have not the least desire or intention to distinguish myself in that way. I have done quite sufficient for my purpose” (275). Essentially, Steerforth is not a producer or a doer, but a consumer of people and things. He seeks no change or improvement in himself, but he merely seeks to maintain the status quo and continue in his debauchery. Steerforth’s own name is immediately suggestive of this, as it captures the blind and single-minded manner in which Steerforth goes through life. Moreover, Steerforth himself proudly counsels David on his philosophy: “Ride on! Rough-shod if need be, smooth-shod if that will do, but ride on! Ride over all obstacles, and win the race!” (396). Essentially, Steerforth thinks only of the present and the material, and such values have formed his character into a short-sighted, selfish, irresponsible, and exploitative individual: such, it seems, are the natural consequences of adherence to the “They” and its empty values.

Why, then, if the reader can see Steerforth’s obviously empty existence, does David fall victim to Steerforth’s allure? The answer is that David seeks a secure sense of self and a place in the world to which he belongs, both of which are clearly promised in

Steerforth's confidence and magnetism. Steerforth represents a potential self that David might become, if David should ever manage to become accepted in society. It is quite clear that Steerforth's "power" is what draws David to him, for Steerforth seems to offer the promise of security in a world that has already threatened David's existence. As Edwin Eigner has noted: "Steerforth appears in [David's] life at the moment when he is most in need of confirming his very nearly lost human identity" (42). Indeed, after his victimization at Murdstone's hands, and his being lowered to the position of an animal, David needs reassurance as to the state of his identity and existence. As Lawrence Frank has observed, David's brief introduction to society has revealed "an adult world teeming with threats to his emerging self" (67). Steerforth promises not simply to protect David in the school, but in the wider world as well; moreover, he represents the potential for David to be accepted by society, after which David might discover a more certain identity drawn from his acceptance in society. Essentially, David initially believes that he might finally find peace if he *becomes* Steerforth.

From Steerforth's introduction, Dickens makes it quite evident that Steerforth derives power and self-confidence from his status in society. Notably, when David arrives at Creakle's school, he is brought before Steerforth "as before a magistrate" (87) so that Steerforth might determine whether David belongs in his company. More importantly, Steerforth holds sway over the adults that run the school. Although Creakle seems to enjoy beating his young wards, there was "one boy in the school on whom he never ventured to lay a hand, and that boy being J. Steerforth" (89). Steerforth likewise holds power over Mell, and he is well aware that his power originates in his position in society, as Steerforth taunts Mell: "You are always a beggar, you know" (99). Of course,

when Creakle must choose between punishing Steerforth and terminating Mell's employment, he opts for the latter without a second thought. Moreover, as an adult, Steerforth continues to evince power over others, as he does and takes whatever he wants without having to apologize or compensate the people of whom he takes advantage. When Steerforth visits the Peggotty household, they all share David's awe of him, as when Mr. Peggotty exclaims: "There's a friend, if you talk of friends! Why, Lord love my heart alive, if it ain't a treat to look at him!" (139). However, they are not truly awed by anything about Steerforth's personal character, but rather by his status in society. His status blinds them and leads them to believe that he is more handsome, bold, eloquent, and intelligent than David, although we, the readers, know that this is not true, as we have already started to see the chinks in Steerforth's golden armor. This is made clear by Emily's elopement with him, for there is little indication that she loves or is attracted to Steerforth; rather, her intention is clearly to rise in society, and Steerforth seems to offer such an elevation. Steerforth's friendship likewise seems to promise David a rise in society, whereby he might find the security to defend himself from the world's innumerable victimizers, like Murdstone.

Therefore, David initially seeks to become Steerforth—or, at any rate, a version of him. As the Leavises have noted, David's story is in some ways emblematic of the values of the Victorian age, when it was widely "believed or held that every man had the prospect of achieving comfort and respectability, even riches and distinction, at any rate happiness" (47). However, David's aspiration to become like the paradigm of his society has a profoundly dark side, particularly in the threat to his true self. As David attempts to become like Steerforth, he "falls into the most dangerous kind of plagiarism," as "his

fragile self is threatened with ultimate usurpation by another" (Frank 68). This is quite evident in that memories of Steerforth dominate a good deal of David's account of his early life; when he describes a large portion of his time in school, David admits that: "except that Steerforth was more to be admired than ever, I remember nothing. He was going away at the end of the half-year, if not sooner, and was more spirited and independent than before in my eyes, and therefore more engaging than before; but beyond this I remember nothing" (121). Unfortunately, David's great "remembrance" (121), Steerforth, consumes the whole of David's nascent identity; once David has been introduced to the shining self he might one day become, his thoughts about all else become colored by this acquaintance. Indeed, for much of David's young life, Steerforth becomes "theguidingstarofmyexist ence" (337), as he effuses drunkenly one night—he cannot envision his existence without the luminescent presence of his "friend."

David's experiences with poverty and the poor likewise suggest Steerforth's influence, as we witness the development of David's "they-self"—the self as determined by how he is seen and accepted in society. When David is forced into becoming "a little labouring hind in the service of Murdstone and Grimby" (150), his most depressing thought is not that he must work at a young age, but rather that it removes him from Steerforth and the possibility of becoming like him. Even though David's working companions protect and welcome him—in contrast somewhat with David's earlier "friendship" with Steerforth, which was quite obviously exploitative—he is devastated that he must associate with their kind after having basked in the glory of Steerforth. David later laments:

> No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship, compared these henceforth every-day associates with those of happier childhood – not to say with Steerforth, Traddles, and the rest of those boys; and felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my bosom. The deep remembrance of the sense I had, of being utterly without hope now; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. (152)

Later, after they are reunited, it is clear that Steerforth has influenced David's understanding of the world further, as when David turns a blind eye to Steerforth's vapid insistence upon the validity of inter-class divisions. After Steerforth jokes about the Peggottys' lifestyle and Ham's betrothal to Emily, David disregards these clues into Steerforth's character:

> Ah, Steerforth! It's well for you to joke about the poor! You may skirmish with Miss Dartle, or try to hide your sympathies in jest from me, but I know better. When I see how perfectly you understand them, how exquisitely you can enter into happiness like this plain fisherman's, or humour a love like my old nurse's, I know that there is not a joy or sorrow, not an emotion, of such people, that can be indifferent to you. And I admire and love you for it, Steerforth, twenty times the more! (298)

Finally, during David's courtship of Dora, we again see how David's character mimics that of Steerforth, as he is terrified of the notion of being poor:

> How miserable I was, when I lay down! How I thought and thought about my being poor, in Mr Spenlow's eyes; about my not being what I thought I was . . . about how I should contrive to live . . . about coming down to have no money in my pocket, and to wear a shabby coat, and to be able to carry Dora no little presents, and to ride no gallant greys, and to show myself in no agreeable light! (166)

Clearly, at this point of the novel, David is deeply under the spell of Steerforth's "They"; he has ceased to define himself and determine the true priorities in his life from an independent vantage point, as he had during his childhood, for he has come to see the world as Steerforth might. All that matters to David is that he might look silly or foolish, and that society might not accept him because he does not have the means to conform to society's rigid requirements.

His awkward courtship and subsequent marriage to Dora also indicate David's succumbing to the "They." Significantly, David's attraction to Dora shows little evidence of a foundation in sexual interest or genuine love. Rather, Dora represents a means by which David might be accepted further into society, as she comes from a genteel background. Since marriage to Dora potentially leads to a secure status in society, David eventually begins to describe Dora in the language with which he had earlier described Steerforth. "The more I pitied myself, or pitied others, the more I sought for consolation in the image of Dora," he explains, "The greater the accumulation of deceit and trouble in the world, the brighter and the purer shone the star of Dora high above the world" (438).

More importantly, she is much sought after by young men in society, and David's eventual "acquisition" of her represents David's entrance and success at society's game of accumulating material objects. David even goes so far as to admit as much, as when he observes that his pursuit of worldly success converges with his pursuit of Dora: "With the new life, came new purpose, new intention. Great was the labour; priceless the reward. Dora was the reward, and Dora must be won" (481). What makes matters worse is that Dora seems to endorse David's objectification of her, for she was raised to be a mindless object of beauty—the "doll in a doll's house" identity against which Bella Wilfer later militates in Our Mutual Friend.[14] David notices that "Dora seemed by one consent to be regarded like a pretty toy or plaything" and that others "seemed to treat Dora, in her degree, much as Dora treated Jip" (558), her dog. However, because David is steeped in his obsession to belong and achieve a secure position in society, he chooses to ignore these omens, just as he chose to ignore the signs of Steerforth's negative influence.

Only after their marriage does it begin to dawn on David that the blessed existence that he has achieved—an existence much akin to that of Steerforth—is flawed and not as comforting as he had hoped it might be. David quickly perceives that he is playing a role for which he is not suited, which is immediately obvious from his entrance into his new home: "I am quite unable to regard myself as its master. I seem to be there, by permission of someone else. I half expect the real master to come home presently, and say he is glad to see me" (580). Moreover, Dora is clearly not much of a wife, as she is wholly incapable of taking care of both of them, let alone herself. David tells us:

[14] It is interesting that when David initially conforms to the "They," he becomes fixated on a child-wife of his own—much like Clara Copperfield after her marriage to Murdstone. Critics have tended to read this as David acting out the oedipal complex, though I think there is less evidence of that than there is in my own reading.

> She took possession of the keys . . . and went jiggling about the house with the whole bunch in a little basket. . . . I seldom found that the places to which they belonged were locked, or that they were of any use except as a plaything for Jip – but Dora was pleased, and that pleased me. She was quite satisfied that a good deal was effected by this make-belief of housekeeping. . . . (598)

Essentially, David's house is nothing more than a giant dollhouse, "a baby-house" (598), in which the grown up doll Dora is housed. Clearly, Dora also plays an ill-fitting role, as she pantomimes housework without getting anything done. Ultimately, David must admit that his marriage was a mistake, "the first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart" (643), as Mrs Strong describes her near marriage to Jack Maldon. Prior to David's marriage, he believed that it would provide the peace and happiness for which he searches so constantly; unfortunately, his marriage is founded on untruths and the empty promise of social acceptance, and for that reason it is destined to fail. Only at the end, when David views the obvious contrast between Agnes—the suitable wife and real love of David's life—and Dora, does he fully realize the errors of his ways. Ultimately, David is unable to draw anything from his relationship with Dora, because they never showed their true selves to each other, and eventually all masquerades must be revealed for what they are.

Finally, the introduction of Uriah Heep into the narrative is another indication of David's descent into "they-self" thinking. However, unlike Steerforth, who represents the beautiful but empty aspects of social recognition, Uriah's character discloses the hideous reality behind worldly success and social climbing. Many critics have tended to read

Uriah's character only as a condemnation of Victorian values; for example, Barbara Hardy has observed that Uriah is "the creature of his time" whose "servility and unctuousness are plainly created by an illiberal society" (125), while David Thiele has read Uriah as "a manifestation of condescending and even downright hostile suspicions directed toward the lower middle class by a Victorian bourgeoisie which, like David, wanted distance from its closest social inferiors" (209). Much evidence exists to support such a reading, but such an interpretation is inherently limited in its scope, as it reduces Uriah to a mere historical curiosity, and an anachronistic one at that, for, of course, the Victorian Age was not the first era in history in which individuals were able to rise in society, and there were many "Uriah"-types in England and Europe before and after that period. It is true that Uriah represents a projection of David's guilt, as Edwin Eigner has noted, though it is not simply guilt "about his social background, about his ambition to rise above it" (55). Upon closer inspection, Uriah clearly represents much more than the ugly side of social mobility.

The most obvious characteristic about Uriah is his dissemblance, for Uriah very rarely shows his true self to others. Uriah takes up the cant of "umility," whereby he feigns disinterest in personal success or aggrandizement, and of which he continually reminds the other characters, as he tells David: "I am well aware that I am the umblest person going . . . let the other be where he may" (223). Upon becoming partners with Mr. Wickfield, Uriah maintains his "umble" masquerade, although he is clearly making his way in the world: "But the umblest persons . . . may be the instruments of good. I am glad to think I have been the instrument of good to Mr Wickfield, and that I may be more so" (353). Through his insincere rhetoric of "umbleness," Uriah pretends to be an

insignificant cog in the wheel of society, a person with no self-interest or ulterior motives, for he believes it will cause others to accept him more readily while not questioning his actions. Uriah succeeds in fooling a great number of other characters, but the true nature of Uriah's "umbleness" ultimately slips through his oily façade, as when he tells David of his designs on Agnes: "But you know we're so very umble . . . and having such a knowledge of our own umbleness, we must really take care that we're not pushed to the wall by them as isn't umble. All stratagems are fair in love, sir" (529). Clearly, Uriah is just like everyone else: he may pretend to have no selfish interests, but ultimately he is shown to be playing a role that will allow him to fit into and succeed within society. His eventual success within the model prison only verifies this interpretation: Uriah analyzes societies or groups of individuals, discovers the values and hierarchies of each, and then determines his best fit within each social order. As Vincent Newey has observed, Uriah "plays the game to perfection" (135); he knows the rules of being with others and works within them—and sometimes bends them—in an effort to win at all costs.

David has cause to worry about Uriah because they share so many characteristics, and Uriah clearly represents a possible self that David might become—the odiously cloying sycophant. They both come from questionable backgrounds, they both seek to find a secure place in society, they both are attracted to Agnes, and—to a certain degree—they have risen to their present places in society through hard work.[15] Moreover, they both exploit others to achieve their own ends, as Uriah is a swindler and blackmailer, while David's exposure of Mr. Mell's mother and his introduction of Emily

[15] I say "to a certain degree" because David clearly does not do this alone—he has a lot of help from his aunt—and because Uriah has obviously pulled himself up through some deception and fraud, though not completely.

to Steerforth are both seemingly innocent, though clearly self-centered, attempts to earn acceptance by others (Poovey 97). Both characters play roles for others, roles that are distinct from whom they truly are. For most of the novel, David has been playing at being Steerforth, and thus Uriah recognizes in him a fellow actor and calls him on it when he accuses David of being no different or any less dissembling than himself:

> You think it justifiable, do you, Copperfield, you who pride yourself so much on your honour and all the rest of it, to sneak about my place, eavesdropping with my clerk? If it had been *me*, I shouldn't have wondered; for I don't make myself out a gentleman (though I never was in the streets either, as you were, according to Micawber), but being *you!* (688)

Ultimately, Dickens has David recognize his own self-serving behavior in Uriah, and David's participation in outing Uriah's crimes coincides with the other formative events in David's life, the deaths of Dora and Steerforth. Clearly, in David's exposure of Uriah, he actually chooses to reject Uriah's behavior and performative existence.

Essentially, over the course of the novel, David is provided with many examples of possible selves he might become. However, none of these modes of existence fit David, for they have nothing to do with who he is. If David is to embrace these inauthentic selves, these roles, then he will never be his own person. He will always sense a lack, a missing piece, as he did during his short marriage to Dora. Ultimately, it falls to David to address who he really is, and such a revelation is only found through David's coming to terms with his past—where he has been, his youth, what has been done to him—and with his future: his own demise. As we will see, David eventually discovers

who he is—he finds the hero of his story in himself—but only through serious existential self-reflection.

IV. Little Dorrit: A Proliferation of "Theys"

In Bleak House, Dickens arguably shifts his focus back to society—only, this time he has formed an ostensibly new conception of it. Unlike the unified society that we find in Dombey and Son, wherein the characters are split between those that belong and those that do not, Bleak House's society is splintered into more than one group, whose member individuals have differing forms of conformity and collective identities. Admittedly, this splintering is quite limited in scope, as Dickens only depicts a small group of different "Theys," including the worlds of Chancery, the fashionable or high society, and the society of philanthropists. Significantly, individuals within each world share a mutual limited view of existence, its significance and purpose, and one's true priorities in life. Dickens describes the Dedlock's aristocratic world as "a deadened world" that "is wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun" (20), but his treatment of the novel's other microcosms indicates that this description applies to each of them. Each of these small societies attempts to impress its vision of existence on individuals—or at any rate, objectify them and negate their existence—as we find in Lady Dedlock's attempt to elide Esther's existence, Chancery's corruption of Richard's character, and Chadband's proselytizing attempts to reform Jo. As the narrator explains, employing the symbolic figure of Tom, there is much discussion of what *others should*

do or be, but little action is taken to really help the less fortunate, unless they should be willing to conform to the wishes of society:

> Much mighty speech-making there has been, both in and out of Parliament, concerning Tom, and much wrathful disputation how Tom shall be got right. Whether he shall be put into the main road by constables, or by beadles, or by bell-ringing, or by force of figures, or by correct principles of taste, or by high church, or by low church, or by no church; whether he shall be set to splitting trusses of polemical straws with the crooked knife of the mind, or whether he shall be put to stone-breaking instead. In the midst of which dust and noise, there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will, be reclaimed according to somebody's theory but nobody's practice. And in the hopeful meantime, Tom goes to perdition head foremost in his old determined spirit. (710)

Essentially, individuality is endangered in Bleak House's world—this time from assaults on multiple fronts—and ultimately Dickens' only solution is to suggest that individuals must retreat from the world and coexist only with those who respect their individuality.

In Little Dorrit, Dickens developed this conception of society much more fully. As William Burgan has noted, no *singular* society exists within the novel (passim); rather society seems to be a loose confederation of several different societies, all of which seem tied to each society's particular environment. In this fractured world of multiple "Theys," individuality is in its most threatened position. David Storor has wrongly suggested that the novel presents numerous "alienated" individuals "cut off from the possibility of

community" (33), for rather it seems that individuals are actually—in the words of Sartre—de trop with Others: the characters are continually objectified and made subject to the influences of the novel's various societies, and therefore they are alienated *from their true selves*.

In his famous introduction to Little Dorrit, Lionel Trilling observed that the dominant image of the novel is "the prison . . . and in a score of ways the theme of incarceration is carried out, persons and classes being imprisoned by their notions of their predestined fate or their religious duty, or by their occupations, their life schemes, their ideas of themselves, their very habits of language. . ." (Trilling 148). Prisons, most notably the Marshalsea, function as the primary loci of action; the government—in the form of the infamous Circumlocution Office—serves merely to trap people in the eternal loop of bureaucracy; class boundaries are strictly maintained, while the ideology of each serves to constrain any form of movement between them. Indeed, the novel is marked by an overwhelming sense of constriction, as if Dickens had decided that this world was a prison-world, and all of its people are merely prisoners. The symbol of the prison is clearly multi-layered and subject to various interpretations, which has led to multiple readings of the novel according to particular themes.[16] Since Dickens uses the prison as the central symbol around which to construct his narrative, and the prison as a metaphor suggests obvious sentiments of entrapment or restriction, Little Dorrit is ostensibly a novel centered on the problems that originate from the loss of personal freedom or agency.

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[16] For instance, Little Dorrit has also been read as: a Marxist commentary on society and the ideology of the state; an analogy of the inevitable psychological condition resulting from the confrontation between the individual and the state or other authority figures; Dickens' belated attempt to portray women and their roles in society more compassionately; and Dickens' analysis of his own life during the dark times prior to his separation from his wife and supposed midlife crisis.

The self-enforced incarceration of the mind, wherein the characters are trapped within "their ideas of themselves," is the most readily observed interpretation of the prison symbol, for it applies to virtually every character within the novel. With the exception of Amy, the titular heroine, almost every major character is at war with his or her conception of himself or herself; they are locked in Sisyphean struggles between their personal desires and the self-proscribed limitations to which they steadfastly adhere. Arthur Clennam, the novel's hero, believes himself to be incapable of thought, feeling, or action—a self-conception that nearly destroys him. By the beginning of the story, Clennam's mother has become an elderly shut-in because she has sought to limit her existence within the boundaries of her own private corner of the world. William Dorrit exists in a delusional state, unaware of who he is and desperate to maintain an important or enviable position in society. Pancks, Casby's collection agent, must perform his employer's extortion of the hapless residents of Bleeding Heart Yard while he is tortured by the knowledge of Casby's deception. Flora Finching, Casby's daughter, chases hopelessly after Clennam's affections, for she still sees herself as the girl Clennam left behind two decades earlier. Miss Wade has become a vindictive misanthrope in search of retribution for her miserable childhood. Finally, Merdle, "the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows" (680), cannot bear to look on his own Chief Butler, for he knows he does not belong in high society. Clearly, one could list every character in the novel and describe similar instances of the clash between the way they see themselves and the desires they would like to enact. The irony is that the characters choose their own modes of self-interpretation: nothing has been forced upon them, as

they willingly reject their individuality and opt for the false security of one "They" or another.

The most ostensible example of this can be found in the strange society of Marshalsea prisoners. Once the debtors are interned within the prison, they seem to exist out of time, blithely unconcerned about their previous—or potential—existence outside the walls. The prisoners have their own "they-self" conception of themselves, wherein they all accept the circumstances that have placed them in custody, and they prefer to dwell on the hopelessness of that situation. Instead of attempting to address their problems, the debtors contentedly latch onto the dream that they will somehow be "going out again directly" (69), seemingly by some form of divine intercession. When the prisoners are not rescued, they gradually embrace their confinement and seem resigned to their destiny—simply fading out of existence entirely—as Fredrick Dorrit pathetically informs Clennam: "I am merely passing on, like the shadow over the sun-dial." (88). The prisoners' fallacious sense of tranquility is best articulated by the incarcerated former ship's surgeon, when he informs William at the birth of his daughter,

> "We are quiet here; we don't get badgered here . . . it's freedom, sir, it's freedom! I have had to-day's practice at home and abroad, on a march, and aboard ship, and I'll tell you this: I don't know that I have ever pursued it under such quiet circumstances, as here this day. Elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another. Nothing of the kind here, sir. We have done all that—we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace." (73)

As Ronald Librach has observed, the prison offers peace to its inmates "because it offers not simply confinement, but security as well" (538). The debtors need not worry about anything anymore, for by accepting the prison's interpretation of existence, they are absolved from all responsibility, even though they may be deprived of their freedom. They can drift through the remainders of their lives without ever having to make a difficult choice or take an independent stance. The prisoners can exist collectively in a dream world until their time on earth expires.

William Dorrit epitomizes this attitude. He initially seems to care about his family's welfare and the maintenance of his status as a gentleman despite his financial troubles, as he is "crushed at first by his imprisonment," yet gradually he finds a "dull relief in it," for the walls of the prison "kept numbers of his troubles out" (73). Eventually, he becomes fully immersed in the Marshalsea "They," as he plays the bizarre role of "the Father of the Marshalsea" and gradually loses any sense of his true self or the dignity that might be found therein. His cares about the past or the future vanish, and William finds erstwhile solace in the false peace of his present "they-self" existence.

Interestingly, the Marshalsea society is eventually shown to have a counterpart at the opposite end of society's ladder, in the Circumlocution Office. Analyses of the Circumlocution Office have dominated many critical assessments of the novel—particularly because it is considered to be simultaneously Dickens' most clever and bitter satire on English government—which has lent credence to the notion that Dickens was *only* criticizing the particular problems of his own era. In fact, several critics have drawn on the historical correlation between Little Dorrit's publication and the Crimean War, as they have deemed that the Office is an attack on the infamously inept War Department.

However, the depiction of the Barnacles and their office offers more than a simple critique of bureaucracy. Edgar Johnson is correct in suggesting that it "is no such limited thing as any single government department . . . no mere aristocratic bureaucracy" (893), though his ultimate intention is to argue that it is representative of *all* bureaucracies. I would take the point a bit further: the Circumlocution Office transcends the "art" of government, as it is clearly a portrait of any closed society or circle of conformity.

From its very introduction, the Office is not portrayed as a gathering of political climbers, but rather as a conspiracy to preserve the status quo. Those characters that belong to the Office all behave in the same way, and they all rigorously hold to the customs of their club. They seek only to maintain things as they are and to avoid change. The philosophy of "How not to do it" (111) perfectly exemplifies this, for it is the great slogan by which the Office's residents find security and identity. As long as the individuals adhere to the great policy, they can continue to exist "mechanically, every day, keeping this wonderful, all-sufficient wheel of statesmanship . . . in motion" (111). The Office's very name implies this state of being, for its inhabitants do nothing but talk around issues without attempting to make any forward progress. Significantly, the Office's "employees" represent some of the hallmark qualities of what I have been calling the "They's" interpretation of existence: they see nothing of the future or the past, while they think nothing of the results of their actions. The only thing that serves to upset the careful balance of the Office is when outsiders pry into the nature of their existence, as we see when "Barnacle Junior" explodes at Clennam, "Upon my SOUL you mustn't come into the place saying you want to know, you know!" (119). Essentially, the Barnacles and their cohorts seek the same sort of peace and security that the Marshalsea

prisoners seek in their own motley society. Dickens is quite clear on this point towards the end of the novel, when "the young Barnacle, Ferdinand" explains the Office's ethos:

> Our place is . . . the most inoffensive place possible. You'll say we are a Humbug. I won't say we are not; but all that sort of thing is intended to be, must be. . . . Regard our place from the point of view that we only ask you to leave us alone . . . it is there with the express intention that everything shall be left alone. That is what it means. That is what it's for. No doubt there's a certain form to be kept up that it's for something else, but it's only a form. . . . Look at it from the right point of view, and there you have us. . . . (704)

In short, the mindset of the Circumlocution Office is similar to that of the Marshalsea, for "they-self" conceptions of existence are fairly interchangeable with each other: in each, one need not question existence, and one need not consider yesterday or tomorrow, for one can blindly hide in a "peaceful" state of ignorance, wherein troubles and wrongs are "left alone." By this means, individuals may lose personal freedom, but they find a prepared identity for themselves—an identity that is free of any discomforts, such as personal responsibility, the ghosts of the past, the potential for one's eventual death, and independent thought. Moreover, the shibboleth of "How not to do it," which all of the members embrace as the definition of their existence, is ultimately shown to be meaningless; it is just a form or façade to give their existence an artificial meaning, just as the Marshalsea's elaborate rites serve to distract the inmates from the insignificance of their lives within the walls.

Dickens clearly was not content to draw parallels only between the Marshalsea and Circumlocution, and thus he would bring a third "They" into this constellation. As Dickens observed in a letter to Forster: "Society, the Circumlocution Office, and Mr. Gowan, are of course three parts of one idea and design" (Letters 8.79).[17] Society—high society, with a capital "s," among whose members we might count the Gowans—is clearly another community within the novel's world to which individuals hand over their identities and senses of individuality. In the latter half of his life, Dickens certainly had no love for Society, as O. F. Christie has noted (134-5). However, in Dickens' depiction of Society, he clearly had more in mind than ridicule of the Victorian upper crust, for we see how Society is little different from the other communities we encounter in the novel. Mrs. Merdle serves as the spokesperson for Society, and through her we get our first sense of Society's "They." Society—like the other two "Theys" we have encountered—is rigidly exclusive and impossible to understand by outsiders, for, as Mrs. Merdle explains, "Society . . . is so difficult to explain to young persons (indeed is so difficult to explain to most persons)" (237). Moreover, we find that Society is similar to Circumlocution in that individuals must accept all of its dictates, as Mrs. Merdle falsely laments: "I wish Society was not so arbitrary, I wish Society were not so exacting . . . Society suppresses us and dominates us" (237-8). As in the case of Circumlocution, those who are in Society also have an empty philosophy around which they rally: the preservation of barriers between

[17] Society serves as a distinct group from Circumlocution, though there is certainly some intermixture between them. The two groups are clearly not the same, as only Barnacles seem to belong to Circumlocution, while those who dominate Society have no business with the Office. In fact, the only interaction between them seems to be at social affairs. The two groups have something of an unspoken rivalry, which is made clear through a conversation between Barnacles that is held late in the novel, in which they contemplate forming a sort of compact of allegiance between the two groups, so that "instead of two rival and contending flames, a larger and a lesser, each burning with a lurid and uncertain glare, we had a blended and a softened light whose genial ray diffused an equable warmth throughout the land" (544). Although they unite as allies to improve their respective states of existence, it is clear that a mutual distrust exists between them.

the classes. This is immediately evident from Mrs. Merdle's unhappiness with Sparkler's engagement to Fanny Dorrit, for, although she is the daughter of a gentleman, she has spent the greater part of her life in a debtor's prison. William Dorrit's change upon his acceptance into Society likewise exemplifies this idea. As soon as William escapes from the Marshalsea and is restored to his "rightful" place, he immediately attempts to put distance between himself and the lower classes, although only a few months earlier he had been forced to "beg" for money and kowtow to the likes of John Chivery. Despite Dorrit's shameful past, he adheres to Society's distinctions, insisting that "people in an exalted position . . . must scrupulously exact respect from their dependents" (447), and that "dependents, to respect us, must be – ha – kept at a distance and – hum – kept down" (439), while he attempts to reform Amy's independent personality so that she might fit into Society more properly and thereby improve his own appearance.

In the figure of Mrs. General, Dickens also examines the relatively myopic perception of the self and existence that one must maintain in Society. Mrs. General clearly represents the close-minded element of "they-self" existence, for she is an instructor in the means by which individuals can join the herd—to use Nietzsche's terminology—and embrace conformity. As a means of transforming the Dorrit children, she first attempts to rid them of their own self-determining habits, for having one's own beliefs is practically taboo in Society. As the narrator informs us:

> Mrs General had no opinions. Her way of forming a mind was to prevent it from forming opinions. She had a little circular set of mental grooves or rails, on which she started little trains of other people's opinions, which never overtook one another, and never got anywhere. Even her propriety

> could not dispute that there was impropriety in the world; Mrs General's way of getting rid of it was to put it out of sight, and make believe that there was no such thing. This was another of her ways of forming a mind – to cram all articles of difficulty into cupboards, lock them up, and say they had no existence. It was the easiest way, and, beyond all comparison, the properest. (435)

Clearly, Mrs. General is not a teacher, but one who merely regurgitates Society's conventional wisdom. She displays the most close-minded aspect of the "They" in that if things do not fit into her limited world, they are considered to be nonexistent. Apparently, that is the easiest manner in which to deal with ideas that might complicate one's own limited understanding of oneself and the world, and it is also the preferred mode of existence in Society, as Mrs. General explains to Amy: "A truly refined mind will seem to be ignorant of the existence of anything that is not perfectly proper, placid, and pleasant" (459). Mrs. General's mantra of "Prunes and Prism" likewise evinces both the herd mentality and negating impulse of the "They," as it is a perversion of language for the purpose of erasing any difficult or uncomfortable aspects of life; as George Holloch has noted, "Mrs. General crystallizes in her language the fictions society tells itself in order to maintain its good conscience" (346). Moreover, it is a meaningless slogan, a collection of words with no meaning behind them, whose sole purpose seems to be to assert one's identification with the community. Ultimately, through Society's representative characters, like Mrs. General, Dickens shows that Society has no foundation, despite its members' fervent belief in its significance, and, in this regard, it is no different than any other "They" within the novel.

The similarities between Society and Circumlocution are obvious, but, interestingly enough, Dickens attempted to draw a further connection between Society and the Marshalsea community, specifically in that they are both examples of "Theys" within the novel. This connection is immediately evident in William Dorrit's transition from one group to the other, for he is readily accepted by both groups without any appreciable change in his personality or behavior. William may lose touch with reality in a very dramatic fashion, reverting back to his Marshalsea persona, but it is already clear that being part of Society naturally leads to an unreal sense of existence, for William Dorrit is not the only individual who "builds castles"—one of Dickens' favorite expressions for daydreaming about worldly success. Dickens takes still greater pains to make the connection more ostensible. As Amy takes the Grand Tour with her family, she notices some strange similarities between the community from which she escaped, and her new "higher" companions. As the narrator explains:

> It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home. They were brought into these foreign towns in the custody of couriers and local followers, just as the debtors had been brought into the prison. They prowled about the churches and picture-galleries, much in the old, dreary prison-yard manner. They were usually going away again to-morrow or next week, and rarely knew their own minds, and seldom did what they said they

> would do, or went where they said they would go: in all this again, very like the prison debtors. (492)

Essentially, although on the surface both of these communities cannot seem more different—especially since they represent two opposite poles of society, the highest and the lowest—they are in actuality examples of the same phenomenon. Bette Roberts has attempted to prove that the "traveling" society was intended as the antithesis of the prison (111), but I think this is quite clearly not the case. When one enters into the herd-like existence of the "They," it does not matter whether everyone else in the "herd" is wealthy, poor, lazy, or ambitious, and it does not matter whether walls surround your community or your community wanders across Europe, for Dickens clearly suggests that such an existence, in which individuals basically "go along to get along," runs contrary to human nature. In this sense, individuals are all imprisoned within a limited understanding of their existence, and there are more prisons in society than one might think.

In this regard, Dickens draws parallels between very different segments of society so as to disregard what he clearly saw to be the arbitrary and artificial divisions in society. Also, more importantly, he criticizes the unfortunate reality of existence-with-others. As Dickens seems to suggest, the prison serves as an unfortunate microcosm of society itself, for society is a collection of various "they-selves," wherein everyone seems to understand his or her existence only according to the immediate, leading to rampant greed, moral myopia, and idleness. It does not matter if one is a member of Circumlocution, or Society, or the Marshalsea Debtors community, for all "Theys" are ultimately the same. Significantly, in this world of individuals succumbing to various "Theys," we see a notable lack of responsibility that coincides with the rejection of

independent thinking. As is well known, Dickens' original title for the novel was "Nobody's Fault," which would have perfectly encapsulated his depiction of social conformity. Numerous critics such as Sherri Wolf have tended to interpret this theme as Dickens' attack on contemporary Victorian institutions and their habit of hiding responsibility for social problems behind bureaucratic red tape (224), but clearly the problem has far deeper roots. Rather, it seems clear that by the time of Little Dorrit's composition, Dickens understood the real complications that arise from the individual's existence with others in society and the terrible pressure to conform to common opinions and values.

V. Great Expectations: the Individual's Existential Crisis par excellence

Many critics have tended to read Dickens' treatment of society from a Marxist perspective, such as when Claire Pettitt posits that "Dickens may be dramatizing not only the pathological effects of a capitalist restlessness predicated on ideas of expansion and tireless exploitation of resources, but also his uneasiness about his own involvement in the capitalist marketplace" (244). Of course, if it is not immediately clear by now, I would suggest that any reference to capitalism is at best a surface manifestation of the deeper problem of the gradual dissolution of true individualism in the modern age.[18] Rather, in Great Expectations, we find Dickens' closest attempt at examining the effect of society on the formation of the individual and the individual's identity. Unlike Amy Dorrit's previously developed example, we find in Pip one of the characters that is most susceptible to the influence of the "They." However, because Pip is the narrator of the

[18] Moreover, as far as the amateur psychological analysis of Dickens' feelings regarding his role as an author, there is virtually no evidence that Dickens was uncertain or questioned the morality of his growing fortune or the means by which he accumulated it—quite the contrary, in fact.

story, and a sometimes insightful and self-reflective character to boot, Dickens has the opportunity to explore the process by which society dissolves the individual's independently-determined sense of value and morality and gradually replaces it with society's empty ideals and rules.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this process begins with the sadistic instruction of Miss Havisham and Estella; they are undoubtedly an important influence—possibly the most important influence—on Pip's character's development, but they are not the only formative forces in the novel. In fact, Pip's status as a sovereign individual is denied from our very first introduction to him. The assault on Pip's independence begins on the novel's opening pages, as he is introduced to the reader as "the small bundle of shivers" (4); essentially, Pip is presented to us as an object without agency, dropped into a universe that seeks to consume him. The world is a place hostile to Pip's autonomy, and the pressure on his identity is compounded in that he does not find any solace or protection at home; even there, where Pip should find a comfortable sanctuary from the world's pressure he is likewise confronted by external forces—in the shape of his sister and his relatives—who seek to shape him into a purposeless object, an automaton beholden to arbitrarily determined rules and values.

Contrary to G. Robert Stange's contention that the first part of the novel develops "the theme of childhood betrayed" (300) by Pip—namely, the edenic period of innocence prior to the hypocritical time of adulthood, I think what we rather find in the novel is a depiction of childhood as a stage in life in which children are attacked from all sides and pressured to see themselves as others see them. As Robin Gilmour has suggested, we very early on realize that "Pip's relationship to the world" is best characterized as "a

child alone in a society of adults, a society which robs him of human dignity by impressing on him that he is merely a little animal, but which simultaneously makes complicated demands on him" (131). Thus, to hammer this point home, Dickens gives us that dreadful Christmas dinner scene, when the assemblage of adults take it upon themselves to objectify and belittle the child in their midst. As Pip elaborates: "Among this good company I should have felt myself, even if I hadn't robbed the pantry, in a false position" (25). Pip is packed off in a corner, "squeezed in at an acute angle of the tablecloth, with the table in my chest, and the Pumblechookian elbow in my eye" (25); like an animal, he is "not allowed to speak" (25). But, if that were not enough, the true torture is that Pip is continuously subjected to corrective suggestions and prods at his character:

> I should not have minded that, if they would only have left me alone. But they wouldn't leave me alone. They seemed to think the opportunity lost, if they failed to point the conversation at me, every now and then, and stick the point into me. I might have been an unfortunate little bull in a Spanish arena, I got so smartingly touched up by these moral goads. (25)

Dickens again employs animal imagery to indicate the means by which Pip's dignity is slowly stripped away from him; as we saw previously through the conflation of David Copperfield with a dog, Pip is compared unfavorably to a "Squeaker" or a "Swine" (26-7), for as Wopsle sermonizes: "What is detestable in a pig, is more detestable in a boy" (27).

Of course, the Christmas dinner is not the only moment in which Pip is made to feel less than human. The most culpable individual is none other than Pip's older sister,

Mrs. Joe, who, as we learn from her spouse, is "given to government" (48) and a "master-mind" (49). In other words, she excels at controlling others—even her massive husband—and making them conform to her will. As a result, her maltreatment of Pip is not limited to the physical, for she is the initial instigator behind the attempt to rob Pip of his human dignity. Thus, she continually informs Pip that he is indebted to her for his very existence—"If it weren't for me you'd have been to the churchyard long ago, and stayed there" (9), she reminds him—and that he should be thankful for her abuse. Therefore, it is no surprise that Pip has little sympathy or love for her, as he admits after the theft of the file and food that "I do not recall that I felt any tenderness of conscience in reference to Mrs. Joe, when the fear of being found out was lifted off me"(41). Moreover, when Mrs. Joe is attacked and subsequently dies, Pip cannot mourn her loss, and rather considers it a felicitous moment in his life. The only exception to his rigorous instruction is, of course, the saintly Joe, whose only wish is for Pip's happiness: "Pip is that harty welcome . . . to go free with his services, to honour and fortun', as no words can tell him" (141). In short, from his earliest recollections, Pip has been made to feel that he is an inhuman object, subject to the whims of others; aside from Joe, Pip finds little kindness and acceptance in the world. The purpose for this programming is to divest Pip of an individual identity, all so that he will conform to the wishes of his superiors. In some ways, Pip is not wholly responsible for his eventual turn to snobbery, for he has been trained from birth to accept the dictates of others. However, we eventually learn that Mrs. Joe's attempts to shape Pip are largely ineffective, or, ironically, they have actually had the opposite effect of what was intended, for we find that—despite all of the physical

punishment, despite all of the abusive and demeaning words—Pip still has some kernel of self-respect, some morsel of an identity:

> My sister's bringing up had made me sensitive. In the little world in which children have their existence whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice. . . . Within myself, I had sustained, from my babyhood, a perpetual conflict with injustice. I had known, from the time when I could speak, that my sister, in her capricious and violent coercion, was unjust to me. I had cherished a profound conviction that her bringing me up by hand, gave her no right to bring me up by jerks. Through all my punishments, disgraces, fasts and vigils, and other penitential performances, I had nursed this assurance. . . . (63)

Ultimately, when Pip has succumbed to his limited "they-self" perception of himself, and when he seems that he cannot be redeemed, it is this small remnant of independence that allows him to break free from society's influence and become his own person.

When Pip is under the ward of his sister, he is subject to a very particular "They," composed of the local potentates, such as Wopsle and Pumblechook. However, when Pip is introduced to the world of Satis House, he is really being initiated into the wider world of the British bourgeoisie; as Alan Lelchuk has suggested: "In all its grotesqueness, then Satis House is a kind of preparatory school for entrance into English society" (408).[19] Just as Mrs. Joe sought to undermine Pip's dignity, Pip's very humanity is put into question again, from the first moments that he is a guest in Miss Havisham's house. Pip is

[19] Moreover, as John Reed has noticed, to emphasize the connection between the limited values of society and Satis House, Miss Havisham's home is described with various adjectives suggestive of enclosure, so that "we will understand what it is that Pip is freeing himself from" when he ultimately rejects society's values (44).

made to hate his very existence, as Miss Havisham has the haughty Estella criticize virtually every element of his person, including his "coarse hands" and "common boots" (Dickens 62). Estella refuses to acknowledge that he has a name—and, by extension, an identity—as she insists on calling him "boy" (56). As before, he is made to feel like an animal, as when Estella brings him his lunch, and "she put the mug down on the stones of the yard, and gave me the bread and meat without looking at me, as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace" (62). Eventually, Miss Havisham and Estella successfully convince Pip that his life is something about which to be ashamed. He lies awake at night, worried "how common Estella would consider Joe, a mere blacksmith: how thick his boots, and how coarse his hands" (72). Whereas Pip had once loved his tiny home for what it was, believing "in the best parlour as a most elegant saloon . . . in the front door, as a mysterious portal of the Temple of State . . . in the kitchen as a chaste though not magnificent apartment . . . in the forge as the glowing road to manhood and independence" (107), he gradually grows to despise it. Whereas Pip had once relished the notion of working the smithy with Joe, he finds that he is "haunted by the fear" that Estella "would, sooner or later, find me out, with a black face and hands, doing the coarsest part of my work, and would exult over me and despise me" (108). Pip sees his future in the smithy as a prison from which he cannot escape, which is clearly suggested by his paranoid fantasy in the midst of being articled to Joe in which he imagines being judged and sentenced and on the "way to the scaffold" (105)—in short, Pip is *condemned* to live the life he had long anticipated living. Essentially, Pip comes to hate everything about himself and his life; as a result, he rejects everything about his life in which he had previously believed, including the honest friendship of Joe and the promise of a decent

but quiet life. What makes this all the more devastating is that Miss Havisham and Estella—and, by extension, bourgeois society as a whole—subconsciously seek to convince Pip of the validity of their values so as to preserve their place in the hierarchy of society: they need to convince those beneath them to buy into their values so that the subalterns in society will accept the truth of social distinctions and continue to exist in a subordinate role to their "betters." The unintended consequence of this training, ironically, is not that Pip accepts his inferiority—although he *does*—but that he should yearn to rise in society and become a gentleman.

Interestingly enough, Pip is not tempted to accept bourgeois values through the promise of riches or power. The power that one might derive from gentility is suggested on multiple occasions, such as the account of how Magwitch and Compeyson received different treatment by the legal system,[20] or the manner in which Miss Havisham's relatives serve at her beck and call so as to be remembered in her will, or the reverential respect with which Trabb the tailor treats the post-expectations Pip—but this promise is not what drives Pip to accept the "They's" values. Rather, Miss Havisham is able to

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[20] The discrepancy between the legal rights of the poor and the legal rights of the middle class are an important element of the novel. We cannot forget how Pip is somewhat aware that in the eyes of the law, he has fewer rights than a young gentleman, as evidenced by his worry after his fight with Herbert Pocket:

> My mind grew very uneasy on the subject of the pale young gentleman. The more I thought of the fight, and recalled the pale young gentleman on his back in various stages of puffy and incrimsoned countenance, the more certain it appeared that something would be done to me. I felt that the pale young gentleman's blood was on my head, and that the Law would avenge it. Without having any definite idea of the penalties I had incurred, it was clear to me that village boys could not go stalking about the country, ravaging houses of gentlefolks and pitching into the studious youth of England, without laying themselves open to severe punishment. (93-4)

One is also reminded of the means by which Jaggers interacts with his "clients," and how a certain amount of his power and respect is derived from the fact that he might turn the law on any of them at any time. It is certainly remarkable that Dickens should come to present the law in this manner towards the end of his career, especially since he had once operated from a position wholly unsympathetic to the lower classes when it came to the law, as in Oliver Twist, or in Sketches by Boz when he writes of the young criminal "congratulating himself on having succeeded in giving every body as much trouble as possible" (Sketches 234).

convince Pip of the superiority of her values only by demonstrating its most significant reward: the hand of Estella. Pip's indoctrination into bourgeois values is consistently linked to sexuality, as in his first visit, when Miss Havisham presses him as to how he feels about Estella's beauty. When Pip knocks out the young Herbert, he is offered more explicit bounties as manifested in the cold kiss on Estella's cheek, which by this point the demoralized Pip admits: "I would have gone through a great deal to kiss her cheek" (93). Interestingly, Dickens draws a parallel between the kiss and other bourgeois "riches" when Pip realizes that "the kiss was given to the coarse common boy as a piece of money might have been, and that it was worth nothing" (93); in essence, Dickens clearly suggests that bourgeois society employs several means of attracting new members, including both sex and money, both of which are ultimately useless. Of course, this reveals the ironic essence of the upper class value system: Estella, like all of the potential material benefits that one might reap from conforming to society, is beautiful and elegant, but at heart she is empty; Estella cannot love, as she freely admits, and because of this, she cannot make another person happy. Ultimately, the acquisition of Estella produces nothing in the way of genuine happiness, in much the same manner as any other pursuit of riches—as Biddy prophesies: "she was not worth gaining over" (129). However, although we, the enlightened readers, along with Biddy sense the emptiness of any possible life with Estella—as we are, in turn, unsettled at the very least by every instance of Miss Havisham's recurring question: "Does she grow prettier and prettier, Pip?" (95)—Pip is wholly taken by the thought of it. Eventually, Miss Havisham's machinations are so successful that Pip cannot envision himself or his life without Estella, as Pip admits:

> Truly it was impossible to dissociate her presence from all those wretched hankerings after money and gentility that had disturbed my boyhood – from all those ill-regulated aspirations that had first made me ashamed of home and Joe – from all those visions that had raised her face in the glowing fire, struck it out of the iron on the anvil, extracted it from the darkness of night to look in at the wooden window of the forge and flit away. In a word, it was impossible for me to separate her, in the past or in the present, from the innermost life of my life. (236)

Moreover, Pip comes to envision his destiny as being intertwined with that of Estella; after all, Miss Havisham

> had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together. She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a going and the cold hearths a blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin – in short, do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the Princess. (231)

In essence, there is no Pip without Estella—the personification of society's values; midway through the novel, Pip has become completely subsumed in a "they-self" conception of himself and his existence.

Thus, Pip succumbs to the values of society, and seeks to become a "gentleman" worthy of Estella's hand. In a further instance of irony, as Jerome Buckley has noted, Pip's understanding of the nature of gentility—derived from society's vision—is discordant with the traditional British concept of gentility, as codified by John Henry

Newman: "At no time does it occur to him that the gentleman . . . must be tolerant, open to new ides, devoted to the free play of the intellect, sympathetic, considerate of the feelings of others" (Season 52). If Pip were to look in the novel for someone truly representative of Newman's vision of the gentleman, he would discover relatively few true specimens, with the exception of his own roommate, Herbert Pocket, as well as Matthew, Herbert's father. Rather, Pip opts for another role model: namely, the epitome of his society's empty values, Bentley Drummle, the human insect—whom he alternately imitates and obsessively despises, but always envies. Therefore, initially in anticipation of—and subsequently in imitation of—this paradigm of society's virtues, Pip becomes one of the most vulgar snobs this side of Beau Brummell. He opts to have his new gentleman's suit sent to Pumblechook's because he worries that his family's friends—the Hubbles, Wopsle, etc.—might "make such a business of it – such a coarse and common business – that I couldn't bear myself" (145). Whereas once he had been perfectly happy in his small room, he now discovers that it has become too small for his grandiose ego: "When I got into my little room, I sat down and took a long look at it, as a mean little room that I should soon be parted from and raised above, for ever" (145). Like a deity, he looks down on the people with whom he previously cohabited in the small marsh village:

> As I passed the church, I felt (as I had felt during service in the morning) a sublime compassion for the poor creatures who were destined to go there, Sunday after Sunday, all their lives through, and to lie obscurely at last among the low green mounds. I promised myself that I would do something for them one of these days, and formed a plan in outline for

> bestowing a dinner of roast beef and plum-pudding, a pint of ale, and a gallon of condescension, upon everybody in the village. (147)

Pip looks down on Joe, as someone beneath him, regretting that Joe "did not get on a little more, when we had our lessons" because "when I came into my property and was able to do something for Joe, it would have been much more agreeable if he had been better qualified for a rise in station" (148). He accuses Biddy, one of his few true friends, of jealousy, suggesting: "You are envious, Biddy, and grudging. You are dissatisfied on account of my rise in fortune, and you can't help showing it" (149). Pip feels so superior to the world of his childhood, that he does not even allow Joe the common courtesy of a real goodbye, as he labors under the misapprehension that others might notice the apparent "discrepancy" between Joe and himself:

> I was to leave our village at five in the morning, carrying my little hand-portmanteau, and I had told Joe that I wished to walk away all alone. I am afraid – sore afraid – that this purpose originated in my sense of the contrast there would be between me and Joe, if we went to the coach together. (159)

In fact, Pip is so changed that he has come to see the fabulous blowhard, Pumblechook, as "a sensible good-hearted prime fellow" (155)—all because Pumblechook's income, though not his sophistication, makes him a more commensurate associate for the newly genteel Pip.

Nancy Shaumberger has correctly observed that Pip is certainly at odds with himself in time, though she wrongly suggests that he is "trapped in a classic 'double bind' between the past and the future" (32). Rather, it can more aptly be said that Pip lives

outside of both the past and future, as he seeks to dismiss the former, and acts without concern for the latter. Once in London, Pip contrives to erase any element of his previous life—true to "they-self" form, as we have seen, he tries to eliminate the past. As a member of society's upper crust, Pip has reason to worry, for the guiding principle of the novel's world is that "no varnish can hide the grain of the wood" (181)—in other words, one cannot pretend for long when one seeks to consort with society's elites. Since he is conscious that he does not row like a gentleman, but with the brute force of a blacksmith, he contracts a rowing tutor, although he is still reminded of his lowly origins:

> I was pretty good at most exercises in which country-boys are adepts, but as I was conscious of wanting elegance of style for the Thames – not to say for other waters – I at once engaged to place myself under the tuition of the winner of a prize-wherry who plied at our stairs. . . . This practical authority confused me very much, by saying I had the arm of a blacksmith. If he could have known how nearly the compliment lost him his pupil, I doubt he would have paid it. (195)

So as to become more fully a gentleman, Pip hires a boy to wait on him:

> I had got on so fast of late, that I had even started a boy in boots – top boots – in bondage and slavery to whom I might have been said to pass my days. For, after I had made the monster (out of the refuse of my washerwoman's family) and had clothed him with a blue coat, canary waistcoat, white cravat, creamy breeches, and the boots already mentioned, I had to find him a little to do and a great deal to eat; and with both of those horrible requirements he haunted my existence. (218)

Although Pip had hoped to solidify his faith in his false identity, this waiting boy—the "Avenger," as Pip comes to call him—only serves to remind Pip of the game that he plays:

> Having settled that I must go to the Blue Boar, my mind was much disturbed by indecision whether or no to take the Avenger. It was tempting to think of that expensive Mercenary publicly airing his boots in the archway of the Blue Boar's posting-yard; it was almost solemn to imagine him casually produced in the tailor's shop and confounding the disrespectful sense of Trabb's boy. On the other hand, Trabb's boy might worm himself into his intimacy and tell him things; or, reckless and desperate wretch as I knew he could be, might hoot him in the High-street. My patroness, too, might hear of him, and not approve. (225-6)

Ultimately, Pip decides to leave the Avenger—and his conscience—behind in London.

Very quickly, Pip subconsciously realizes that his genteel persona is nothing but a façade; he knows that the smallest element from his past might resurface and undermine his endeavor entirely. When Joe comes to visit him, Pip contrives to do all he can to hide all elements of his background from his London acquaintances; he looks forward to Joe's coming:

> Not with pleasure, though I was bound to him by so many ties; no; with considerable disturbance, some mortification, and a keen sense of incongruity. If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money. My greatest reassurance was, that he was coming to Barnard's Inn, not to Hammersmith, and consequently would not fall in

> Bentley Drummle's way. I had little objection to his being seen by Herbert or his father, for both of whom I had a respect; but I had the sharpest sensitiveness as to his being seen by Drummle, whom I held in contempt. So, throughout life, our worst weaknesses and meannesses are usually committed for the sake of the people whom we most despise. (218)

Of course, Pip is somewhat deluded: the real source of his embarrassment is that his lowly origins might be discovered and that he might be humiliated; that is, after all, the risk one runs when one endeavors to deceive the world for the sake of getting along.

Admittedly, Pip is not the only individual pressed to conform to the various "Theys" swirling about him; in fact, most characters are subject to the influence of one crowd or another. As Mordecai Marcus has noted: "Most of the characters in Great Expectations lie along the continuum from complete integration of character through various degrees and modes of self-alienation" (9). I would add that most seem to exist on the latter end of the spectrum, such as Wemmick, Estella, and Miss Havisham, all of whom have at best partial understanding of themselves, in large part due to their participation of the social world. Most of these characters fail ever to find their true independent selves or a place in which they truly belong, with the possible exception of Wemmick, who for most of the novel attempts to preserve the boundary between his home/private life and office/social life, as he confides to Pip: ". . . Walworth is one place, and this office is another. Much as the Aged is one person, and Mr. Jaggers is another. They must not be confounded together. My Walworth sentiments must be taken at Walworth; none but my official sentiments can be taken in this office" (Dickens, Great 291). Eventually, Wemmick is able to bring the two halves of his identity together

towards the end of the novel, when he publicly admits the existence of his private self to his employer. Unfortunately, most of the other deluded or "inauthentic" characters are not so lucky, as they are condemned to misery and death without realizing their true selves.

However, the novel is ultimately Pip's story, and it is his redemption that truly matters. As we will see, Pip gradually becomes conscious of the inadequacy of his existence. He comes to realize the utter pointlessness of his life and pursuits in London, for he has become a wanton consumer who produces nothing of any worth, as he complains to Herbert: ". . . I have been bred to no calling, and I am fit for nothing" (342). Pip's thoughts regarding his feelings for Estella indicate his anxiety, for Pip is conscious that she will never return his love, and that his love is not real love, but obsession or desire, and a reaction to her rejection of him. Thus, Pip admits that "The unqualified truth is, that when I loved Estella . . . I loved her simply because I found her irresistible. . . . I knew to my sorrow, often and often, if not always, that I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement" (232). But despite this understanding of his sentiments, Pip cannot reform his character, for "it was impossible for me to separate her, in the past or in the present, from the innermost life of my life" (236). Ultimately, Pip's insight allows him to realize that every part of his present life in London is a sham, and he becomes overwhelmed with the sense that his existence and identity are hollow and useless. Gradually, as Pip becomes "accustomed to my expectations," he starts "to notice their effect upon myself and those around me," before he finally realizes that "their influence on my own character, I disguised from my recognition as much as possible, but I knew very well that it was not all good" (272). This anxious recognition of his faults eventually places Pip in "a state of

chronic uneasiness" (272). Later, Pip notes of his behavior and wasteful spending that, "we spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us. We were always more or less miserable. . . . There was a gay fiction among us that we were constantly enjoying ourselves, and a skeleton truth that we never did" (274). In short, Pip comes to understand that nothing is as it seems in the upper reaches of society; money and social acceptance do not buy happiness or an identity, for they serve only to mask the absence of any genuine essence beneath them. As Pip attempts to reform himself, he finds that he must learn to accept his past self, of which he has become so ashamed. More importantly, he must have a face-to-face encounter with the prospects of his own death, first through his witnessing of the violent end of Miss Havisham, then through his nursing of the slowly dying Magwitch, and subsequently in his own nearly terminal illness. Only then does Pip begin to find a truly independent identity, before he ultimately becomes capable of performing some good deeds in his world.

VI. Our Mutual Friend's Apocalyptic World of Frozen Selves

Clearly, Dickens investigated various aspects of the struggle between individuals and the society in which they reside, yet he was never able to completely articulate the complexity of his growing understanding of it in a single work wherein he might encapsulate these ideas in a unified narrative. Little Dorrit and Great Expectations each represent an attempt to do just that, one being from a generalized panoramic depiction of society, the other being a more personal and reflective study of a single individual. However, it is Dickens' often overlooked last complete novel that most closely captures

this theme. Critics have often noted Dickens' negative depiction of society in Our Mutual Friend, frequently emphasizing that, unlike in his previous novels, Dickens does not provide any possibility of redemption or escape for his characters. For instance, Earle Davis has noted that the novel is "Dickens' bitterest attack on his world" and that his goal is to create "a picture of Victorian society struggling in Hell" (264-5). Barry Qualls has similarly observed that "it is Dickens' one novel which comes near Hardy's pessimism; its narrator sees utterly no hope that the 'civilized' life of modern society can ever be much more than bestial" (123). Most critics echo this assessment of the novel, and for good reason, as it is indeed Dickens' darkest novel and virtually devoid of the occasional light touches and moments that serve to break up the darkness of Bleak House, Little Dorrit, and Great Expectations. However, the suggestion that the novel is an example of futile cynicism, or that it provides no real indication that social or individual redemption is possible, indicates a misunderstanding of Dickens' intentions for the novel and his execution of those intentions. The error lies partly in the fact that many critics have tended to read the novel as a proto-Marxist condemnation of capitalism and English culture. On the surface, "monetary barbarism" (1024), as Edgar Johnson has labeled it, seems to be the central problem with which the novel's characters struggle, as many of them—including Bella Wilfer, the elder John Harmon, Silas Wegg, Rogue Riderhood, Fascination Fledgeby, the Lammles, and, seemingly, for a time, Mr. Boffin—nearly or completely succumb to the lure of money and the negative behavior associated with greed. Admittedly, many characters act as if they share Bella's assertion that: "I have money always in my thoughts and my desires; and the whole life I place before myself is money, money, money, and what money can make of life" (455). Indeed, it is easy to see

the world of Our Mutual Friend as the end result of Dombeyism's triumph, for everyone *believes* that money truly "can do anything" (Dombey 152), regardless of the truth—or lack thereof—behind that conviction.

However, upon closer inspection, money is not the root of the novel's evil, nor is the value mistakenly placed upon it by society, as some critics have suggested.[21] This is primarily obvious in the fact that many of the novel's characters—even the negative ones—do not share the compulsion to accumulate wealth or property; rather, many of them, such as Headstone, Charley Hexam, and the Veneerings, seem more intent on achieving recognition by society, "rising" to superior positions by conforming to society's values. Significantly, these characters do not seek to rise because a better position will allow them to make more money or buy more goods; rather, they share the belief that society's recognition will convey upon them a previously lacking sense of self. In short, they believe that they do not exist *at all*, if they cannot rise out of the seemingly invisible lower and middle classes. Moreover, many of the characters who *seem* to be wholly set on the pursuit of wealth are actually acting in response to relatively different impulses. For example, Wegg and the Lammles appear to be driven by the lust for gold, but their true motivations lie in the thirst for revenge: the former seeks to avenge himself upon "him that shall be nameless" (296), Boffin, in whose favor Wegg wrongly believes he has been passed over, while the Lammles seek retribution from society for conspiring in their unprofitable alliance. Thus, with the lone exception of Rogue Riderhood, who seems interested in nothing more than the accumulation of money by any means possible,

[21] F.S. Schwarzbach, Dickens and the City, 200-1; Arnold Kettle, "Our Mutual Friend," Dickens and the Twentieth Century, 216.

none of the novel's characters are perverted or led astray by the temptation of money and property *alone*.

If we examine the philosophy of Podsnappery, the ethos of the novel's dominant class and therefore the creed and code by which the novel's world is run, we can see that the problems and abuses of that world are not caused by the pursuit of capital, but rather by a system of arbitrary divisions and regulations, which encourages insularity and conformity while discouraging any sense of individuality or ethical responsibility. Undoubtedly, money and property have an important place in Podsnappery, but only as a means of distinguishing between those who belong at the top and those who do not. It is easy to misinterpret the oft-quoted passage on "Shares" as the expression of bourgeois cupidity, as it seems to suggest that Podsnappery is solely a dogma of accumulation; however, upon closer inspection, we can see that Dickens portrays "Shares" in a much more complicated fashion as the centerpiece of a quasi-religion with no foundation, which has somehow managed to usurp the place of traditional values and replace them with a meaningless shibboleth by which divisions among people may be maintained. As the narrator explains:

> As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have Shares. Have Shares enough to be on Boards of Direction in capital letters, oscillate on mysterious business between London and Paris, and be great. Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares. What

> are his tastes? Shares. Has he any principles? Shares. . . . Sufficient answer to all; Shares. (118)

Significantly, in this passage, Dickens does not really comment on capitalism at all, for "Shares" is nothing more than a hollow slogan, repeated interminably and in response to every question. "Shares" is not a real goal to be pursued or a false idol to be worshipped: it is nothing but a sort of password to gain entry into a select club. Most importantly, in this passage, "Shares" do not have any meaning behind them; they are not representative of anything, and they cannot be exchanged for something else: characters either have them, or they do not. In this regard, "Shares" is a slogan of the "They," just as we have seen in the cases of "How not to do it" and "Prunes and Prism" in Little Dorrit.

What is reprehensible about the upper classes' treatment of "Shares" and the like is their conformity to a vapidly insular way of living and thinking about themselves, and not simply a brutal hunger for wealth. As in previous novels, acceptance into the novel's elites requires an acceptance of the upper classes' limited perception of existence and individuality, whereby every character must accept the narrowly defined identity of his or her place in society, an identity which, like "Shares," has nothing behind it. Thus, the world of the upper classes is populated by individuals whose manufactured selves have no depth or significance; their existence is bereft of any essence, as they are only what they possess: there is nothing behind the façade. For instance, we see how the Veneerings might purchase a "bran-new," obviously false and artificial identity that smells "a little too much of the workshop and . . . a trifle stickey" (17), or how Mrs. Lammle ceases to be a person and becomes a sort of living mannequin, appraised by Lady Tippins, as "thirty shillings a yard, veil fifteen pound, pocket-handkerchief a present" (123), or how

Twemlow is nothing more than the "innocent piece of dinner-furniture" (17) in the Veneerings' stately home. Each member of high society becomes nothing more than a "pokey unknown" (123), a socialite hanger-on with no real identity, waiting to listen to the "Voice of Society," whose identity remains a mystery. The "disguise" motif that runs throughout the novel likewise suggests the emptiness of a conformist existence, as personal identity within this society is so meaningless that it can be exchanged or discarded as easily as a piece of clothing.

In a seeming paradox, this absence of genuine identity is accompanied by a sinister vein of self-centeredness, whereby the members of the elite conceive of nothing beyond their limited existence. This narrow-minded understanding of existence is most clearly represented by its greatest advocate, Mr. Podsnap, who believes "that whatever he put behind him he put out of existence" (131). With this state of mind, one cannot see anything but oneself, one's false self—or what one plans to do with one's immediate future—and beyond that there is "nothing else To Be—anywhere" (132). For Podsnap, everyone is exactly like him, following his strange schedule and seeing only from his point of view ("the world got up at eight, shaved at a quarter-past, breakfasted at nine, went to the city at ten" (131-2)), and, if they cannot conform to his limitations, "they were swept away" (131). It is easy to see Podsnap as a grotesque, an overblown caricature of the typical jingoist, but his disease is common among the members of the upper class, as they cannot understand and envision anything that does not fit immediately into their plans or desires for themselves. Thus, as G.W. Kennedy has noticed, we can see how the members of high society mistake and pervert the names of others (170), as when they casually dismiss Harmon/Rokesmith first as "the man from

Somewhere . . . [the] man from Nowhere . . . [the] man from Tumwhere" (Dickens 23) and later as "an individual . . . whose name, I think, is Chokesmith—but it doesn't in the least matter—say Artichoke" (405). Moreover, they cannot be troubled with the fact that several human beings have seemingly met their demises and slipped off the face of the earth, since they have decided that "the great subject of the happiness of Mr. and Mrs. Lammle must not be allowed to vanish with the other vanishments—with the vanishing of the murderer, the vanishing of Julius Handford, the vanishing of Lizzie Hexam" (406). Finally, these elites cannot understand how anyone might be motivated by anything outside of their collective game of accumulating Shares and heavily plated objects, as is evident from the frantic confusion they express upon hearing of Wrayburn's cross-class marriage to Lizzie Hexam: "madness and moonshine . . . a man may do anything lawful, for money. But for no money!—Bosh!" (796). In short, money is not the problem here; rather, the world of Our Mutual Friend is dominated from the outset by a powerful "They," who have managed to convince virtually every member of society to take up a limited role and self-conception, and to accept the empty values of this vapid collective identity.

Importantly, this limited and empty conception of existence and individuality trickles down to the very lowest members of the novel's society, and is therefore directly responsible for the fact that most characters lack an authentic understanding of their existence, which has led to the absence of any real sense of personal responsibility, and which in turn has led to all of the concomitant social problems we find in the novel's world. As J. Hillis Miller has suggested: "all of the characters are . . . aware that they have been thrown willy-nilly into a particular place in the world, and have found

themselves already committed rather than able to commit themselves freely" (World 282). At the beginning of the novel, virtually every character has subconsciously accepted the upper classes' insular interpretation of individual and social existence; they are ensconced in their places in society, and they cannot see any possibilities beyond that. However, Miller is incorrect in his interpretation of the characters' self-awareness, as most of them seem blindly to accept the state of the world and their places within it, without questioning the artificiality of their socially constructed roles and restrictions. The characters do not initially seek to transcend existence under the reign of Podsnappery, and all of their actions are either predetermined by what an individual in a particular station is "supposed to do" or limited by the vain possibility that an individual might "rise" in society and be accepted into the exclusive association of wealthy elites. G.W. Kennedy asserts that the central crux of the novel is the struggle between individual beings and J. Hillis Miller's concept of a "transindividual mind" that "has become an amoral and inhuman force" and that most of the characters choose either "to exploit the greed and selfishness of the social environment" or "passively accept exploitation" (Kennedy 165-6); similarly, Masao Miyoshi has suggested that the characters in the novel face a "crisis of identity by which every character exhibits some degree of duality" (6) and ultimately must choose between greed or benevolence. There is an element of truth in both of these contentions, as most of the characters seem to be torn between these two impulses, though the struggle around which the novel is centered is certainly more abstract than that. This conflict is manifested as a clash between greed and benevolence and between production and consumption, but it is really the choice between staunch individualism and immersion in a morally flat group mentality, between authentic moral

existence and the inauthentic performance of a role for others. Ultimately, the novel's characters must choose whether to continue their lives under the "they-self" misperception into which they have fallen, or to see past the façade, realize the truth of their existence, and attempt to transcend their initial circumstances so as to realize their potential being and engage in truly moral action.

Bella Wilfer's story provides one of the more ostensible examples of the means by which individuals are bound to a particular limited identity and existence and the concomitant negative effects that prescribed self-comprehension has on the individual's behavior. From her first introduction into the narrative, Bella's existence is completely defined by her place in society—indeed, she does not seem initially to have any private existence or character traits that might undermine the artifice of her socially constructed identity. Bella's present and future condition is immediately dictated by her place in society, for she has been doubly marked for entrance into the exclusive club of high society: she is biologically favored in that she is quite pretty by society's standards—beauty always being a valuable commodity, though less so than money or lineage—while she is likewise promoted legalistically in that she has been willed to a potentially rich man as an entailment on a large fortune. Essentially, Bella's existence is quite similar to that of the Veneerings; she is "the doll in the doll's house" (663), an object of much appreciated beauty as well as a much-sought commodity. At first, Bella does not have an interior life or character; she exists only on the surface, and thus she is commoditized and frozen into a hollow, predetermined self. Her behavior is wholly reflective of this fact, as she simply plays her role in society, never questioning its reality or shallowness. "I am one of the most unfortunate girls who ever lived," she gripes to her family, when she

learns of her missed opportunity for wealth, "I hate to be poor, and we are degradingly poor, offensively poor, miserably poor, beastly poor" (44-5). She blames her living conditions and upbringing for her voraciousness, assuming that she is owed something because of her tenuous legal connection to the vast Harmon fortune and that it is only natural to be greedy when one has lived in poverty for so long:

> I, for one, want [property] more than another . . . and I grudge this money going to the Monster that swallows up so much, when we all want—Everything. And if you say . . . 'that's neither reasonable nor honest, Bella,' then I answer, 'Maybe not pa—very likely—but it's one of the consequences of being poor, and of thoroughly hating and detesting to be poor, and that's my case.' (50)

Upon her quasi-adoption by the Boffins and subsequent rise in society, Bella's reflection of the very worst attributes of high society and Podsnappery only intensifies. Bella embraces the exterior trappings of wealth and privilege, dressing in "as pretty colours as she could muster" and passively reading novels that are "more about money than anything else" (204). Bella accepts the artificial divisions in society without question, expressing indignation that the disguised Rokesmith should have any interest in her: "A little too much, I think . . . to have Pa's lodger laying claim to me, and keeping eligible people off! A little too much, indeed, to have the opportunities opened to me by Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, appropriated by a mere Secretary and Pa's lodger" (305). In a scene reminiscent of the instance upon which Pip returns to the humble forge of his youth in Great Expectations, Bella's attitude towards her background and things associated with her less-fortunate childhood becomes dismissive and derogatory, as upon her return to

her old home she realizes that "the family room looked very small and mean, and the downward staircase by which it was attained looked very narrow and very crooked" and "the little house and all its arrangements were a poor contrast to the eminently aristocratic dwelling" (308) of the Boffins to which she has moved. Moreover, just as in Pip's case, Bella's emotions—notably, love—become inextricably bound to the "They's" concentration on money and profit, as she admits to her father: "I have made up my mind that I must have money . . . I feel that I can't beg it, borrow it, or steal it; and so I have resolved that I must marry it . . . in consequence of which, I am always looking for money to captivate" (317). Essentially, Bella initially seems to be yet another Veneering and Podsnap—a hollow shell of a human being who simply repeats the meaningless slogans of a decrepit society and limits her conception of herself to her role in society. Most significantly, she *does not* voice these reprehensible thoughts *because of* any real feelings of desire for money or property, which is obvious from the fact that she does not dream about what she might do with that money; rather, her "money-hungry" opinions seem more evocative of an *actress* playing a miser, which is especially apparent when one compares her "performance" to that of Boffin. In short, Bella's greed never really has the tinge of reality behind it, as it seems to be more performative than anything else: she speaks and acts in such a way because that is what a woman in her position is *expected* to do.

However, Bella has a fairly unique character trait that allows her eventually to reject and transcend her position in society and her "they-self" conception of her existence. Although Bella initially assumes all of the negative elements of the upper-class "They," she starts to analyze and question her character and what she has become, largely

because her acceptance into the world of finery has led to a demystification of the upper class way of life.[22] "That's the terrible part of it," Bella tells her hapless father, "When I was at home, and only knew what it was to be poor, I grumbled but didn't so much mind. When I was at home expecting to be rich, I thought vaguely of all the great things I would do. But when I had been disappointed of my splendid fortune, and came to see . . . what it could really do, then I became the mercenary little wretch I am" (317). Slowly, Bella comes to understand that she is "always avariciously scheming" (317), and, aware of the course she is on—and despite her questioning of this path—she knows her future self is limited by the need to fall endlessly further into the "they-self" existence. Thus, she develops an existential ennui, as she is conscious of her flawed existence—which is an important first step toward redemption—but she cannot as yet see the possibility of breaking free from it. Like the commonly employed decadent hero/anti-hero of the Dickensian bildungsroman, who is tortured by the sense of his mistaken life and past choices but is also unwilling to do anything to redeem himself, Bella laments her condition endlessly, practically to anyone who will listen, but takes no real action at first, for, although she can see past the empty quality of her being, she still cannot peer through the façade of society's rules and requirements, and therefore she sees no opportunity for redemption. "You had better be prepared in time," she warns her father, "I shall not be able to keep my greediness for money out of my eyes long, and when you see it there

[22] The fact that this occurs well before Boffin and Harmon's assessment and reformation of her character—which Barbara Hardy has termed the "testing and revealing of Bella's worth for Harmon's benefit" (76) and which countless other critics have read simply as another instance of Dickens' misogyny—indicates that this is an act without exterior stimuli, and Bella is at least as strong a character as Pip. Though Bella is helped along by the Boffin plot/ruse, *she* initiates this self-questioning and ultimately makes her own decision, having been exposed to the horrific void of "they-self" existence.

you'll be sorry" (453).[23] Despite her growing fear and insightful self-analysis, Bella can only bemoan her destiny and condemn society as a whole:

> Think how terrible the fascination of money is! I see this, and hate this, and dread this, and don't know but that money might make a much worse change in me. And yet I have money always in my thoughts and my desires; and the whole life I place before myself is money, money, money, and what money can make of life! (455)

Furthermore, in a clear echo of Great Expectations' Estella, Bella bewails the fact that she might never find happiness: "I don't expect to be pleased . . . I am convinced I have no heart, as people call it . . . and so . . . as to seeking to please myself, I don't" (465).

Eventually, Bella is able to disregard the "they-self" limitations of her environment and create a life that transcends the artificial boundaries about which she had previously felt hopeless. The first indication of this transformation in her outlook can be found in her insistence on cooking for her family, an act which her mother recognizes as "conduct utterly incompatible with the equipage in which [she] arrived" (447). From a certain perspective, Bella's mother is absolutely right, as cooking is an act of servitude beneath a woman of Bella's favored position and wholly inconsistent with what Mrs. Wilfer had previously known of her daughter's character. Therefore, although Bella is not completely successful in her first culinary attempt—the meal being largely inedible—her intentions and actions signify a gradual change in her character, whereby she ceases to

[23] For example, this figure can be seen in John Steerforth, David Copperfield, Richard Carstone, Arthur Clennam, Sydney Carton, Eugene Wrayburn, and Pip. This character type becomes the central figure in works by other authors, such as Camus' absurd man or Sartre, Dostoevsky, and Kafka's protagonists: all are conscious of the iniquities and pointlessness of life, all are dissatisfied by their positions in the present time, and all are incapable—always by choice—of doing anything to change it, thus pushing them into an endless circle of rage, resentment, or rebellion. Typically, this character is masculine, yet Dickens provides several instances of the "absurd woman," such as Eliza Bounderby, Estella, Miss Wade, and Bella; however, only the last is truly sympathetic and achieves redemption.

look upon herself as a consumer and begins to cultivate an identity as someone who might assist others. Moreover, the act of cooking is a clear indication that Bella is beginning to reject her preconceived conception of the social limitations placed on individuals, whereby certain actions—as well as the very notion of service to others, voluntary, paid, or otherwise—are restricted to individuals within certain classes. Thus, Bella single-handedly seems to break down the rigid boundaries that govern the novel's society. Indeed, she is not the doll in the doll's house that we initially believe her to be; she is, according to Lizzie Hexam's quasi-prophetic appraisal, the possessor of "a heart well worth winning . . . a heart that once won, goes through fire and water for the winner, and never changes, and is never daunted" (520). Bella continues to defy the regulations of society bravely, marrying Rokesmith, whom everyone believes to be much lower than her in society—and therefore a taboo companion—and rejecting the vast Harmon wealth, both of which, at that point, are unprecedented choices in the novel's world.

Significantly, once Bella has freed herself of the insular view of the novel's "They," she becomes one of the few voices of morality in the novel. In so doing, Bella casts the temporary and material aspects of life aside, dreaming not about fortunes or property, but the reward of positive self-worth, the vision of being "so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house" (663), which can only be found in making oneself useful to others. Thus, when the truth of her inheritance of the Harmon property via her marriage to Rokesmith is disclosed to her, she becomes the incarnation of Dickens' true feelings regarding wealth and worldly success. Indeed, for Dickens, money is not bad in itself, nor is power, but he insists that the paramount concern of one in possession of them should be how best to employ them in service to others.

Bella is not the only character who must learn to see beyond the ephemeral materialistic values that have infected her society, yet she is one of the few who successfully manage to reject the limited interpretation of existence without having to consider the possibility of non-existence. Horrified by the empty sadism and self-centeredness of her society's "They," Bella rejects temporary material values and embraces their logical extreme, the transcendent and eternal values of self-sacrifice and love for others. Other characters are not so fortunate, such as Silas Wegg, Bradley Headstone, Fascination Fledgeby, and the Lammles. These characters define themselves so closely with existence in society that they can see no "selves" besides their "they-selves," and thus no change or transcendence is possible for them.

Silas Wegg presents an interesting example of these frozen characters, for he is so closely connected to the restrictions and values of society that he invents a proper and exclusive place for himself in society, despite the fact that he has existed exclusively among society's lowest classes until the onset of the narrative. Wegg's reluctance to change and his attachment to the status quo are immediately apparent from his first description:

> Wegg was a knotty man, and a close-grained, with a face carved out of very hard material, that had just as much play of expression as a watchman's rattle . . . sooth to say, he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally, and rather suggested to the fanciful observer, that he might be expected . . . to be completely set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months. (54)

Moreover, early in the novel, we know that Wegg is incapable of seeing beyond the immediate, as screwing up his eyes "is something superfluous in him, for Nature has already screwed both pretty tight" (82). Wegg is so connected to society and materialism that he imagines a world – and his place in that world – which is actually the manifestation of his private desires to rise within that world. Wegg's imagined connection to the house in front of which he sells his wares is the foundation of this particular fantasy. Thus, he not only invents a family to live in "Our House" (53), and a position for himself in that household, but he likewise raises himself into another stratum of society, beyond his common origins as a mere costermonger, establishing himself in the highest position that someone of his class might attain, as an upper servant in a respectable house. On the surface this doesn't appear to be much different than what the Lammles do; however, the crucial difference between them and Wegg is that the Lammles know they play a role, whereas Wegg is wholly convinced of his fantasy's reality. Wegg's cupidity is so powerful that it infects his mind with this delusion, and his desperate hold on this illusion inspires in him a willingness to do whatever he must to protect his fictional place in society. Wegg will go to any lengths to preserve his "situation", including almost murdering Boffin if not for the intervention of Mr. Venus. Wegg's greed creates a paranoid delusion that he has some rightful claim to a certain place in society, and upon being confronted with evidence to the contrary, he develops an angry belief that he has "been passed over" (302) in favor of Rokesmith, and that his fictional world has somehow been torn asunder, while his fictional employers have "all been offered up sacrifices to the minion of fortune and worm of the hour" (303), Boffin. Wegg even feels righteous indignation regarding the rectification of the "misdeed" done

to him, as he informs Mr. Venus: "It ain't that I object to being passed over for a stranger, though I regard the stranger as a more than doubtful customer. It ain't for the sake of making money, though money is ever welcome. It ain't for myself, though I am not so haughty as to be above doing myself a good turn. It's for the cause of right" (299). Finally, Wegg develops a self-pitying sense whereby he begins to believe that he is a helpless and abused child: "Mr. Wegg argued, if an orphan were wanted, was he not an orphan himself . . . why go beating about Brentford bushes, seeking orphans forsooth who had established no claims upon you and made no sacrifices for you, when here was an orphan ready to your hand who had given up in your cause, Miss Elizabeth, Master George, Aunt Jane, and Uncle Parker" (328). Clearly, Wegg's attachment to the material world goes much further than in the cases of most other characters, as he invents a world in which to live and then experiences the whole range of defensive emotions in response to being disabused of that illusion, all because Wegg is so desperate to succeed, rise, and be accepted in *any* society that is built on the physical and temporary.

Moreover, Wegg's self-concern is so controlling that it has an impact on his very constitution. Wegg's missing leg is clearly representative of the state of his soul, as his physical incompletion mirrors the irreparable lack that he feels inside: Wegg is always missing something and searching for that missing piece. Wegg's attempt to repurchase his displaced limb from Mr. Venus not only shows his incomplete nature, but it also reveals a more concrete connection between Wegg's character and his limited view of existence. Wegg is so attached to his possessions—regardless of whether they are pieces of property or body parts—that he will do anything to hold onto them. He is wholly controlled by the preoccupation of recovering those things that have been "wrongfully"

removed from his possession. He continuously gathers all of his possessions and hoards them, acting in accord with his fanciful appraisal of his place in the world. "I have a prospect of getting on in life and elevating myself by my own independent exertions," he informs Venus, "and I shouldn't like – I tell you openly I should *not* like – under such circumstances, to be what I may call dispersed, a part of me here, and a part of me there, but should wish to collect myself like a genteel person" (88). Essentially, Wegg's existence is inextricably bound to his material presence: he defines himself only according to a place in society and what power he might have because of that position, and, because he is not in a strong enough position in society, he invents a fantasy world wherein he has been more successful. Furthermore, since Wegg is incapable of seeing beyond the limits of material existence, and incapable of experiencing any emotions beyond greed or resentment, he cannot be redeemed.

Like Wegg, Bradley Headstone is inexorably connected to his "they-self" and the rights, privileges, and possessions he feels are due to him because of his conformance to society's values and protocols. Headstone at first seems to be a positive character, as he has risen from the gutter, educated himself, and created a decent life for himself. However, Headstone becomes too absorbed in his carefully built identity: it is as if "Headstone is trying desperately to escape being Nobody" (Horne 299).[24] Headstone is enamored with his achievements, and he wants universal respect for them. He does not want to fall back into the lower class, and he does not even really desire to rise in society: he wants to stay exactly where he is and preserve his position to the last. What bothers Headstone most is being mistaken for anything less than his position, as the narrator

[24] Interestingly, Dickens seems to have always intended Headstone as a negative and self-centered character, as Joel Brattin has pointed out that Dickens' number plans consistently refer to Headstone's "selfishness" (147) in Brattin's article, "Dickens' Creation of Bradley Headstone."

points out: “regarding that origin of his, he was proud, moody, and sullen, desiring it to be forgotten” (218). Headstone’s obsession with his rise from poverty creates a paranoid delusion by which he believes others know of his past and seek to exploit it; yet, as is the case with most paranoia, his fears are founded on little truth, for, as Wrayburn laughingly suggests, Headstone is “a curious monomaniac” who “seems to believe that everybody was acquainted with his mother” (291).

Wrayburn’s exploitation of this paranoia further exhibits how dearly Headstone prizes his identity. Wrayburn understands that Headstone is so obsessed with being worthy of society’s attention that he seeks to “goad the schoolmaster to madness” by passing him in the street “unaware of his existence” (533). Headstone is so concerned with being noticed that he is driven wild by Wrayburn’s constant suggestion of his non-existence. Moreover, in their confrontations over Lizzie Hexam, Wrayburn’s habit of addressing Headstone as “Schoolmaster” further insults Headstone’s overblown sense of himself in that it denies him a proper name, as due any respectable male. More viciously, it suggests that his very occupation, that thing by which he defines himself and in which he takes great pride, is shameful and beneath the status of a gentleman. Headstone’s extreme reaction to Wrayburn’s scorn reveals his attraction to the very idea of his “self”; he does not pride himself in possessions and money, but rather, in his socially-derived identity. Headstone’s existence in society is his most prized possession, and his subsequent murderous behavior indicates the danger that Dickens suggests might arise from too strongly identifying oneself according to one’s place in the world.

Ironically, Dickens makes it quite clear that the socially constructed identity that Headstone defends so ardently has no factual basis. Headstone does not understand that

his "they-self" is an imaginary conception of his existence, for Headstone is clearly not the educated worldly-wise individual whom he believes himself to be, although only he and his admirers, namely Charley Hexam and Miss Peecher, cannot see this obvious truth. This inconsistency is apparent from virtually every detail regarding his appearance, as he always wears "his decent black coat and waistcoat, and decent white shirt, and decent formal black tie" and "looked a thoroughly decent young man of six-and-twenty," yet nonetheless "there was a certain stiffness in his manner of wearing this, as if there were a want of adaptation between him and it" (218). Notably, when he disguises himself in the filthy working clothing evocative of Rogue Riderhood's common dress, the narrator notes: "whereas, in his own schoolmaster clothes, he usually looked as if they were the clothes of some other man, he now looked, in the clothes of some other man or men, as if they were his own" (619). Essentially, Headstone grasps desperately at a personal sense of decency, but that is not representative of his essence. Dickens' judgment is quite clear: in a sentiment clearly reminiscent of his treatment of Compeyson and Merdle, Bradley Headstone never was anything like a gentleman, despite his pretensions. Moreover, his supposed erudition is likewise a fiction, although that fact is also unknown to him, for he does not have a natural intelligence, but mere "mechanical stowage" and his face betrays "a naturally slow or inattentive intellect that had toiled hard to get what it had won, and that had to hold it now that it was gotten" (218).

Thus, the most prominent detail that Dickens employs in his depiction of Headstone is the fact that his natural self is in a constant conflict with his artificial identity, for "suppression of so much to make room for so much, had given him a constrained manner, over and above" (218). Beneath the carefully maintained veneer of

respectability, “there was enough of what was animal, and of what was fiery . . . still visible in him” (218), a raging self at war with an artificial gentlemanly identity. Headstone’s natural animalistic character eventually triumphs over his polished and false identity, first during his proposal to Lizzie, when “the wild energy of the man, now quite let loose, was absolutely terrible” (389), and he grinds a stone to powder in his hands, “bringing his clenched hand down upon the stone with a force that laid the knuckles raw and bleeding” (390), and later during his vicious assault on Wrayburn. Towards the novel’s conclusion, the conflict between Headstone’s natural and contrived selves results in an inevitable explosion. Headstone’s external Jekyll succumbs to his internally raging Hyde, as he recognizes that he cannot suppress the nocturnal murderous character that he has developed:

> The state of the man was murderous, and he knew it . . . he irritated it, with a kind of perverse pleasure akin to that which a sick man sometimes has in irritating a wound upon his body. Tied up all day with his disciplined show upon him, subdued to the performance of his routine of educational tricks . . . he broke loose at night like an ill-tamed wild animal. Under his daily restraint, it was his compensation . . . to give a glance towards his state at night, and to the freedom of its being indulged. (535)

Indeed, Headstone is clearly at the mercy of his animalistic self when he attempts to murder Wrayburn, as “he knew as well what act would follow” (536) upon his next encounter with the dandy lawyer, and even after the attempted murder, he feels only regret—and not guilt—for his action because “the instrument might have been better, the spot and the hour better chosen” and “if it could be done again, it must not be so done”

(691). However, Dickens clearly does not suggest that Headstone was always destined to be a murderer, nor does he merely voice a broad condemnation of society by attempting to exonerate Bradley from responsibility for his actions and to place all blame on the effects of a class system's limitations on individuals. Rather, Dickens clearly is focused on highlighting the dangers of believing in society's values too deeply.

In accordance with society's emphasis on material existence, Headstone also resents being denied anything he believes to be rightfully his. Though we do not see him salivating over money and material goods like his peg-legged counterpart, Headstone exhibits a desire to acquire a wife who he feels should be proud of her connection to him. That Lizzie rejects him in favor of Wrayburn, his nemesis, is not as devastating to him as that she rejected him *in the first place*. Headstone feels that Lizzie, who is beneath him in society as the daughter of a river rat, should be more than happy with his proposal. In Headstone's mind, he is a better husband than Lizzie deserves. His violent reaction to her lack of interest in him is not indicative of his overwhelming desire to possess her or his deep hatred of Wrayburn, but an incredibly strong attachment to his place in society. "It seems egotistical to begin by saying so much about myself," (387) he begins his proposal to Lizzie, and we are meant to fully understand that the proposal is not about love, or lust, but the exhibition of the power that his class position supposedly gives him. The rest of his appeal to Lizzie follows in this same egotistical vein: "I ask you to believe that there are many people who think well of me; that there are some people who highly esteem me; that I have in my way won a station which is considered worth winning" (388). It is not a confession of love, nor a praise of her beauty or goodness, but actually an argument *to himself* that validates his pride. As a result, Lizzie's rejection, in effect,

lowers him back into her class: it displays society's utter disregard for his achievements. Thus, Headstone is not driven wild by his desire for Lizzie; his descent into violence springs from his spurned desire for public approval. His rejection by the lower classes, as represented by Lizzie, is the last push required for him to become a murderer, as he essentially feels that he has done nothing with his life if he is still to be thrown aside by an impoverished girl.

As Koichi Miyazaki has correctly observed, at Riderhood's unmasking of Headstone towards the end of the novel, Headstone "has forsaken his pretension of respectability" (229) for his real self; however, it is a bit more complicated than that. As Riderhood confronts Headstone in his classroom, Riderhood toys with Headstone through cryptic allusions to the facts of the murder and their connection to Headstone's name, which is written on the blackboard. When it is quite clear that Headstone has been found out, he "slowly withdrawing his eyes, turned his face to the black board and slowly wiped his name out" (774). In this act, Headstone clearly indicates that he has finally come to understand the truth of his existence. He does not erase the name simply as a gesture towards forsaking a pretension; rather, he clearly has come to understand that the name—in fact, the very idea or identity of Bradley Headstone—is nothing more than a lie. All of his restraint and suppression, all of his learning and changes in dress, and all of his belief in the system and how to succeed within it are ultimately shown to be meaningless. He can never be a gentleman; more specifically, he can never be the Bradley Headstone he thought he might be. Only at the end, is Bradley disabused of his misplaced faith in the "They"; only when he cannot keep up the masquerade any longer, does Headstone finally

see that his world never really existed, that he has prided himself on nothing, and that he has committed the most extreme atrocities to protect an empty falsehood.

As Dickens suggests, existing solely according to the values and restrictions of society and defining oneself only according to one's place in society is not really living at all, but an unproductive and empty living death. The motif of "declining and falling" that appears in the novel's first half is an early suggestion of this notion. Dickens clearly points out that a civilization or society—any society, at any time, including the Roman, "Rooshan," British, and perhaps American empires—is doomed to moral and physical decay and collapse. All things must pass, and every powerful civilization inevitably is drawn to a materialistic group consciousness. Furthermore, the wasteland of the novel is not simply Dickens' negative view of the Victorian world, as so many critics have suggested, nor is it simply intended to be the apocalyptic vision of capitalism's future; rather, it is the byproduct of a civilization whose members have almost unanimously forsaken individuality for the emptiness of existence according to society's dictates. The world exhibits the symptoms of this static existence, whereby its residents have become scavengers of detritus, and the world's foundation seems to have decayed to the point of collapse. Hence, the novel's most common details are of consumption and destruction, for the world is a place like "a tract of suburban Sahara, where tiles and bricks were burnt, bones were boiled, carpets were beat, rubbish was shot, dogs were fought, and dust was heaped by contractors" (42). It is a world of garbage that "hangs on every bush, flutters in every tree, is caught flying by electric wires, haunts every enclosure, drinks at every pump, cowers at every grating, shudders upon every plot of grass, seeks rest in vain behind the legions of iron rails" (147). In this dead world, the refuse covers everyone, and

everyone seems threatened with the possibility of joining this great heap of offal as well, as we hear that the mass of "accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river" (30). Many dwellings and gathering places in the novel—often employed by Dickens as exterior indications of characters' interior lives, as we will see more specifically in Chapter 4—share the communal state of decay, such as the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters tavern, which "had long settled into a state of hale infirmity" and whose "whole constitution . . . had not a straight floor, and hardly a straight line" (67), or as in the environment of Headstone's school, which is:

> like a toy neighbourhood taken in blocks out of a box by a child of particularly incoherent mind . . . here, one side of a new street; there, a large solitary public-house facing nowhere; here another unfinished street already in ruins; there, a church; here, an immense new warehouse; there, a dilapidated old country villa. . . . as if the child had given the table a kick, and gone to sleep. (219)

Indeed, this world is an exhausted world, teetering on the edge of self-implosion, "more like the prostration of a spent giant than the repose of one who was renewing his strength" (589). The oft-cited symbol of the mounds further amplifies this point, as they are undoubtedly what Edgar Johnson has described as "an all-embracing metaphor of mistaken endeavors directed to the piling up of rubbish, mounds marking the dust and ashes of buried aspiration" (1030-1). The characters not only live in a dead and static world, but they celebrate the after-elements of death—the "coal-dust, vegetable dust, bone-dust, crockery dust, rough dust, and sifted dust" (24)—in the refuse remaining from

dead individuals, dead lives, dead households, and dead possessions, as they circle around the filth like "crawling, creeping, fluttering, and buzzing creatures" (208). In short, the material things in life do not promise transcendence or happiness because material existence can only end with one's eventual passing. Therefore, as Dickens seems to emphasize, this world's residents are not really living, but dying with every passing moment, as they miss out on the true joys to be found in life and continue to indulge in nothing more than the temporary and material aspects of life.

VII. The Way Out: The Appearance of Anxiety

Essentially, the scathing portrayals of these villainous characters and dying worlds display Dickens' observations of the dangers of becoming too possessed with one's social identity, for it is these characters' preoccupation with this socially-derived identity that leads to the beliefs that one is defined solely by what one has acquired and that others can be owned or thrown away like common goods. All of the problems in society originate in this misperception of existence and individuality that pervades each novel's world. Abuse, exploitation, self-centeredness, and greed all arise from the skewed priorities that develop out of this mistaken point of view, and they in turn lead to the creation of larger social institutions that perpetuate and defend these flawed values.

However, Dickens is not a gloomy doomsayer, woefully proclaiming how terrible the world is, without any productive solutions for its cure, as some critics have tended to see him. Rather, in each novel, we find that the central characters slowly awaken to the realities of their worlds and come to see the false quality of their existence. They experience serious trepidation as to the quality of their existence and their purposes in the

world. They experience a profound sense of emptiness, or lacking, or unhappiness, with no apparent cause or origin for that except that they have no real sense of themselves. Many of the protagonists also share a floating and uncertain sense of guilt, although they do not have a specific act for which they should feel guilty. In many ways, they experience what existentialism has described as "anxiety." The experience of "anxiety" can readily seen in virtually every later novel, particularly in the cases of Mr. Dombey, Richard Carstone, David Copperfield, Arthur Clennam, Sidney Carton, Pip, and Eugene Wrayburn.

For most of the existential writers we have discussed, guilt and anxiety are related concepts that are central to their works. Guilt and anxiety seem to be inherent elements of human existence, because, as Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre suggest, human existence is always incomplete, as it continuously shifts from one possibility to another in the freedom of being—human existence is always defined as much by what it is not as by what it is. John Macquarrie has summarized the importance of the concept of "anxiety" in existentialism: "To exist is to project oneself into the future. But there is always a lack or disproportion between the self as projected and the self where it actually stands. . . . The gap is between existence and essence, or between facticity and possibility, or between the self one is and the self that is projected" (202-203). Thus, a human experiences "alienation from his own deepest being" (Macquarrie 204).

When dealing with the relationship between anxiety and human existence, one must first look to Kierkegaard, for he is the recognized philosophic authority on the concept of anxiety. For Kierkegaard, "Man is a synthesis of the psychical and the physical . . . united in a third. This third is spirit" (Concept 43). Unfortunately, man is

incomplete—in a fashion—because man is removed from God; as a result, man gets lost in the present time, distracted by worldly pursuits and the opinions of the masses. Therefore, man exists in a state of "despair"—the titular sickness unto death—because "despair" convinces man that there is nothing beyond this life, and that death is man's only reward: "If there is to be any question of a sickness unto death in the strictest sense, it must be a sickness of which the end is death and death is the end" (Sickness 17). Man is also troubled by the absolute freedom of existence, and has the potential to get lost in the endless possibility available to a human being—this is the origin of "anxiety," as Kierkegaard elaborates: "In possibility everything is possible. For this reason, it is possible to become lost in possibility in all sorts of ways, but primarily in two. The one takes the form of desiring, craving; the other takes the form of the melancholy-imaginary (hope/fear or anxiety)" (Sickness 37). Thus, "anxiety" is the awareness of the infinite and of what the individual is not—". . . anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" (Concept 42); it is the consciousness of the lack in human existence. Since this is essentially an account of the inadequacy of man's relationship with God, Kierkegaard expands this interpretation to include sin, for "anxiety means two things: the anxiety in which the individual posits sin by the qualitative leap, and the anxiety that entered in and enters in with sin, and that also accordingly, enters quantitatively into the world every time an individual posits sin" (Concept 54). However, Kierkegaard does not treat sin in the traditional way—as the violation of a certain set of religious proscriptions—but rather as a state (and the affirmation of that state) in which there is a disconnect in man's relationship to God. In fact, Kierkegaard characterizes "temporality," or existence without the eternal, as sinfulness, for "he sins who lives only in the moment

as abstracted from the eternal" (Concept 93). "Guilt," then, is the "opposite of freedom" (Concept 108), for it is the limitation of one's possibilities to "fate" and death—namely, to live only in "the now."[25] Ultimately, it is man's responsibility to discover his true self by growing closer to his prelapsarian relationship with God, as Kierkegaard explains: "The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can be done only through the relationship to God" (Sickness 29-30). For Kierkegaard, the only response to sin and guilt is faith:

> The only thing that is truly able to disarm the sophistry of sin is faith, courage to believe that the state itself is a new sin, courage to renounce anxiety without anxiety, which only faith can do; faith does not thereby annihilate anxiety, but, itself eternally young, it extricates itself from anxiety's moment of death. Only faith is able to do this, for only in faith is the synthesis eternal and at every moment possible. (Concept 117)

Essentially, for Kierkegaard, anxiety and guilt are related to one's consciousness of the lack in one's existence. Faith is the only solution to man's inadequate and anxious existence, for that brings the human being closer to a more authentic existence via the individual's relationship with God and the restoration of the synthesis of the psychic, physical and spiritual.

As we will see more closely in Chapter 3, Heidegger interprets the concept of anxiety as "*the state-of-mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being*" (Being 310)—in short, it is the consciousness of Dasein's non-being in death, which serves to complete Dasein's Being.

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[25] It is no wonder that it is often noted how much Heidegger is indebted to Kierkegaard, particularly in the ostensible similarity between this line of reasoning and Heidegger's own treatment of "inauthenticity".

Heidegger's concept of guilt is closely related to this notion. Contrary to traditional understanding of it, Heidegger insists that anxiety is not really a worry about something in the everyday world, like one's job or family obligations; as Heidegger rather confusingly suggests (the ellipses stand in for nothing, a concept which Heidegger finds to be ineffable), it is actually the confrontation with the possibility of nothing, or non-being:

> Anxiety is indeed anxiety in the face of . . ., but not in the face of this or that thing. Anxiety in the face of . . . is always anxiety for . . ., but not this or that. The indeterminateness of that in the face of which and for which we become anxious is no mere lack of determination but rather the essential impossibility of determining it. ("What" 100-1)

It is this "indeterminate" sensation that drives an individual to realize his or her "authentic" existence. Heidegger's conception of the "conscience"—the "organ" by which individuals feel guilt and anxiety—is as the part of Dasein's being that "*discloses*," for it "is revealed as a *call*" that "has the character of an *appeal* to Dasein by calling it to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self; and this is done by way of *summoning* it to its ownmost Being-guilty" (Being 314). Conscience and anxiety thus play a role in calling human beings to face their guilt; however, lest there should be any misunderstanding, Heidegger's guilt is not traditional guilt regarding acts or misdeeds, or even Kierkegaard's notion of guilt—there is, after all, no place for a higher power in Heidegger's philosophy—though it does have some similarities. Rather, Heidegger connects guilt to the idea of "owing" or "*having debts*" (327), ultimately explaining that "in the idea of 'Guilty!' there lies the character of the '*not*'. . . . Hence we define the

formally existential idea of the 'Guilty!' as 'Being-the-basis for a Being which has been defined by a "not"'—that is to say, as '*Being-the-basis of a nullity*'" (329). In other words, when conscience speaks to Dasein, it calls Dasein to recognize what it is not—some might say what it "lacks," though Heidegger rejects that specific term—and to come to terms with the inevitability of its "not being," and as a result the influence of "the '*they*' collapses" (317). Essentially, conscience calls Dasein to its authentic being, anxiety is the reaction in the face of this call, and guilt is the state previous to authenticity wherein Dasein is still lacking, or owing something to itself.

Sartre's conception of anguish (anxiety) and guilt—like much of his philosophy—is very closely related to Kierkegaard and Heidegger's interpretations of the same concepts. According to Sartre, human reality is "haunted" by a series of negations, whereby the not being or nothingness of existence has an inextricable circular relationship with being. Sartre agrees with his predecessors that anguish exists in the individual's encounter with what he or she lacks, as manifested in "anguish in the face of freedom" and "as the apprehension of nothingness" (Being 65), which Sartre suggests are definitions that imply each other. For Sartre, anguish is a fear-like sensation that an individual feels when conscious of his or her various possibilities, the responsibility of the individual for those possibilities, and—above all—"consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not-being" (Being 68). Essentially, the individual sensation of anguish is derived from the consciousness of one's lack. Of all aspects of nothing or not being, Sartre suggests, ". . . the one which penetrates most deeply into being, the one which constitutes *in its being* the being concerning which it makes the denial along with the being it denies—this negation is *lack*" (Being 135). Sartre goes so far as to suggest

that "human reality is a lack" (Being 136) in itself, because human reality is characterized as much by what it is not as by what it is. Moreover, human beings are responsible for introducing the notion of a "lack" to existence: "Human-reality, by surpassing itself in the direction of its own possibility of negation, makes itself that by which negation through surpassing comes into the world. It is through human reality that *lack* comes to things in the form *of* 'potency,' of 'incompletion,' of 'suspension,' of 'potentiality'" (Being 269). Sartre's concept of guilt is directly connected to his notion of "lack." As we have already seen, the individual has a somewhat contentious relationship with the Other, particularly in that the Other is what the individual is not, and the individual is what the Other is not. This conflict becomes problematic when we discover that the gaze of the Other objectifies the individual and awakens him or her to the consciousness of his or her lack. In existence, the individual is almost always being objectified by the Other's gaze; this is partially what Sartre meant in the famous conclusion to Huis Clos and in L'Être et le néant when he says: "Whatever our acts may be, in fact, we must accomplish them in a world where there are already others and where I am *de trop* in relation to others." (Being 531). For Sartre, this condition of human existence is what makes it "fallen"—in the same sense that Kierkegaard and Heidegger intend—and

> It is from this singular situation that the notion of guilt seems to be derived. It is before the Other that I am guilty. I am guilty first when beneath the Other's look I experience alienation and my nakedness as a fall from grace which I must assume. . . . Thus original sin is my upsurge in a world where there are others; and whatever may be my further

> relations with others, these relations will be only variations on the original theme of my guilt. (Being 531)

In essence, Sartre's treatment of guilt and anguish mirrors that of Heidegger; in both cases the individual is forced to confront the lack in his being, and this confrontation forms the basis for guilt—the consciousness of one's incompleteness or inauthenticity.[26]

The similarities between these treatments of guilt and anxiety ostensibly bear a resemblance to Dickens' earlier portrayal of them. In novel after novel, we see how his protagonists gradually become aware of their roles in creation of the social ills that infect their worlds. Subsequently, they manage to trace these problems back to the inadequacy of their understanding of themselves and their places in the world. How, then, does Dickens suggest that humanity might begin to work its way free from these errors? How can the fog, mud, and shadows of the present time be swept away? Clearly, it is not enough to effect social change artificially through the auspices of government or traditional activism, for bad laws and institutions inevitably will be replaced by similar or worse examples. Rather, the solution, it seems, lies in each individual, for, as Earle Davis has observed: "The only solution [in Dickens' novels] for man's difficulties with society is man himself. An explosion is appropriate and just, but reform is dependent upon human effort" (209). Any sort of reform must be made on a personal level, whereby individuals must first come to terms with who they are, and not who others want them to

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[26] It should be noted that Camus, too, has something to say about "anxiety." As he briefly describes in The Myth of Sisyphus, when an individual becomes conscious of the absurdity of existence, he experiences something like "anxiety":

> It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins'—this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. (13)

be, before a valid sense of moral action can be realized. Significantly, this self-evaluation involves one's reconciliation with one's self in time, whereby one must reconcile oneself to one's past selves and experiences, while one must also accept the reality of one's future and death. Only once this is accomplished can one begin to understand the real purpose of one's existence. In the following two chapters, I will explore how Dickens developed this idea in his novels.

Chapter 2

The Shadows of the Marshalsea: Little Dorrit and the Reclamation of the "Historical" Self

The past was obviously an important element in Dickens' works, particularly when one notes the prominent role his personal memories play in many of the novels. Undoubtedly, Dickens would often think about his past experiences during the composition of his novels, and, as many of his critics and biographers have frequently observed, elements of his past intrude into each narrative.[27] For instance, most of his novels are placed in an antedated setting, generally of the 1820s, the time of his youth.[28] Moreover, many of Dickens' characters often have been read as imaginative recreations of significant individuals from his life. It is generally accepted that Mr. Micawber shares some of Dickens' father's characteristics; the frequently helpless or bad mother figures of the novels—such as Mrs. Nickleby, Lady Dedlock, or Clara Copperfield—are arguably patterned after Dickens' own mother; and Catherine, his wife, may have served as the model for Dora Copperfield, the hopeless child-wife. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that Dickens attempted to air his grievances over supposed abuses or embarrassments from his childhood and young adulthood, expressing in particular the sadness he felt for his father's financial improvidence, the anger he felt at his mother's

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[27] For instance, Earle Davis' The Flint and the Flame, Edgar Johnson's Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, Fred Kaplan's Dickens, Peter Ackroyd's Dickens, and Alexander Welsh's From Copyright to Copperfield—to name but a few—all to a degree emphasize the inseparability of Dickens' life from his works and Dickens' seemingly therapeutic use of his novels to cope with traumatic elements of his past.

[28] The exceptions being the two historical novels, Barnaby Rudge and A Tale of Two Cities, both of which are initially set in 1775, as well as Martin Chuzzlewit, Hard Times and Our Mutual Friend, which are roughly set in the time of their compositions.

insistence that he continue working and forgo his education, or the pain of rejected love at the hands of Maria Beadnell. Adding to all of this, Dickens apparently had long considered writing a formal autobiography; he had made abortive attempts to do so in The Haunted Man and the famous "autobiographical fragment" published posthumously in John Forster's biography, and he had succeeded in partially recreating his childhood experiences and growth into manhood in "the disguised form" of David Copperfield (Johnson 657-60).

However, this in itself is not evidence of any larger purpose in Dickens' work, for there are few writers who do not mine their respective histories for subject matter and inspiration. It is not a thoroughly true assessment of Dickens' works to claim that he was perpetually reviewing the "tragedies" of his life, for it is difficult to find characters that are drawn from real individuals in his later novels, particularly those novels written between Little Dorrit and the incomplete The Mystery of Edwin Drood.[29] Yet, although Dickens no longer seemed to dredge up *his own* past in his later novels, an overwhelming sense of the past and the passage of time remains within them and actually seems to intensify. Upon closer inspection, these later novels seem to demonstrate that Dickens was still concerned with the past, yet, instead of simply trying to cope therapeutically with the troubled remembrance of what had gone wrong in his own life, Dickens clearly had begun to formulate a deeper, more philosophical expression of a preoccupation that had been at the heart of his writing since the advent of his career.

In fact, in these later novels, Dickens clearly shifts his treatment of the past from the personal recapitulation of his youth into a more sophisticated, universal argument

[29] For instance, though William Dorrit is bankrupted and imprisoned in the Marshalsea like John Dickens, he does not truly resemble him, as he is ostensibly a negative character, while Dickens had a loving, though clearly disappointed, opinion of his father.

wherein the nature of existence and selfhood are analyzed. As we have seen, Dickens consistently suggested that the typical human being misunderstands his or her temporal existence, tending to privilege the present day. This temporal disconnect is most apparent in two ways, one of which is the manner in which most individuals tend to ignore the importance of their pasts in relation to their present existence, particularly in the formation of their identities and the foundation of their current behavior, which is evident in Dickens' depiction of several characters' lives and forms of self-interpretation, including the Dedlocks, Mrs. Clennam, Dr. Manette, Miss Havisham, or the inhabitants of Cloisterham.[30] As evidenced by Dickens' characters' behavior, the general belief among them is that the past can be separated from one's present existence, generally so as to erase or hide one's background. Thus, as we will see, there are characters who completely dismiss the past and understand existence solely according to what is immediately present to them, such as Bounderby, William Dorrit, and Pip. On the other hand, there are characters who shift their interpretation of existence to the opposite extreme and become frozen in a particular moment from the past—for whatever reason, be it to preserve a moment of trauma or a moment of triumph—such as Mrs. Clennam, Dr. Manette, and Miss Havisham. Regardless of which time frame is privileged, Dickens' argument suggests that the error lies in the misunderstanding that a particular time can be separated, privileged, and experienced *alone* as existence. More importantly, Dickens seeks to demonstrate how important one's past experiences can be in one's understanding of oneself, for a study of one's development over time can reveal the source of one's oppression or—conversely—one's immorality, or the connection that

[30] As we will see in the next chapter, the other way in which this disconnect is manifested is in the characters' mutual fear of death.

human beings have with each other, all of which serves as the key to finding one's "authentic" identity and existence.

As we will see with Little Dorrit, which was perhaps the best example of Dickens' treatment of this conflict, Dickens gradually developed an idea that existence cannot be limited to one perspective of time, for it is rightly understood as the co-existent and simultaneously evident unity of all of them. In essence, if all temporal states simultaneously hold a co-existent place in being, then the past stands alongside the present: it can be seen in the present, it is inseparable from the present, and it is that from which the present is derived. Thus, a complete understanding of one's being is accomplished only through the comprehension that the past self—one's earlier state of being, such as childhood—is co-relevant and co-evident with the present self that one sees in the mirror every day—one must learn to accept the unity of one's various selves over time. Thus, as Little Dorrit concludes, it is clear that Amy Dorrit is always Amy Dorrit, including her child-self, the hardworking teenage-self, or the wealthy adult-self, which can be said as well for any other person's existence.

I. The "They" and the Dismissal of the "Historical" Self

In this respect, Dickens anticipates a particular aspect of existentialism's analysis of being's temporality, particularly regarding Heidegger, who addresses this issue most articulately and thoroughly. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Dickens portrayed society as privileging the present, or what Heidegger terms "everydayness," in its consideration of existence. Society—as represented by various classes and groups, such as the dying upper class, branches of government, bureaucracies, and various capitalists

and socialites—seems to be focused only on the immediate and the hollow values of consumption. Society's ethos is the maintenance of things as they are, and the vain attempt to stop time in the "glorious" present. According to society's interpretation of existence, there is no consideration of the future or the past: all that matters is what is now. It is concerned only with things associated with the present, and thus it interprets existence only through a perspective focused on the immediate. This, however, is a serious error, for the present is inextricably bound to the past.

For Heidegger, the suggestion that time might be carved up so easily and separated as such is contrary to his perception of the truth of existence. As Tina Chanter has noted, "One of Heidegger's great contributions is his constant insistence that the present cannot easily release itself from the hold of the past, any more than it can divorce itself from the impending future" (Being 104). Heidegger specifies that existence is characterized by a sort of "stretching":

> . . . death is only the 'end' of Dasein; and, taken formally, it is just *one* of the ends by which Dasein's totality is closed round. The other 'end', however, is the 'beginning', the 'birth'. Only that entity which is 'between' birth and death presents the whole which we have been seeking. . . . Dasein *stretches along between* birth and death. The 'connectedness of life', in which Dasein somehow maintains itself constantly. . . . (Being 425)

If being is understood as a movement between birth and death, then the past, or "having-been" is the evidence of existence within this "stretching," for it is the development from

an earlier to a later state.[31] Heidegger terms this aspect of temporality, "historizing" (Being 427). Ultimately, as I have already suggested, Heidegger's philosophical project was to "restore man's historical being-there . . . to the domain of being, which it was originally incumbent on man to open up for himself" (Introduction 41-2). In turn, the recovery of the past self leads to the understanding of the "authentic" self, for "Dasein 'is' its past in the way of *its* own Being, which, to put it roughly, 'historizes' out of its future on each occasion" (Being 41). This involves a process of thinking about the past in a new way, a way counter to traditional thought, which interprets the past as a dead "present" or a consumed "now," for, according to Heidegger's scheme, "my past is not constituted by the now's that are no longer, but by what I *was then*, my given situation" (Molina 65). Heidegger's employment of the term "having-been" (Gewesenheit) instead of "past" (Vergangenheit) further emphasizes this distinction between the traditional understanding of the past and Heidegger's new angle.

Moreover, not only is the present closely connected to a living past, but so too is my future; as Heidegger suggests: "The character of 'having-been' arises from the future, and in such a way that the future 'has been' (or better, which 'is in the process of having been') releases from itself the Present" (Being 374). In other words, "Future and past are not disjointed . . . I assume my past on the occasion of looking forward to my future. I project my possibilities on the ground of my given situation, and it is in projection that it becomes necessary to assume my past *as* such a ground" (Molina 65-6). Essentially, my present existential situation is determined by my previous existential situations, so they are fundamentally inseparable; so, too, are my future possibilities, including death, established on the bedrock of the present and the past together. By extension, it is only in

[31] According to Heidegger, this is neither a positive nor a negative development, but simply a "becoming."

the comprehension of the union of the three temporal "ecstases" that Dasein can understand true being:

> *Only an entity which, in its Being, is essentially* **futural** *so that it is free for its death and can let itself be thrown back upon its factical "there" by shattering itself against death—that is to say, only an entity which, as futural, is equiprimordially in the process of* **having-been***, can, by handing down to itself the possibility it has inherited, take over its own thrownness and be* **in the moment of vision** *for 'its time'*. (Being 437)

In short, the past is necessary for the individual's realization of himself in time, for it is only possible to project oneself toward Death—the key moment of existential disclosure, as we will see in the next chapter—if one already "has-been" or is (Lescoe 230).

Sartre also echoes these points in his treatment of the past: "I see first that the term 'was' is a mode of being. In this sense I *am* my past. I do not have it; I am it" (Being 168). Like Heidegger, Sartre likewise asserts that one's present existence in some way incorporates the past. He insists that there is an inexorable connection between the past and present: "There is a past only for a present which can not exist without being its past—back there, behind itself; that is, only those beings have a past which are such that in their being, their past being is in question, those beings who *have to be* their past" (Being 167). For Sartre, the difference between the past and the present is that it has exhausted its possibilities, and, for that reason, it is inseparable from who I am—it cannot be changed, and so it is more "permanent" than my present state:

> The past is what I have to be, and yet its nature is different from that of my possibles. The possible, which also I have to be, remains as my concrete

> possible, that whose opposite is equally possible—although to a lesser degree. The past, on the contrary, is that which is without possibility of any sort; it is that which has consumed its possibilities. *I have to be* that which no longer depends on my being-able-to-be, that which is already in itself all which it can be. The past which I am, I have to be with no possibility of not being it. I assume the total responsibility for it as if I could change it, and yet I cannot be anything other than it. (Being 170)

Moreover, one's "facticity"—factual existence, the "fact" that I exist—is grounded not in the present, but in one's past:

> This contingency of the for-itself,[32] this weight surpassed and preserved in the very surpassing—this is *Facticity*. But it is also the past. "Facticity" and "Past" are two words to indicate one and the same thing. The Past, in fact, like Facticity, is the invulnerable contingency of the in-itself which I have to be, without any possibility of not being it. It is the inevitability of the necessity of fact, not by virtue of necessity but by virtue of fact. It is the being of fact, which can not determine the content of my motivations but which paralyzes them with its contingency because they can neither suppress it nor change it; it is what they necessarily carry with them in order to modify it, what they preserve in order to flee it, what they have to be in their very effort not to be it; it is that in terms of which they make themselves what they are. (Being 173)

[32] Essentially, the difference between the "for-itself" and the "in-itself" is the difference between essence and the self. The "in-itself" is man's essential being—one's "presence" to the world. The "for-itself" is the cogito, or what Heidegger terms Dasein, or man's consciousness of himself—namely, man's self or identity.

For Sartre, mankind is torn between its present self and its essence: the implication is that the various elements that comprise a human are not so simply dissected from the physical being. The question arises as to what extent one individual is composed of the ethereal cogito or the physical essence. As one approach to this question, Sartre suggests that "the past is given as a for-itself become in-itself. . . . it has become what it was—behind me" (Being 174); essentially, the past self is evidence of the "knowing" self become physical essence: "the Past is a For-itself reapprehended and inundated by the In-itself" (Being 175). For this reason, Sartre ascribes one's physical form to the past:

> The body as a sensible center of reference is that *beyond which* I am in so far as I am immediately present to the glass or to the table or to the distant tree which I perceive. . . . Thus the body, since it is surpassed, is the Past. It is the immediate presence to the For-itself of 'sensible' things in so far as this presence indicates a center of reference and is *already surpassed* either toward the appearance of a new this or toward a new combination of instrumental-things. In each project of the For-itself, in each perception the body is there; it is the immediate Past in so far as it still touches on the Present which flees it. (Being 429)

Most importantly, to explain the importance of the past in the formation of the present, Sartre ascribes almost full responsibility to one's past for the limits of one's freedom in the present. As Sartre explains, "Nevertheless the fact remains that the freedom which escapes toward the future can not give itself any past it likes according to its fancy. . . . It has to be its own past, and this past is irremediable. . . . If the past does

not determine our actions, at least it is such that we can not take a new decision except *in terms of it*" (Being 637). In this regard, the past applies new meaning to the present. More specifically, all of one's present actions and decisions are directly derived from what has occurred in the past. In this regard, Sartre suggests that the past is "pressing, urgent, imperious" (Being 640)—it is always before us, dictating our every move. However, because it is connected to my present—the essence of freedom, which is "*perpetually on trial*" (Being 644)—"my past therefore is a concrete and precise proposition which *as such* awaits ratification" (Being 644).

To return to Heidegger—this sense of "historizing," in which the self is "stretched" over time and the past is inseparable from the present time, is anathema to the "They," for "the common view is that Dasein is real in its 'now' and that its past and its future are, respectively, already not real and not yet real" (Wyschogrod 109). As Heidegger notes, the "They" completely disregards the past, for "in awaiting the next new thing, it has already forgotten the old one" (Being 443). The "They" experiences time as a continually repeating present, which restricts the realm of possibilities for existence to what is already realized at the moment. "Lost in the making present of the 'today'," Heidegger observes, the "They" "understands the 'past' in terms of the 'Present'" (Being 443). Thus, the "They" sees the past as already done or complete, not having any relevant bearing on present existence, and only evident in what is "left over," such as in artifacts or historical locations—"the leavings, and the information about them that is present-at-hand" (Being 443).

This aspect of the "They" is specifically illustrated in Dickens' later conceptions of society's "they-self" mindset. Returning to the example of Pip, we can see that Pip

must remove any evidence of his apprenticeship or village upbringing in order to fully embrace the worldly, present-oriented values appropriate to his "expectations." The village of his youth and the city of his adulthood are seen as two different and irreconcilable temporal spheres within Pip's being, and, for a time, he believes that he must choose one or the other. The same can be said of Our Mutual Friend's Bradley Headstone, who is so obsessed with who he is at the present time that any evidence of his origins drives him to murderous insanity. Headstone believes that he has escaped the impoverished world of his youth, and he no longer *is* his past self; thus, the very suggestion that he is still defined by his old existence shakes the idea of his new artificial self at its core. Moreover, within Little Dorrit, this conflict is developed through a number of "Theys" found in the novel, all of which are seen by their inhabitants as completely detached from the past.

II. Historicality's Observable Presence in the Present Time

In relation to the past's importance in the understanding of existence, Dickens, along with most of the existential writers, indicates that the past is not dead and gone, but observable in the present, and crucial for the full understanding of being. This is likewise an element of Heidegger's philosophy, for he notes that the past is never truly gone. Heidegger observes:

> For one thing, there is much that is no longer present in the way we know presencing in the sense of the present. And yet, even that which is no longer present presences immediately in its absence—in the manner of what has been, and still concerns us. What has been does not just vanish

> from the previous now as does that which is merely past. Rather, what has been presences, but in its own way. In what has been, presencing is extended. (On Time 13).

In other words, although something is not necessarily ready-at-hand and immediately apparent, it still has an existence that bears on the present time. Moreover, just because something does not have an ostensible physical presence—does not perform the act of "presencing"—does not mean that it does not have a present existence. This is especially true for the past, for what once was still is, whether in physical remnants—no matter how small—or in the memory.

For Heidegger, this is most evident in the manner in which human beings approach the idea of "history." As Heidegger notes, "history" or the "past" has a double sense: it "belongs irretrievably to an earlier time," yet "it can still be present-at-hand 'now'" (Being 430). Heidegger employs "the remains of a Greek temple" as an example, for "with the temple, a 'bit of the past' is still 'in the present'" (Being 430). The reason for this is that the "history" to which Heidegger refers is not simply the designation for the "past" timeframe, but the idea that an entity has a previous existence connected to an earlier sense of the "world." Therefore, "history" is the aspect of an entity of having once been something else and having developed out of that state: it is the aspect of being that is a "*derivation* . . . from such a past" for "anything that 'has a history' stands in the context of a becoming" (430). For Heidegger, "history"—the academic discipline—is therefore the record of changes undergone by entities in the world over time, including both the great works of man and the developments of the natural world, as he observes:

> . . . "history" signifies the totality of those entities which change 'in time', and indeed the transformations and vicissitudes of men, of human groupings and their 'cultures', as distinguished from Nature, which likewise operates 'in time'. Here what one has in view is not so much a kind of Being—historizing—as it is that realm of entities which one distinguishes from Nature by having regard for the way in which man's existence is essentially determined by 'spirit' and 'culture', even though in a certain manner Nature too belongs to "history" as thus understood. (430-1)

Essentially, if "historizing" is the "stretching" of one individual being over time, "history" is thus distinguished as the full range of all beings, in a sense, "stretched." This is made clear to introspective Dasein in the tangible evidence of "remains, monuments, and records that are still present-at-hand," which are all instances of "*possible* 'material' for the concrete disclosure of the Dasein which has-been-there" (446). Ultimately, this is the true value of "history"; in all of its various senses—whether one thinks of it as human events, or "whatever has been handed down to us . . . something that has been taken over as self-evident" (431)—"history" is only significant in that it involves the existence of man in "that they relate to man as the 'subject' of events" (431). "History's" true purpose is therefore as a record of mankind, mankind's interaction with itself, and mankind's involvement in the world. By understanding Dasein's "history," we thus receive a clearer picture of Dasein's present situation. Essentially, although "history" is commonly thought of as something dead and in the past—and only having, at best, a tangential or metaphoric relationship with the present—it is actually vibrant and real, as much today as

it was during "its present time," for it is inextricably connected with Dasein across time through the present and toward the future. Thus, Heidegger stipulates that the "historical" or past state of an entity's involvement in the world is not only an intrinsic element in the makeup of existence, but it also has a concrete presence in the present time.

Sartre also mentions this characteristic of existence in his work. In fact, Sartre specifically emphasizes that the past "is *there* constantly" (Being 200). However, lest we think that he suggests that there is no distinction between the present and past, Sartre takes pains to explain how the "the past indeed can haunt the present but it can not *be* the present; it is the present which *is* its past" (Being 166). As he explains:

> It is the very meaning of the object which I look at and which I have already seen, of the familiar faces which surround me. It is the origin of this movement which presently follows and which I would not be able to call circular if I were not myself—in the Past—the witness of its beginning. It is the origin and springboard of all my actions; it is that constantly given density of the world which allows me to orient myself and to get my bearings. It is myself in so far as I aim at myself as a person. . . . In short, the Past is my contingent and gratuitous bond with the world and with myself inasmuch as I constantly live it as a total renunciation. (Being 201)

Essentially, the past, or evidence of the past, is always present, even in *the* present, for it is man's connection to the world in which he lives. He exists in the world because he has been in the world. His potential actions are governed or limited by his past actions—restricted by the present situation which arises from his past decisions or potentialities.

This is how the cogito, or self, is grounded in the essence of reality. Moreover, as Sartre elaborates, the past is the connection between the individual and other entities over time:

> By means of its Past, the For-itself founds itself in the In-itself. In the Past the For-itself, now become In-itself, is revealed as being in the midst of the world: it is; has lost its transcendence. . . . Thus there is only *one* Past, which is the past of being or the *objective* Past *in* which I was. My past is past in the world, belonging to the totality of past being, which I am, which I flee. (Being 285)

This characteristic of past time, wherein it can be understood to "stand-alongside" the present, is quite explicitly depicted in Dickens' later novels. Frequently, certain objects or characters with a "historical" meaning within the novel's world enter into the novel's present time—the point at which the narrative takes place, even when it is written in the past tense—and signify the co-existent relationship between past and present time. This "historiological" material serves to disclose the "historical" quality of being to the various characters, almost always at a point wherein the particular characters have compressed their understandings of their selves to the "inauthentic" restrictions of a certain "they-self." For instance, in Bleak House, Lady Dedlock denies her past for most of the novel, even going as far as rejecting the material evidence of that past, her daughter Esther; however, the past continually reasserts itself through physical objects like the reminder of the Ghost's Walk at Chesney Wold and the pieces of Nemo's handwriting, bringing her present aristocratic self into a confrontation with her past lower class self. Further historiological evidence can be found in A Tale of Two Cities, where Dr. Manette's shoemaker's bench ties him to his earlier time in the prison, while his

daughter's golden hair serves to bridge the gap between his pre-incarceration self and his post-incarceration self. In Little Dorrit, Mrs. Clennam's D. N. F. watch likewise binds her to her past, continually reminding her not to forget her husband's "misdeeds" of forty years earlier. Our Mutual Friend's numerous legal wills also serve this purpose, as they represent the "historical" presence and influence of the deceased Harmon, Sr. in the present. More importantly, the structure of that novel's present world depends on the revelation of the will's contents, for the question of who will retain the dustman's power and money is a central issue for the hierarchy of the present society; thus, the present is truly "derived" from the past in Our Mutual Friend, for the past still has its effects on the making of the present.

Dickens likewise employs certain characters as "historiological" material, whereby human beings are abstracted into representations of past time, beyond the same real existence they share with other characters. As in the case of the symbolic objects mentioned above, these characters from the past serve as the disclosing evidence of a past that still has an effect on the present. Some of these characters serve as physical manifestations of a troublesome moment from the past, such as Betsey Trotwood's delinquent husband in David Copperfield, who represents Aunt Betsey's one ostensible moment of fallibility, her involvement with a worthless and impecunious man. Or, we find a similar example in Bounderby's mother in Hard Times, who embodies Bounderby's true background from a well-to-do middle class family, an identity which Bounderby has rejected in favor of his self-perpetuated myth of himself as the "heroic" self-made man.

Other characters fit into this motif as the keepers or finders of past secrets, such as Sir Leicester Dedlock's lawyer, Mr. Tulkinghorn, who unearths Lady Dedlock's true past—and in so doing, exposes the interconnected pasts of various other characters—and uses such information for the purposes of blackmail. Pancks in Little Dorrit is another example of this; although Pancks claims to be a "gypsy" and a "fortune-teller" (282), which would suggest that he is the holder of *future* knowledge, his true power lies in his ability to uncover the keys to William Dorrit's bankruptcy and incarceration, which is to say that his "fortune-telling" ability is directed backwards to the past, rather than the future. Great Expectation's Mr. Jaggers is similar in this respect. However, unlike Pancks, Jaggers does not have to search for the secrets of the past, for he seems to have total knowledge within all states of time; Jaggers seems to anticipate the future wedding of Drummle and Estella well before it occurs, while he also knows all about the histories of Pip, Estella, Miss Havisham, Magwitch, and Molly.

In fact, examples of both elements of this theme—symbolic objects and symbolic people—have a prominent place in Great Expectations, and each instance illustrates the temporal and existential significance of this theme in relation to the novel's overall purpose. Over the course of the novel, Pip first encounters a pair of leg-irons and a file, which periodically reappear to remind Pip of his first "crime" and his village origins. Importantly, Pip is never allowed to stray too far from his past self because of the past's presence in these objects; even though he attempts to expunge all but the "they-self" from his existence, the stolen file and broken leg-irons immediately return Pip's attention to his "historical" self. Moreover, we see how this "historiological" material grows in strength and presence; the idea of Pip's past experience is incarnated initially in a historical

correlative object and its presence gradually develops into the form of actual human characters, like the mysterious man at the Three Jolly Bargemen with whom Pip has a brief conversation about his experience with the convicts on the moor. This intensification of the past's presence is punctuated by the reappearance of Provis/Magwitch, who, unlike the convict at the public house, has a lengthy intercession in Pip's world, continually reminding Pip of his past self during his stay in Pip's apartment. Significantly, Pip's present existence as a gentleman derives from Magwitch's money and efforts; thus, Magwitch seems to straddle the divide between Pip's past and present, demonstrating the connection between one's selves in time. Thus, Dickens makes it quite clear that Pip's past and present selves are united, and his foolishness goes well beyond snobbery and cupidity, for Pip has no real idea of who he is until his acceptance of Magwitch, the embodiment of Pip's past time.

III. Existential Space and World-Historical Sites

One final correspondence between Dickens and existentialism's (primarily Heidegger's) respective treatments of the past is the examination of physical locations as the sites wherein temporal being is disclosed. As Heidegger suggests, the "history" of Dasein is a past existence of Dasein within "the world," wherein everything outside of Dasein "belonged to a context of equipment[33] and were encountered as ready-to-hand[34] and used by a concernful Dasein who was-in-the-world" (432). Although that "*world* is

[33] Heidegger employs the term "equipment" (das Zeug) as a collective noun referring to entities around Dasein that are utilized for specific activities or uses: thus, he uses tools as a concrete example of this, though it is not limited to such (Heidegger 97).

[34] "Readiness-to-hand" (Zuhandenheit) is the aspect of existence primarily defined through "some ontological relationship towards the world and worldhood" (Heidegger, Being 114). More specifically, it can be read as the definition of an entity's existence according to Dasein's real use for it in the world.

no longer," we find that "what was formerly *within-the-world* with respect to that world is still present-at-hand[35]" (432). The reason for this is that "a world *is* only in the manner of *existing* Dasein, which *factically* is as Being-in-the-world" (432). In other words, the "world" that Heidegger describes only exists because of Dasein's encounter with it and action within it. Dasein's "history" is bound to the "history" of everything else, for "Dasein understands itself in terms of that which it encounters in the environment and that which it is circumspectively concerned" (439). If Dasein's being is temporal, and temporality is understood only as far as its relation to Dasein's being, then "history"—even so-called "world history" or "natural history"—as an aspect of that temporality, would have to be understood in its relationship to Dasein's being as well. Therefore, Heidegger can claim that "Dasein's historicality is essentially the historicality of the world" (440), which implies that any sort of temporal significance that we would assign to a particular location is related to the temporality of Dasein. Moreover, although it can be said that something belongs to the past, as long as Dasein exists and questions its existence, it can never truly be said to be left in the past; as Françoise Dastur states: "what . . . is properly historical in a so-called historical object is its belonging to a world which is no longer, but which, as a mode of existence of a Dasein having been there, cannot strictly be said to be 'past.' What is primordially historical, then, is Dasein itself, and the environing world is historical only secondarily" (45). Therefore, Dasein can be said to leave a mark on physical locations, such as historical sites, in that the "history" of a place is drawn directly from Dasein, and not from the site itself. What is "left over" and

[35] "Presence-at-hand" (Vorhandenheit) is opposed to "readiness-to-hand" as it is the existence of the entity prior to its immediate uses—an existence somewhat independent of Dasein or Dasein's intentions. In some ways, the contrast between these two terms is equivalent to Sartre's distinction between "essence" and "existence," particularly relating to the famous example of the paper knife.

"handed down" to us is thus some element of Dasein's Being—in some respects, the environment becomes a part of Dasein, and Dasein becomes part of its environment, at least through the fact that the environment at one point interacted with Dasein.

The notion that human beings somehow leave traces of their existence on a physical location appears frequently in Dickens' works. Dickens had often utilized setting as his primary conveyance for meaning from the very earliest of his novels. On numerous occasions, Dickens' description of a space is connected to the central theme of a particular novel or serves as a suggestion about a particular character's disposition or temperament, as with the memorable depictions of the prisons of Pickwick Papers and Oliver Twist, the Maypole Inn of Barnaby Rudge, and Todgers's lodging house in Martin Chuzzlewit. However, in Dickens' later novels, places—particularly homes or workplaces—take on significance regarding the relationship between the past and present within an individual's being. Well ahead of his time, Dickens observed that physical locations bear the mark of their relationship with an individual's identity, particularly in the manner in which physical locations are so closely tied to specific memories or feelings; Dickens clearly noticed the phenomenon by which individuals imprint themselves on physical locations, thereby transforming a space into evidence of an individual's existence. As Henri Talon has noted: "long before phenomenologists and other philosophers and psychologists began to speak of der gelebte Raum, l'espace vécu, 'existential space,' Dickens had experienced that a few privileged places are part and parcel of oneself" (125).[36] Or, as Dickens observed in David Copperfield: "I don't know

[36] From a certain regard, Dickens also seems to anticipate Gaston Bachelard's analysis of the presentation of "the images of *felicitous space*" in poetry, the investigation of which "seek[s] to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we

why one slight set of impressions should be more particularly associated with a place than another, though I believe this obtains with most people, in reference especially to the associations of their childhood." (47). Thus, in the later novels, Dickens consistently ties locations to their past inhabitants or the past events that occurred within them. For instance, we see how David Copperfield's past experiences become embodied in particular locations from his childhood home in Blunderstone as he observes upon returning to this place:

> . . . my occupation in my solitary pilgrimages was to recall every yard of the old road as I went along it, and to haunt the old spots. . . . I haunted them, as my memory had often done, and lingered among them as my younger thoughts had lingered when I was far away. The grave beneath the tree, where both my parents lay—on which I had looked out, when it was my father's only . . . and by which I had stood so desolate, when it was opened to receive my pretty mother and her baby. . . . (Dickens, David 299-300)

Clearly, David's past experiences remain present in this place associated with his childhood; most importantly, this location would be meaningless without its connection to David's past, for it draws its sole significance from this relationship.

In Bleak House, Chesney Wold, as the ancestral home of the Dedlocks, a family "as old as the hills," likewise seems to hold traces of a more glorious past, as "the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves" (21). Moreover, the

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love" (xxxi). We will see more of this in my last chapter's examination of Dickens' treatment of the "home".

house is ringed by "The Ghost's Walk," a terrace haunted by the long-deceased wife of Sir Morbury Dedlock from which an echoing step is often heard to remind the family of their eventual doom. Significantly, this sound cannot be ignored as Mrs. Rouncewell explains, ". . . what to be noticed in it, is, that it *must be heard*. My Lady, who is afraid of nothing, admits that when it is there, it must be heard. You cannot shut it out" (114). Essentially, the Ghost's Walk's echo is the intruding presence of the past in the present, and just as the Dedlocks cannot ignore it, they also cannot ignore their past, specifically Lady Dedlock's previous marriage, for it eventually will bring down the family's life and remaining glory.

In Our Mutual Friend, it is clear that the Harmon children's past experiences have been imprinted on their childhood home, as several of its rooms and corners are significant only as evidence of the children's lives there. This becomes clear when Boffin gives Rokesmith/Harmon a tour of the house, for he points out several locations only for their connection to the supposedly deceased children:

> Another staircase . . . leading down into the yard. . . . When the son was a little child, it was up and down these stairs that he mostly came and went to his father. . . . I've seen him sit on these stairs, in his shy way, poor child, many a time. Me and Mrs. Boffin have comforted him, sitting with his little book on these stairs, often. (185)

Boffin also points out a "white wall where they one day measured one another" as they "wrote up their names here, only with a pencil" (185); notably, this wall still serves as a record of the children's existence, as "the names are here still" although Boffin believes that "the poor dears [are] gone for ever" (185). The house also seems to retain evidence

of its cruel master's existence, for, in "the bedroom where the clutching old man had lost his grip on life," they find an "old grisly four-post bedstead" and a "tight-clenched old bureau," from which the narrator observes that "a hard family likeness was on all the things" (184-5).

As a final example, we can see how this motif of the past's perpetual presence in the present is evident in the incomplete The Mystery of Edwin Drood. Cloisterham, the ancient town that serves as the novel's locus of action, bespeaks the presence of the past more strongly than perhaps any other location in Dickens' works, as it has changed little over the years, and its space is dominated by "the old Cathedral with the square tower" and its appending "monastery ruin" (40). Cloisterham is "an ancient city," out of time, and it is "no meet dwelling-place for any one with hankerings after the noisy world" (51). Its essence is derived almost exclusively from the past, for it is a "monotonous, silent city, deriving an earthly flavor throughout, from its Cathedral crypt . . . abounding in vestiges of monastic graves" where "fragments of old wall, saint's chapel, chapter-house, convent and monastery, have got incongruously or obstructively built into many of its houses and gardens" and "all things in it are of the past" (52-3). Moreover, the narrator informs us that Durdles, the local stonemason, "lives in a little antiquated hole of a house that was never finished: supposed to be built, so far, of stones stolen from the city wall"; notably, this house is surrounded by "a petrified grove of tombstones, urns, draperies, and broken columns" (68), all of which are either real or potential forms of historiological evidence.

IV. Over-privileging the Past

Although there is a distinct similarity between existentialism and Dickens' respective understanding of the past's ostensible "co-being" with the present in existence, Dickens arguably takes his argument in two additional directions that Heidegger and the existentialists opted not to follow in their work. The first of these is the revelatory quality of the retrieval of the past, wherein Dickens clearly feels that one's past existence partly discloses one's moral obligations (this is discussed in my last chapter). The second of these is the idea that some people misinterpret their existence in an opposite manner to what has previously been established, over-privileging the past in relation to the present time. Clearly, Heidegger believes that Dasein's misinterpretation of existence only occurs one way: with a focus on the present and a dismissal of the "historical" characteristics of existence. Although this notion is manifested in Dickens' work quite explicitly, Dickens also seemed to suggest that there are some people who latch onto a particular moment in the past and attempt to freeze that moment as the temporal center of an eternally perpetuated present. There are several instances of characters who seem to be locked in the past, such as David Copperfield's Mrs. Gummidge, who seems to think of nothing but "the old 'un," or Rosa Dartle, who dwells on the disfiguring scar above her lip and the invisible scar on her heart, both of which were caused by Steerforth during their shared youth. Bleak House's Sir Leicester Dedlock likewise dreams too much about the long-passed glories of his family's history. During times of stress, A Tale of Two Cities' Dr. Manette frequently returns to his time in the prison, compulsively making shoes at his old bench and murmuring his prison designation, "One Hundred and Five, North Tower" (44). As we will see below, Little Dorrit's Mrs. Clennam attempts to halt

the passage of time and sustain herself continuously in the moment at which her husband's deceitful history is revealed. Finally, the most obvious example of this is Miss Havisham of Great Expectations, who has decided to stop time at the moment of her traumatic heartbreak.

The misperception of existence in this way is likewise depicted negatively, for, although it does not necessarily fall into the same form of selfish thinking as evidenced in the "they-self" focus on the present, it still reveals a misunderstanding of the self in time. If people are stuck in the past, they do not acknowledge that they have a moral obligation to grow and learn or that the world changes, regardless of what has happened to them. Dickens even seems to insist that this obligation should be extended to include those who have felt trauma in the past; yes, Dickens expresses sympathy for these individuals who have been wronged by others or the world, but he seems also to realize that the inability of certain characters to move on from the past only exacerbates the pain one feels. Compounding this misunderstanding of one's existence, those who cannot part with the past have a distorted view of the world, and therefore they cannot take up useful positions in it. They are attached to the selves they once were, and they cannot understand that their statuses in the world have changed and they must adapt their behavior to fit their new places. These characters are static individuals, and, for Dickens, there is nothing worse than stasis, as it spreads through society like a disease and hampers any form of development, including technological, social, and spiritual improvement.

Thus, we can see the true significance of the past's presence in the later novels. The purpose of determining one's temporality through the recovery of one's "historical" self, which ultimately leads to the better understanding of one's existence, is clearly an

early step towards the performance of some useful role in the world, which, as we will see later, is in itself a moral obligation, but also in turn leads to other responsibilities for the independent individual, particularly in relation to what one can do for one's fellow human beings. The implications of one's retrieval of one's past can best be described by a particular line from David Copperfield, which seems to anticipate the various developments this theme will undergo in the subsequent twenty years; early in the narrative, David frets about his past, and his aunt Betsey attempts to comfort him by advising, "It's in vain, Trot, to recall the past, unless it works some influence upon the present" (325). Upon closer inspection, this particular line expresses the diverse complications that the question of the past's importance undergoes in the later novels. The past is indeed necessary and important to the individual, but only to a point. As we have seen, one cannot dismiss the past, for to do so cuts one off from any vision of oneself beyond his or her present situation and limits one's awareness of his or her responsibilities to other human beings. Thus, rejecting the past is tantamount to rejection of the true self, which leads to greed and selfishness, the roots of all social ills.

Moreover, the alternative misunderstanding of the past, the privileging of the past and the arresting of time in a singular moment or period, is no better. It is another form of the rejection of being, wherein the present and the movement of time are thus ignored, instead of the past. Those people who remain stuck in the past likewise have a limited understanding of their being, and thus they have a limited understanding of the world. This too leads to selfishness and stasis, for the past-oriented person has reconstructed the world and time around him or herself, which inevitably results in the recasting of one's existence according to one's needs and desires. Clearly, if a moral sense can be distorted

or erased through the misperception of the self, then the reclamation of morality seems to require a refocusing of one's self-perception and interpretation of one's existence. Essentially, Dickens seems to suggest that the reclamation of the "historical" self leads *in part* to an "authentic" understanding of one's existence, which is tantamount to an "authentic" understanding of the world, and results in an "authentic" sense of moral purpose. This understanding of the role of the past in one's existence is expressed in parts of various novels, but it is most ostensible in Little Dorrit, particularly in the paradigmatic example of Amy Dorrit and the story of Arthur Clennam's development out of his limited self-conception.

V. Little Dorrit and the Recovery of the "Historical" Self

As we have already established, in Little Dorrit, Dickens depicts possibly the most restrictive society in all of his novels. From top to bottom, virtually every member of society is confined within a limited "they-self" perception. Every character is intractably locked into his or her role and place in society, cannot see beyond that role, and cannot formulate an independent will or conscience. Numerous critics have speculated on the nature of this imprisonment; however, two questions remain unresolved within critical arguments to date: namely, the precise origin of this loss of individual freedom, and the true oppressor responsible for depriving the characters of individual identity and agency. The key to this may lie in the correlation between this question and the concept of how individuals tend to understand their past. Largely absent from criticism on the novel is any discussion of the representation of past time within the novel, which is particularly notable because of the overwhelming presence of this theme

within every aspect of the novel, for it is quite important for every plot line and every character within the novel, including Clennam, the Dorrits, the Meagles, the Casbys, the Merdles, and Miss Wade. Moreover, we find that midway through the novel the theme of past time's relationship with the present becomes closely associated with the prison, the novel's central symbol. The confluence of these two themes—how to deal with the past, and how to deal with genuine or emotional incarceration—suggests that they have a mutual purpose and are highly dependent on each other. In essence, the prison's significance, and that of its corollary thematic purposes, must be re-evaluated according to its connection with the motif of past time, and vice versa.

For virtually every character that we find within Little Dorrit, the limited understanding of one's existence can be traced back to a particular perception of each character's past experiences. It cannot be so easily blamed on society and social institutions, as when Edgar Johnson observed that these mental states are "conditioned by . . . institutions" (893). Most of these instances of limited self-comprehension have little—if any at all—relationship with some sort of institutional oppression. Rather, most of these instances stem directly from the characters' decisions to separate their past experiences and past selves, what they have been, from their present experiences and present selves, what they are now. Most characters refuse to acknowledge that the true nature of their existence involves both the present and the past, and that their selves do not exist solely in the isolated moment of the present. As Dickens effectively demonstrates in the novel, seeing one's existence only in the present is tantamount to having virtually no time at all—all that matters is the satisfaction of momentary desires, which generally manifests itself through greed and conspicuous consumption.

Meanwhile, existence only as part of the "they-self" is shown to be a rejection of independent thinking or action, for one merely goes along with the will of the crowd. Thus, there is no sense of a responsibility to rectify the errors of the past or to act for the future. Both of these—the lack of independent will and the consequent lack of individual responsibility—make up the essence of Barnacle-ism, "How Not To Do It," which is the inevitable outcome of a limited understanding of existence. Thus, we can see that certain characters who have separated themselves from their past selves can act so selfishly and foolishly, like William Dorrit, Flora Finching, Merdle, Casby, Fanny Dorrit, and Miss Wade. In each of these character's stories, it is evident that they consciously dismiss the past, they attempt to erase the past, or they have simply forgotten their past existences; as a result, they do not fully understand their present existences, and they utilize their present time for selfish purposes.

The notion of change and its effects represent another dominant theme in the novel. Frequently, characters raise the question of whether or not they have changed, their surroundings have changed, or the world itself has changed. Clennam seems to be particularly observant of change, as is made quite apparent from his preponderance on whether or not he has the same character as was molded in his childhood. Moreover, when he returns home, he first notices that "nothing changed" (44), and as he moves through the locations associated with his youth, he continues to observe the varying rates of perceptible change, whether it is ostensibly lacking, as at Casby's home, or obviously intense, as we see with his mother, her possessions or Flora Finching's faded beauty. Clennam is not the only character who is attentive to the idea of change or attempts to manipulate it. This is evident in Flora's frequent babblings to Arthur about how much has

changed, or the manner in which Mrs. Clennam has attempted to somehow subvert the passage of time, living "intensely and constantly in one kind of personal time, perpetual fury. . . . willed and constant and voluntary" (Scribner 21).

This theme of change is likewise connected to the theme of incorporating past existence, for the manner in which characters look at change is directly tied to their understanding of past existence and its relationship with the present. In fact, the attention given to the idea of change, or the lack thereof, reveals the aforementioned alternative misunderstanding of existence and the past, as we learn that some characters believe they have remained unchanged from their past selves, as in Clennam's case, or they have consciously attempted to remain in the past and thwart the passage of time, as with Mrs. Clennam or Mr. Casby. This misrepresentation of one's existence is similarly destructive because it represents a wholly inaccurate misunderstanding of oneself; moreover, it reveals an individual's allegiance to a world that no longer exists. Ultimately, this notion that one might lock oneself into a particular moment or era and circumvent the passage of time is shown to be the most extreme form of stasis, which Dickens often indicated to be the root of many social problems. As a result, the world of Little Dorrit is a world dominated by Barnacle-ism, in which very little is accomplished.

In light of this, the Marshalsea prison, the dominant image around which the novel is centered, takes on a new significance. Undoubtedly, the Marshalsea is associated with some aspect of Time, as Dickens employs temporal details to introduce it to the narrative: "Thirty years ago there stood . . . the Marshalsea Prison. It had stood there many years before, and it remained there some years afterwards. . . ." (68). Later in the novel, after Dickens has developed the themes of change and the past more

extensively, the symbol of the Marshalsea becomes less identified with the confined historical era of "thirty years ago." In fact, the Marshalsea takes on a timeless sense, as it seems to stand throughout the passage of time: "changeless and barren, looking ignorantly at all the seasons with its fixed, pinched face of poverty and care" (776). Essentially, Dickens attempts to universalize the symbol, applying its significance to all people, in all societies at all times. As we have seen, within the prison's walls, we find that the collection of imprisoned characters uniformly exemplify the disconnect from the past. They waste away in the prison, attempting to completely forget that they had previous led free lives outside of the walls. As we have also already seen, in this regard, the "They" inside the prison is no different from the "They" outside of it, so, whether one languishes in the debtor's prison or associates with the best of society, one is still imprisoned, in a sense. All societies of every kind are eventually shown to be equivalent in that they limit the insight each individual has into his or her existence; thus, every individual, with a few significant exceptions, is trapped in their present selves, detached from their "authentic" existence in time. In this regard, the prison is revealed to be a prison of the mind in which every individual in society resides, although most are blithely unaware of this unfortunate truth.

The solution to the problem of the almost universally-held "they-self," present-oriented mentality in Little Dorrit lies in the example provided by Amy Dorrit, for she is the only character who is conscious that her existence is a union of all of her past and present selves. Indeed, Amy is able to straddle the divide between the present and the past, and her uniquely consistent goodness, generosity, and honesty spring from her privileged existential insight. Furthermore, that this is an existential realization with

existential results, and not simply a case of having a healthy psyche, is evident in Dickens' presentation of Amy's employment of this understanding, which incorporates elements of physicality, psychology, morality, and sociology, all of which fall under the purview of existence. More specifically, we see how Amy's understanding of her temporality is manifested in her physical form, wherein we learn that she is both a child and a woman. It is also quite clear in terms of her healthy self-conception, as she seems to be the only character aware of herself and at peace with that understanding, bereft of the psychological torments to which so many of Dickens' characters fall victim. Moreover, she has a developed ethical sense, which stems directly from her enlightened understanding of existence, and she exhibits this true morality in service to others, such as her helpless father, siblings, and the mentally impaired Maggie. Finally, we can also see the effects of her temporal awareness in her understanding of the individual's role in society—specifically, the responsibility one has to others and the world—and her recognition of the false nature of high society. Clearly, Amy's insight affects all levels of her existence, and thus it can be truly said to lie at the heart of her being. Through Amy, Dickens seeks to provide the evidence that the problems of today and tomorrow may be solved by incorporating the past into one's understanding of oneself, and, by extension, recognizing that change has taken place in oneself and the world—which raises a host of new responsibilities—reconciling past wrongs, and reevaluating the temporary concerns and desires of the present.

The first suggestion that Amy understands her temporal existence is her connection to the Marshalsea, the great symbol of temporality within the novel. Not only is Amy born within its walls, but she seems to have in some way become adopted by the

prison itself, as the narrator notes that she is the "Child of the Marshalsea *and* child of the Father of the Marshalsea" (78, emphasis added). In essence, she is not only the offspring of her father, William Dorrit, but also the descendant of the Marshalsea-entity, the personification of everything the prison represents. Moreover, it also appears that beyond this quasi-mythological origin, Amy represents a sort of social institution among the prison's inhabitants, for she "was handed down among the generations of collegians, like the tradition of their common parent" (77). As an element of Marshalsea culture, Amy functions as the symbolic object involved in the rite of passage by which new members of the community are accepted, as "in the earlier stages of her existence, she was handed down in a literal and prosaic sense; it being almost a part of the entrance footing of every new collegian to nurse the child who had been born in the college" (77). The record of her birth in the local church registry further solidifies Amy's significance to Marshalsea culture, as she represents a rare occurrence of new life arising from within the gloomy walls. This entry in the registry allows Amy's cultural standing to transcend the prison's limits, whereby she comes to the attention of the outside world and achieves notoriety, as the beadle informs her: "You're one of our curiosities. . . . Here you'll find yourself, as large as life. . . . we tell people that you have lived there, without so much as a day's or a night's absence ever since" (177). In short, Amy's existence takes on seemingly superhuman characteristics in relation to the prison: she is more than a mere resident, but the possible offspring of the prison, while she functions also as a cultural symbol within the community's belief system. Amy's existence and significance within the novel is inextricably tied to that of the prison, as if she is partially defined by the prison and vice versa. Therefore, if the prison functions as the symbolic indication that there is a

widespread misunderstanding of temporality, Amy's connection to the prison—including her origins there, her ability to cross its boundaries, and her ultimate acceptance of her Marshalsea origin as an important element in her existence—suggests Amy's ultimate purpose, as the example of how to correct society's misunderstanding regarding the past.

Amy's bridging of the past and present is likewise suggested by her physical appearance, wherein she is physically both a child and an adult. When Clennam first encounters Amy, he is struck by her childlike appearance, noting her "delicately bent head, a tiny form, a quick little pair of busy hands" (64). Later, after Clennam sees Amy traversing the streets of London, he expresses the parental sentiments that Amy's diminutive appearance evokes, when he again observes how

> diminutive she looked, so fragile and defenceless against the bleak damp weather, flitting along in the shuffling shadow of her charge, that he felt, in his compassion, and in his habit of considering her a child apart from the rest of the rough world, as if he would have been glad to take her up in his arms and carry her to her journey's end. (174)

Clennam continues to manifest these misdirected parental feelings, even going so far as to regard her "as his adopted daughter" (189); however, he eventually overcomes these feelings and begins to look upon her as a woman after he absorbs her lesson on the union of the past and present. On the other hand, the rest of the novel's world is fallen into existential confusion, and thus most of the characters tend to "misread" Amy, focusing on her small size and mistaking it as indicative of youth or weakness and fragility, characteristics that are readily associated with childhood. They misinterpret Amy's age and treat her accordingly as a child, as when a suicidal prostitute attempts to save her

from an imagined abduction at Maggy's hands, or when Mrs. Merdle briefly withholds her insight into society, warning Fanny that Amy should not be exposed to such things at her supposed age. Amy's presence is indeed often taken for granted, partially as an extension of the other characters' misconstruction of her importance, and partly due to her retiring presence, as when Affery Flintwich informs Clennam: "Oh! She? Little Dorrit? *She's* nothing. . . ." (51). Even those who are close to her don't quite grasp her significance, and they either dismiss her advice and feelings, like Fanny does, or sentimentally attempt to protect her, as Clennam does for much of the story. Ironically, Amy's seemingly contradictory form informs the reader of her relationship to the past—that she is both her child-self and her adult-self—while it simultaneously blinds the novel's other characters to her example. Thus, the other characters do not pay attention to her, for hardly anyone ever listens to the logic of a child or one with the meek presence by which childhood might be characterized, particularly regarding worldly affairs.

But what the other characters fail to realize is that this strange eternal youth is the mark of the existential realization of one's temporality. Amy is as much "who she was then" as "who she is now." For her, there is no separation between the past and present, and this has an effect on every element of her existence. Therefore, when certain characters finally appreciate her lesson—as William and Frederick Dorrit do immediately prior to their deaths, and Clennam does just before the novel's conclusion—they likewise magically inherit a younger form. For example, when Frederick begins to question their rise in society and their careless embrace of empty social values, Amy remarks quite earnestly that, "I think . . . that you have been growing younger for weeks past" (612), which the enlightened Frederick readily admits is completely due to her own influence.

Moreover, William finally recognizes Amy's example after years of mistreating Amy and failing to comprehend her true value immediately before his death; thus, at this moment, his "face subsided into a far younger likeness of her own than she had ever seen under the grey hair" (623).

Amy's temporal awareness is further suggested by the oddly "atemporal" role into which she is forced, as a mother figure for much older characters. First, Amy functions as her own mother, having no older woman upon whom to lean. Therefore, we learn that she teaches herself about the world and herself, for

> With no earthly friend to help her, or so much as to see her, but the one so strangely assorted; with no knowledge even of the common daily tone and habits of the common members of the free community who are not shut up in prisons; born and bred, in a social condition, false even with a reference to the falsest condition outside the walls; drinking from infancy of a well whose waters had their own peculiar stain, their own unwholesome and unnatural taste; the Child of the Marshalsea began her womanly life. (80)

Amy must become her own instructor in the ways of adult women, for she cannot find any present figure worthy of emulation. Amy's mother is dead, her older siblings are vapid, her father is deluded and irresponsible, and the residents of the prison exist in a state of morbid self-pitying; so, to whom should Amy look for a positive role model of adulthood? Importantly, it is Amy's self-cultivation that enables her to see things differently than those under the shadow of the wall, while it simultaneously forms her into an independent and capable young woman immune to the sways of "they-self" thinking. Therefore, we find that "she was inspired to be something which was not what

the rest were, and to be something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest" (80). In other words, her sense of duty can be traced to her self-instruction in responsibility and adulthood; she realizes her independence and insight into existence on her own, without any guidance.

We also learn that Amy becomes the mother figure within the Dorrit family when she "took the place of the eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames" (81). Amy organizes everything for her family, as a mother would. Amy maintains their finances and purchases their necessities; she coordinates schooling for herself and her siblings; she arranges for her sister's dancing lessons; she raises the money to send her foolish brother Tip to Canada so he might begin a career; and she becomes the sole productive contributor to the family's meager funds. Amy even becomes "Little Mother" to the mentally impaired Maggie. Significantly, Amy's parental achievements further suggest her unified understanding of her existence: again, Dickens stresses that she is concurrently a child and an adult. Through this particular emphasis, we can see the moral component of her existential realization: understanding one's being inevitably leads to an understanding of the necessity for service to the greater good.

This is most clear in Amy's efforts with her father, who ostensibly is portrayed as undeserving of the attention and care he receives from his faithful daughter. Amy's relationship with her father can best be described as perversely inverted. William should be most concerned with caring for his child, and earning what money he can to feed and clothe her; however, he is content to lie on the meaningless laurels of his status as Father of the Marshalsea. As a result, Amy is forced into the role of caregiver and protector,

both of which take a variety of forms. While Amy must care for all of the other "household" concerns, she must also minister to her father's self-pity and delusions of grandeur, "preserving the genteel fiction" (82) in which her father increasingly believes with every passing day. Amy is forced to cover up the lie out of fear for her father's sanity, as she makes excuses for her father's behavior to anyone who questions his priorities. When Clennam asks her about her family's situation, she continually makes it clear that William is not to blame: "It would be a new distress to him even to know that I earn a little money. . . . He is so anxious about us, you see, feeling helplessly shut up there." (105) Later, Amy worries that Clennam has a poor perception of her father, and pleads with him:

> You don't know what he is . . . you don't know what he really is. How can you, seeing him there all at once, dear love, and not gradually, as I have done. . . . I cannot bear to think, that you of all the world should see him in his only moments of degradation! (173)

Indeed, Amy's self-knowledge and self-sacrifice enable her to see deeper into the hearts of others, and she sees that a residue of goodness exists somewhere in her father. In fact, Amy's self-sacrifice for her father continues even after her father's worst exhibit of selfishness, when he urges her essentially to prostitute herself so as to maintain his comfort by "leading on" Chivery. Regardless of the depths to which her father has sunk, Amy remains true to him, staying by his side, "comforting her father's wasted heart upon her innocent breast, and turning to it a fountain of love and fidelity that never ran dry or waned, through all his years of famine" (227). Amy sees that her father has little sense of himself or reality and that he cannot see the error of his ways; he is so blinded by the

influence of the prison that he can only vacillate between boasting of his station within the prison and wallowing over his fall from grace in the eyes of society. She blames the "prison taint" for her father's current state, even to the point wherein she believes all he requires to overcome his state of useless and shameless self-indulgence is to simply pass through its gates once more. "I shall see him, as I never saw him yet," Amy announces happily, "I shall see my dear love, with the dark cloud cleared away. I shall see him, as my poor mother saw him long ago" (403). However, yet again, her father disappoints her after their rise in society, as he exchanges one "they-self" mentality for another, but still Amy stays by his side, maintaining that she wants nothing but to care for him.

Amy's conduct with her family, particularly with her father, indicates the true value of coming to a realization about one's temporal existence. By way of embracing the past from which her being is derived, Amy comes to fully understand herself; by understanding herself she understands *her* purpose—and that of every individual—which is to fulfill one's duty to the human race and to provide help and love to one's fellow human beings. Thus, her Uncle Frederick's half-hearted statement at the beginning of the novel—"She is a very good girl, Amy. She does her duty." (100)—takes on serious ramifications within the novel's ethical sense. It ultimately does not matter that Amy's relatives "were lazily habituated to her" (100) and take her tremendous daily effort for granted. It does not matter that Amy almost never receives any form of thanks or reciprocated love and kindness from most of the people whom she has helped. Moreover, it is not important if she receives any financial reward for her service, as she explains to Clennam: "I have no use for money, I have no wish for it" (725). All that is important is that duty is done, for there is no higher purpose for an individual than that. For Dickens,

as we will see later in greater detail, there is no more self-evident truth about existence. Amy represents the paradigm of this ideal, and therefore Meagles holds her up for Tattycoram as the model of human behavior, pointing Amy out while extolling: "Duty, Tattycoram. Begin it early, and do it well; and there is no antecedent to it, in any origin or station, that will tell against us with the Almighty, or with ourselves" (774).

Just as Amy derives a sense of morality and duty from her existential insight, she likewise comes to understand the present in a way that others cannot. Through her comprehension of what Heidegger calls the "stretched" or "ecstatico-temporal" character of being, the equivalent essence of the past and present within existence, Amy is able to see the false character of "they-self" thinking and its privileging of the present. By extension she is aware of the hollowness of society's rules and limitations, and understands her world's class system from an enlightened perspective. She finds that there is no truth behind the division that separate classes and people, and there is nothing truly valuable in that which society values—namely, money and personal property. In short, everything is basically equal, although she is the only character in the novel who can see that.

Thus, we see how Amy seems to rise above any sort of "they-self" thinking, whether it belongs to the upper classes, the masses in the streets, or the pathetic residents of the Marshalsea. This is immediately evident in the fact that Amy can pass back and forth through the Marshalsea's gates, despite Frederick's caution to Clennam that: "Any one can *go in* . . . but it is not every one who can go out" (88). Essentially, although the other residents of the prison are trapped in their limited conceptions of existence, Amy is able to free herself from all restrictions. Moreover, we see how Amy can transition

between the classes, although other characters have significant difficulty in doing so, as she is welcomed into the homes and company of Casby, Mrs. Clennam, the motley residents of Bleeding Heart Yard, the theater society, and—eventually—high society as well. In essence, whereas the arbitrary differences of society circumscribe most characters into their own limited spaces, Amy does not acknowledge them and is thereby able to transcend them. As has been noted:

> Amy gathers strength from her memories. As a result, she is able to discern the real that lies beneath the varnish of the illusory. We come to rely on her perceptions in this shifting world of uncertain phenomena. It is primarily through her reactions to experience that we gauge the quality and extent of its illusoriness. (Roopnaraine 66)

What is real in Amy's world is the ultimately revealed equivalence of all things temporal and spatial, and that which is illusory is anything that society values above duty, responsibility, and love. Essentially, everything upon which social divisions and values seem to be based.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Amy's extended sufferings as she is exposed to the temptations of the upper classes in the second half of the novel. Subsequent to her family's rise from poverty to wealth, Amy observes how her father and siblings forsake the "they-self" mentality of the Marshalsea for that of the upper classes. Immediately we see that Amy is beset upon to join them and to cease "relapsing into old habits" (437) and to embrace the new ways and beliefs appropriate to their risen stature. These "old habits" that are seen to be so antithetical to their improved station are none other than the habits of common decency that Amy has practiced all along, specifically in this case

remembering and looking after the welfare of old friends like Minnie Gowan and Clennam. However, according to the regulations of the upper classes, this behavior is only appropriate for a member of the service class; the only intersection between the different behaviors of the higher and lower in society is the enforcement of society's restrictions, as William informs Amy:

> Now, it is incumbent upon all people in an exalted position, but it is particularly so on this family, for reasons which I—ha—will not dwell upon, to make themselves respected. To be vigilant in making themselves respected. Dependents, to respect us, must be—ha—kept at a distance and—hum—kept down. Down. (440)

However, Amy has grown to maturity knowing nothing but service, and understanding nothing but duty and kindness; thus, her family's attempt to re-educate her in the ways of the wealthy is an attempt to erase her very essence. William, Fanny, and Tip have managed to elide their past experiences quite easily because they lack Amy's insight, but Amy can never accomplish this because it is contrary to her very nature: she cannot simply forget who she was and take on an inauthentic socially-contrived persona.

Amy loves her family, and does not want to hurt them; therefore, she makes an attempt to learn Mrs. General's lessons of "prunes and prism" (458). But the "varnish" of society's mores and values with which Mrs. General "varnished the surface of every object that came under her consideration" (436) cannot cover up Amy's natural self. She is constantly pressured to take on the contrived behavior of the upper classes, but her true self always resurfaces, and she finds that she cannot pretend or put on upper class airs. Keeping Clennam informed in a series of letters, Amy confesses that:

> As soon as I begin to plan, and think, and try, all my planning, thinking, and trying go in old directions, and I begin to feel careful again about the expenses of the day, and about my dear father, and about my work, and then I remember with a start that there are no such cares left, and that in itself is so new and improbable that it sets me wandering again. (452)

Always Amy expresses the notion that she "cannot learn" (453); in essence, she worries that she cannot change into the person her family and class desire her to be, and she manifests a sense of guilt that she is somehow neglecting her duty to them.

Amy's conflict between her natural self and the false world of society is likewise reflected in her double vision of her environment, through which she sees the unreality that lies beneath the locations frequented by the upper class. Whereas everyone around her marvels at the grandeur of their current situation, Amy is unable to share these feelings completely. "All that she saw was new and wonderful, but it was not real," the narrator informs us, "it seemed to her as if those visions of mountains and picturesque countries might melt away at any moment, and the carriage, turning some abrupt corner, bring up with a jolt at the old Marshalsea gate" (447). Indeed, Amy is struck by the beauty and novelty of her new situation, but she senses hollowness beneath the wonders of upper class life. Her passage along the Grand Tour, through the Alps and into Italy, becomes nothing more than a dream. All of the wonders of continental Europe, including the natural elements of the landscape, seem to be nothing but a series of fictions when compared to the stark authenticity of her memories of the Marshalsea, for "only the old mean Marshalsea [was] a reality" (448). But, Amy is well aware that the Marshalsea is not her "present-at-hand" reality, as it is no longer immediately before her and remains

only as a memory; therefore, when Amy remembers her past existence in the prison, she "would wake from a dream of her birth-place into a whole day's dream" (448). A seemingly ineffable question arises from these conflicting visions as to what constitutes one's genuine reality; thrust into the conflict between the present and the past, between the immediately evident and the memory of "what has been," Amy struggles to determine from which she should derive her understanding of herself, which has been thrown into turmoil by the efforts of her family to mold her into a "proper" member of her class.

Eventually, Amy comes to associate reality with the impoverished and the lowly, while she relates the unreal to everything connected with high society. Throughout her trip, Amy senses that the true reality of life has been hidden behind Europe's majestic veneer so as to enable the upper classes' conspicuous display of wealth and self-congratulation, and occasionally she notices the momentary evidence of reality revealing itself from beneath the facade. Amy looks past the false beauty of "white villages and towns on hill-sides" and sees that they are "lovely without, but frightful in their dirt and poverty within" (449). Although the roads between the towns are bounded by lush vegetation, Amy notices that within the "squalid villages . . . there seemed to be nothing to support life, nothing to eat, nothing to make, nothing to grow, nothing to hope, nothing to do but die" (449), as if life does not truly exist in these towns, but that they had been constructed purely for tourists' enjoyment. Despite the bounteous loveliness of the European countryside, Amy focuses her attention on "beggars of all sorts everywhere: pitiful, picturesque, hungry, merry: children beggars and aged beggars" (449). Ultimately, beneath her window, Amy witnesses a transcendent vision wherein the various figures within her view are abstracted into representations of her existential

struggle: “a group of monks and peasants in the little street below, misery and magnificence wrestling with each other upon every rood of ground in the prospect, no matter how widely diversified, and misery throwing magnificence with the strength of fate” (448). Amy begins to identify both herself and reality with these elements of “misery,” for there is nothing inherently dishonest about poverty, as it is the absolute exhibition of humanity’s most basic existence. Indeed, the pangs of hunger and the struggle for survival are more understandable than the experience of the upper classes’ gluttony and self-indulgence. Moreover, their pathetic condition reminds Amy of her true self, the self derived from Marshalsea life, as the narrator notes that “she would sit with her folded hands, thoughtfully looking after some diminutive girl leading her grey father, as if the sight reminded her of something in the days that were gone” (449). Thus, Amy manages to solidify her sense of her true self through this conflict between the real and the unreal, between the struggle of life and the absolute waste of life found in idle comfort.

Moreover, beyond her comprehension of the eternal dialectic between the “haves” and “have-nots,” Amy begins to realize something she has known all along: the absolute equality between all things within existence, which in turn reveals the implied fallacy of socially imposed barriers and designations. Through her travels, Amy observes something beyond the antipodal relationship between the Marshalsea and the wonders of Europe, wherein she sees visions of the Marshalsea transposed upon her present environment. While she stays in the “crowning unreality” of Venice, “where all the streets were paved with water,” Amy’s thoughts again return to “that old gate . . . and of other places and of other scenes associated with those different times” (449-50). Looking

over the Po's flowing waters "as though they all lay underneath it. . . . she would musingly watch its running, as if, in the general vision, it might run dry, and show her the prison again, and herself and the old room, and the old inmates, and the old visitors: all lasting realities that had never changed" (451). Moreover, just as the Marshalsea's physical presence seems to coexist with the palaces and waters of Venice, it reappears later to coexist in Rome's existential space, as Amy observes "the ruins of the vast old Amphitheatre, of the old Temples, of the old commemorative Arches, of the old trodden highways, of the old tombs . . . were ruins of the old Marshalsea—ruins of her own old life—ruins of the faces and forms that of old peopled it—ruins of its loves, hopes, cares, and joys" (586). Through this vision of her surroundings, Amy comes to understand her own position at the intersection of these two existential spaces, and to a certain degree she brings them together through her own being—as her existence is "derived" from the prison, and she is presently situated in the various cities of Italy; thus, we learn that "two ruined spheres of action and suffering were before the solitary girl often sitting on some broken fragment; and in the lonely places, under the blue sky, she saw them both together" (586). Furthermore, just as Amy sees that these physical locations coexist, she begins to notice how the high society of wealthy travelers associated with one "world" appears nearly identical with the society she left in the prison's world, as I noted in my first chapter. Between the Marshalsea and Venice, the lone identifiable differences appear to be the sense of excess in the latter in contrast with the former's ostensible lack, and the dominance of "Prunes and Prism," due to which "nobody had an opinion," as opposed to the influence of the "prison taint." Essentially, these visions in which the prison and the palaces or ruins seem to occupy the same space serve to collapse the difference between

the previously established opposition; now it becomes clear that these places are identical or interchangeable, to a degree, within the disclosure of their relative states of existence. Likewise, the different societies associated with these locations, the debtors and the wealthy, are also exchangeable, and the divide between them is merely an artificial construct.

Buoyed by the revelation of the truth of her existence, the co-being of the past and present in her self, Amy returns to the space of her origins to redeem Clennam, who has fallen into "they-self" thinking. First, Clennam follows the "they-self" madness of financial speculation, losing all of his investments; secondly, upon internment in the Marshalsea, Clennam embraces the "prison taint," content to wallow in his miseries and to fancy impractical reveries of what might have been. Notably, Amy comes to redeem him through her own example, signifying her existential insight by wearing "her old, worn dress" (723). "I hope you would like me better in this dress than any other," she explains to Clennam, "I have always kept it by me, to remind me: though I wanted no reminding" (723). She repeats that she will always be Little Dorrit, regardless of any change in circumstances, as she tells him: "You have not spoken to me by my right name yet. You know what my right name always is with you" (724). She ignores Clennam's self-pitying claims that "the time when you and this prison had anything in common, has long gone by" (727) because of her realization that the opposite is actually true: there will never be a time when she can be separated from her prison-self—Clennam only believes that because of his limited self-perception. Thus, Amy models the nature of co-existing in the past and present places, inside and outside the past world of the prison, between the

different velocities of the "changes of a fevered room" and the "changes of the fevered world," for "it was Little Dorrit's lot to wait upon both kinds of change" (766).

Significantly, Amy becomes a quasi-Christian prophetic figure due to her existential insight. It is not enough that Amy sees through to the true nature of being, for she must actually put this knowledge to use. Thus, we see how her understanding of her being and its connection to the world's existence lead to the formation of a value system unique in the novel's world. The importance of duty, particularly the duty to other human beings in need, is paramount among these values. Moreover, Amy also believes that the performance of this duty must be done in secret, without hope of later rewards, and particularly without the expectation of the eternal reward of heaven, for both of these undermine the selfless nature of the act.[37] Furthermore, the message of Amy's moral proselytizing follows the principles of Christianity in its suggestion to give up money and material objects and to replace them with love and generosity for others. The similarity between Christianity and Amy's existential morality is made even clearer in her advice to Mrs. Clennam:

> Be guided, only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in his life, I am sure. There can

[37] Admittedly this is by no means an original idea, as women were often presented in Victorian novels as holding an inherent obligation to their husbands, families, and communities, as in the examples of Gaskell's Margaret Hale and Molly Gibson, William Thackeray's Laura Pendennis and Ethel Newcome, or George Eliot's Romola, Esther Lyon, and Dorothea Brooke. However, as we will see in Chapter 4, I believe that Dickens' development of Amy's character is a bit more complicated than a mere reiteration of traditional Victorian gender roles.

> be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps, I am certain! (756)

Indeed, Amy comes to voice the necessity of following Jesus' example, but this does not simply mean that Amy eventually becomes an advocate for Christianity; rather, the values she represents are quite similar to those of Christianity. However, Dickens' rationale behind elevating these values to an imperative behavior is wholly unique, for it is suggested that one does not act morally so as to receive rewards in the afterlife, and one does not perform acts of goodness out of fear of the Lord's wrath. Rather, in Dickens/Amy's moral system, the performance of good acts originates in the revelation of one's being; the understanding of the self is coterminous with the understanding of the world—when one truly happens the other occurs as well—and, in a quasi-Nietzschean inversion of the traditional understanding of morality, the instinctual sympathy for others and desire to help them is made known in their disclosure. Essentially, in Amy Dorrit's story, we can see a quite original approach to the question of being and morality. Moral action is shown to be a natural aspect of human existence, while the rejection of morality for selfishness or passivity is ostensibly contrary to nature. Most importantly, this understanding of morality cannot be found in the empty rules of society; rather, it is buried in our own being, and the total ontological understanding and acceptance of that being, particularly in relation to its temporality, reveals moral truth.

However, there is one *seeming* inconsistency: though Amy is the exemplar of a proper understanding of temporal existence, she seems to maintain this understanding from birth, and thus cannot fully exhibit the means to work through the miscomprehension many of us have. Amy has been blessed with perfect existential

understanding, and Dickens does not suggest that much reflection was necessary to acquire it, as her struggles were predominantly for the purposes of its defense in the face of temptation to reject it, and not in the struggle to gain it in the first place. To a certain degree, Amy can be read as a sort of secular saint, and her story provides readers with Dickens' evidence that perfection can exist in reality; however, it does not provide any instruction in how to achieve or work toward that status. In response to this necessity, Dickens' employs the figure of Clennam and his quest of self-discovery to depict the means to achieve true existential insight. Thus, because the novel is undoubtedly centered on Arthur Clennam's existential struggle, and the story can be described best as the account of his redemption, Clennam is ostensibly the novel's hero, and he provides the clearest exhibition of this particular theme.

From Clennam's first introduction, we learn that he experiences a problematic relationship with the past, alternating between the belief that he is still his oppressed child-self of twenty years earlier and his immersion in the "they-self" conception of himself, whereby he bemoans his present state and rejects all forms of individuality and personal responsibility, succumbing to society's values. At first, Clennam conceives of himself as unchanged from his past self, informing us that he is the "only child of parents who weighed, measured and priced everything: for whom what could not be weighed, measured, priced, had no existence" (33). As Clennam repeatedly avows, he is nothing but the product of his parents' cold and calculating upbringing; he relates his currently empty emotional state to his first education in two forms of the "they-self": that of business—for which he claims, "I have given up everything in life" (49)—and a strict form of Christianity. Clennam seems to regard these two focuses as the means by which

any semblance of feelings or imagination have been excised from what remains of his soul. He describes the process of character formation—or deformation—as a violent exploitation of his younger self, as he was "trained by main force; broken, not bent; heavily ironed with an object on which I was never consulted and which was never mine; shipped away to the other end of the world before I was of age, and exiled there . . . always grinding in a mill I always hated" (33). Every Sunday serves as a painful reminder of his Christian education, wherein—like a prisoner—he was "marched to the chapel by a picquet of teachers three times a day, morally handcuffed to another boy" (42). Clennam remembers with particular anger "the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was going to Perdition?" (42) As a result of this ordeal, wherein the young Clennam was denied love and forced to repress all evidence of individuality or personal desire, the adult Clennam has come to believe that he has been transformed into a shell of a human being. More specifically, instead of looking upon this as a case of the psychological effects of bad parenting, or as a flaw in his psyche that must be corrected, Clennam manifests these feelings in an existential statement about himself: he *is* his past self, the child whose will was broken, and not simply a grown man who must therapeutically deal with childhood trauma. Since Clennam believes himself to be the emotionally impoverished child-self stuck in a man's body, he exhibits that child's self-conception, as a will-less and loveless child subject to the whims of a controlling authority.

In Clennam's case, physical locations, particularly his mother's house, function within the novel as the symbolic correlatives that awaken his sense of his past and the

existential discontinuity he experiences as a result of the imbalanced perspective of himself over time. When Clennam first returns to his mother's home, he is struck by the utter lack of change, and this impression triggers both his memory of his past and his sense of himself as being trapped in childhood. "Nothing changed," Clennam observes, "Dark and miserable as ever. A light in my mother's window, which seems never to have been extinguished since I came home twice a year from school" (44). Everything is exactly as he last saw it, "the old articles of furniture were in their old places" (44), and there is an overwhelming sense that his mother has attempted to stop time in its passage:

> There was a fire in the grate, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a kettle on the hob, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a little mound of damped ashes on the top of the fire, and another little mound swept together under the grate, as there had been night and day for fifteen years. There was a smell of black dye in the airless room, which the fire had been drawing out of the crape and stuff of the widow's dress for fifteen months, and out of the bier-like sofa for fifteen years. (46)

Of course, the effort to check time's movement has been to no avail, as decay has spread throughout the house, and a funereal sensation permeates the air:

> Dull and dark he found it. The gaunt rooms, deserted for years upon years, seemed to have settled down into a gloomy lethargy from which nothing could rouse them again. The furniture . . . hid in the rooms rather than furnished them, and there was no color in all the house. . . . the ceilings were so fantastically clouded by smoke and dust . . . the dead-cold

> hearths showed no traces of having ever been warmed. . . . In what had once been a drawing-room, there were a pair of meagre mirrors, with dismal processions of black figures carrying black garlands. . . . Down in the cellars, as up in the bed-chambers, old objects that he well remembered were changed by age and decay, but were still in their old places. (65)

Clennam's mother likewise has become an integral element in this scene, yet another unaltered fixture that serves to return Clennam to his past, as "the old influence of her presence and her stern strong voice, so gathered about her son, that he felt conscious of a renewal of the timid chill and reserve of his childhood" (46). Mrs. Clennam is also just as her son had left her twenty years earlier—cold and callous, and incapable of more than "one glassy kiss" (45). She resumes the empty religious lecturing Clennam resented, and, yet again, "as she read on, years seemed to fall away from her son like the imaginings of a dream, and all the dark horrors of his usual preparation for the sleep of an innocent child to overshadow him" (48). However, just like the other items in the house, Mrs. Clennam has likewise decayed, despite her best efforts to the contrary, and she remains physically an old invalid. Regardless, Mrs. Clennam, like the furniture and the house, still holds an immense power over Clennam, and the very sight or sound of her is enough to trigger his consciousness of his existence and the belief that he remains as his past self.

Clennam also experiences this retreat into his past when he first returns to the Casby home. "The house," Clennam observes, "is as little changed as my mother's, and looks almost as gloomy" (147). Just as his entrance into his mother's house brings back waves of past memories, Casby's home likewise overwhelms him with involuntary

recollection: “those faded scents [of old rose-leaves and lavender] saluted him like wintry breath that had a faint remembrance in it of the bygone spring” (147). There likewise seems to have been some attempt to stop the passage of time within this house, as we learn that it is “sober, silent, air-tight” and that the front door “seemed to shut out sound and motion” (147). Unlike Mrs. Clennam, Casby, though an old man, *seems* to have succeeded in his attempt to impede time’s passage, as Clennam finds Casby to be “recognisable at a glance—as unchanged in twenty years and upwards, as his solid furniture—as little touched by the influence of the varying seasons, as the old rose-leaves and old lavender in his porcelain jars” (148). Their conversation instantly reverts to their shared past experiences and what has happened in the decades since, and Clennam recalls his old sentiments and distrust of Casby and Pancks’ extortion of their lessees as if they were the previous morning’s thoughts.

However, the battle against age and decay is not completely won in Casby’s home, as Clennam soon discovers when he is confronted with the altered Flora, the young woman “whom he had left a lily” and “had become a peony” (152). The change that Clennam sees in Flora reminds him again that time has indeed passed, for she does not wholly resemble his twenty-year-old memory of her: “In his youth he had ardently loved this woman, and had heaped upon her all the locked-up wealth of his affection and imagination. . . . he had kept the old fancy of the Past unchanged, in its sacred place” (152). Now that Flora “had grown to be very broad,” Clennam’s one happy memory is shattered forever, and he realizes that “Flora, who had seemed enchanting in all she said and thought, was diffuse and silly” (152). Flora confirms Clennam’s growing belief that his past cannot be redeemed; moreover, her physical condition solidifies his building

realization that his childhood is gone, and he does not truly share the impressions of the world and others that he had as a child: essentially, Clennam is decidedly not only his child-self.

However, Clennam takes a long time to realize the truth about his existence, and as he works through it we see how his self-conception moves from his pathetically will-less child-self to an absolute questioning of his selfhood's *very reality*, evident in the consideration of himself as a non-entity without the abilities to feel or to act. Clennam's status as a non-entity is manifested in a variety of forms, all of which are in some way connected to the diseases of stasis and inaction that spread throughout the novel's world. Clennam often expresses the sentiment that he is a man bereft of agency, incapable of changing or being useful to the world, as he notes to Mr. Meagles, "I have no will. That is to say . . . next to none that I can put in action now" (33). As a personal illustration of his lack of direction and independence, he develops an imaginative conceit through which he associates his existence with that of an untended boat on a river, as he laments, "I am such a waif and stray everywhere, that I am liable to be drifted where any current may set" (33). The conceit returns later, when Clennam reflects on the void his life has seemed to be, and he looks out his window upon "the serene river . . . the drifting of the ferry-boat, so many miles an hour the flowing of the stream, here the rushes, there the lilies" (200). At a certain point, Clennam even seems to resign himself to his own impotence, observing that "it might be better to flow away monotonously, like the river" (200), rather than to continue his reflection on his past. The image recurs with a related connotation following the afternoon in which Clennam spends the afternoon conversing with the now-married Pet. On this occasion, however, the river becomes symbolic of

Clennam's dismissal of his feelings, in the same manner as he has let go of his sense of agency. Pet has gathered roses and has given some to him, which he places in his breast pocket, next to his heart, thereby transforming them into symbols of his potential for love. Upon being alone, Clennam does not embrace these feelings, as his previous action seems to imply; rather, he dispels them: "he bent down on the shore, and gently launched [the roses] on the flowing river. . . . the river floated them away" (329). In essence, the river motif exemplifies Clennam's questioning of his existence: he perceives himself as a non-entity, and thus he passively allows any sense of himself as an individual—including the ability to decide, or act, or feel—to float away into nothingness.

Clennam's apparent lack of agency is further evident in his lamentations on the impossibility of resolving the issues of his past. While Clennam sees his childhood experiences with his parents as those of denial and punishment, he also distinguishes them as items in a long series of missed chances: "To review his life, was 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" (167). Clennam is tortured by the belief that "he should have missed so much" (167) and in his self-appraisal, his life appears "so long, so bare, so blank. No childhood; no youth, except for one remembrance" (166). That "one remembrance" is of the once beautiful Flora Finching, whom he was not allowed to marry. The memory of the young Flora haunts Clennam as the epitome of his missed chances; his encounter with Pet Meagles revives this sense of loss, as her "face . . . had had an unusual interest for him, and a tender hold upon him, because of some resemblance, real or imagined, to this first face that had soared out of his gloomy life into the bright glories of fancy" (52). However, Clennam's sense of his limitations does not

allow him to make any overtures to Pet, and his disgusted reaction to the aged Flora further crystallizes his perception of the past as dead and irreconcilable. In response, Clennam lapses into self-loathing, no longer for his childhood, but for his current middle-aged state. Whereas his bad childhood experiences had been the stimuli for his impotence, the fact that he is "too old" to act becomes the present rationale for his inaction. Significantly, Clennam's concern for his powerlessness is not simply in regards to how he might be useful, or start a business, but specifically whether or not he will ever find a woman to love him. Unwilling to address his feelings for Pet Meagles or Amy, Clennam "resigned the dying hope" that he might find someone to love and "from that time he became in his own eyes, as to any similar hope or prospect, a very much older man who had done with that part of life" (326). Clennam's distraught self-conception is even more apparent when he confides in Amy that he did not woo Pet Meagles because "I found out my mistake, and I thought about it a little—in short, a good deal—and got wiser. . . . I counted up my years, and considering what I am, and looked back, and looked forward, and found that I should soon be grey. . . . I found that the day when any such thing would have been graceful in me, or good in me, or hopeful or happy for me, or any one in connection with me, was gone, and would never shine again. . ." (370-1). When amorous feelings for Amy begin to stir in his heart, Clennam again represses these feelings with the same logic. He continually reminds Amy that he is "so far removed, so different, and so much older," and "the better fitted for your friend and adviser" (371). Clennam also advises Amy to "always think of [him] as quite an old man" because he "for the matter of years, might be [her] father or [her] uncle" (372). Essentially, Clennam's uncertainty about his past and unwillingness to understand that he is not his

child-self is transformed into the sense that life has been ruined for him; any possibility that arises before him is treated as only "what might have been," or dismissed out of hand because he is "too old" for it to be proper. It is quite significant that Clennam's feeling of helplessness is not limited to merely finding a social purpose or business, but rather overlaps with his feelings regarding the opposite sex. Feelings of love for another and their eventual consequences of marriage and childbirth represent an immensely important action for a male character. By uniting with either Amy or Pet, Clennam would be truly useful as a father, husband and head-of-household, and he likewise would leave a mark on the world in the form of his offspring. By choosing to have no business—until he meets Doyce—and remaining bereft of any female companion, Clennam actualizes his self-conception as a non-entity by relying on his feelings of impotence. Therefore, by way of a distorted, circular logic, Clennam negates his own existence.

The worst manifestation of Clennam's denial of his existence is his dismissal of his feelings and his subsequent attribution of them to the imaginary figure of "Nobody." As his feelings begin to torture him further, Clennam dismisses his ability to feel and completes the process of denying his own selfhood. Significantly, this self-denial occurs in relation to Pet Meagles, the eventual wife of Henry Gowan and forbidden object of Clennam's displaced amorous desires. As Clennam reflects on the hopelessness of his chances with Pet, the narrator gives us a glimpse into the displacement of his feelings: "Why should he be vexed or sore at heart? It was not his weakness that he had imagined. It was nobody's, nobody's within his knowledge, why should it trouble him?" (200). Again, when confronted with the painful ordeal of spending time with the Gowans while wrestling with his unrequited love for Pet, Clennam dismisses the idea that such a

situation might be difficult for his self-conception, for "after the resolution he had made . . . such a state of mind was nobody's—nobody's" (302). Simultaneously, while he rejects himself as "nobody," Clennam also writes off his feelings as "nothing": "If Clennam had ever admitted the forbidden passion into his breast, this [visit with the Gowans] might have been a period of real trial; under the actual circumstances, doubtless it was nothing—nothing" (301). Rather than attempting to rectify the situation or realize his desires, it becomes easier for Clennam to simply dismiss his feelings and existence, for then he would not have to take the responsibility of being an individual and facing his sense of his own impotence. However, Clennam is so aware of his feelings that he still feels the ache in his heart, as the narrator informs us: "And yet it did trouble him" (200). Clennam's only means to avoid addressing the facts of his existence is to project his feelings onto someone else, someone with whom he does not need to compete, a nobody: if nobody feels these feelings, then they must be unimportant. However, this is a vain gesture, which only further lowers his self-esteem and solidifies his own perception of himself as a helpless non-entity.

Furthermore, this state of mind created by Clennam's limited self-assessment leads to a vision of his environment as a closed, dead, bogged-down world. Significantly, Clennam connects this sense of enclosure or imprisonment to his own feelings of inability. As Clennam walks to his London lodgings, he observes that the city is "gloomy, close, and stale" and that the streets are covered in "a penitential garb of soot" that "steeped the souls of the people . . . in dire despondency" (40). Clennam also notices that "everything was bolted and barred" (41), not simply to him, but to the city's other residents as well. London has become an unfamiliar maze to Clennam, as there is

"Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets" (41). Moreover, mud, Dickens' favorite symbol of unhealthy stasis, coats London's streets and denizens: "Then wet umbrellas began to appear, draggled skirts, and mud. What the mud had been doing with itself, or where it came from, who could say? But it seemed to collect in a moment, as a crowd will, and in five minutes to have splashed all the sons and daughters of Adam" (43). This overwhelmingly dour perspective of the city is clearly an interpretation of the world reflective of Clennam's own feelings of impotence; he sees himself as limited, and, as a result, he can only see the world as the source of those limitations. Furthermore, he applies his own feelings to the other residents of the city, seeing them as sharing in his own misery and helplessness. Clearly, Dickens seems to suggest that there is a co-dependent relationship between our impressions of ourselves and our impressions of the world as a whole, wherein we tend to identify society as the source of our troubles or tend to view the world dependent on our own appraisals of ourselves.

Of course, Clennam is not a non-entity; he simply denies the fact of his existence and by extension his ability to act or to feel. Meanwhile, his actions betray the untruth of his self-conception. He is not completely will-less or useless, and he is not incapable of feelings. His individuality has not been destroyed by his upbringing or his subsequent experiences. We know that he is not wholly blinded by his stern education, for "it had been the uniform tendency of this man's life . . . to make him a dreamer after all" (52). Importantly, Dickens does not treat this character trait negatively but rather sees it as a virtue: despite everything, Clennam's imagination has not been snuffed out. More

importantly, Clennam's ready access to his imagination—of which he is unaware—is significant because it is the origin of his goodness and empathy. As the narrator notes:

> He was a dreamer in such wise, because he was a man who had deep-rooted in his nature, a belief in all the gentle and good things his life had been without. Bred in meanness and hard dealing, this had rescued him to be a man of honorable mind and open hand. Bred in coldness and severity, this had rescued him to have a warm and sympathetic heart. Bred in a creed too darkly audacious to pursue . . . this had rescued him to judge not, and in humility to be merciful, and have hope and charity. (166)

In essence, the cruel upbringing that Clennam blames for his deep unhappiness has had a dual result; it has deprived him of any sense that he has a right or ability to feel or think, but simultaneously it has created a sense of justice and sympathy for other people. His individuality has not been destroyed: it has been transformed into a sense of selflessness indicative of the independence and potential for goodness through which Clennam may ultimately confirm his existence.

Thus, although Clennam sees himself as useless and aimless, he is not without some redeeming quality. He may not be able to understand himself fully, and he may be unable to accept the love of another, but he does have sympathy for his fellow human beings, and it is from this that Clennam seems to be capable of action. As Trilling has pointed out, "[Clennam] has by no means been robbed of his ethical will, he can exert energy to help others. . ." (154). In fact, witnessing others' suffering stimulates Clennam's will to action. For instance, upon seeing Amy for the first time at his mother's house, he is driven to investigate her situation and perhaps save her from her

possible plight. Clennam becomes obsessed with discovering his father's "secret remembrance. . . . that he had unhappily wronged any one and made no reparation" (58). Though Clennam's vision of his existence is distorted, he is more capable than most of recognizing the details of others' being, and thus he is more sensitive to others' pain; thus, the awareness of his possible indirect culpability in a crime or deceit—and his empathy with the possible victims of it—allows him sporadically to see the greater surreptitious misdeeds of the larger world:

> As he went along . . . the dim streets by which he went seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting-houses, with their secrets of books and papers . . . the banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells . . . the secrets of all the dispersed grinders. . . . the secrets of the lonely church-vaults . . . the secrets of the river. . . . (520)

Moreover, in Clennam's pursuit of righting his father's transgressions, the hidden power of his will becomes quite evident, as he admits to his mother:

> I cannot shake it off. Time and change (I have tried both before breaking silence), do nothing to wear it out. Remember, I was with my father. Remember, I saw his face when he gave the watch into my keeping, and struggled to express that he sent it as a token you would understand, to you. Remember, I saw him at the last with the pencil in his failing hand, trying to write some word for you to read; but to which he could give no shape. The more remote and cruel this vague suspicion that I have, the stronger the circumstances that could give it any semblance of probability

> to me. For heaven's sake let us examine sacredly whether there is any wrong entrusted to us to set right. (59)

In essence, the very idea that he is connected—even indirectly—to some wrongdoing or exploitation awakens the sense of justice and action in Clennam's heart. Although "there was the subject seldom absent from his mind, the question what he was to do henceforth in life; to what occupation he should devote himself," he is continuously reminded of "his misgiving that there was some one with an unsatisfied claim upon his justice" (189). Thus, Clennam's need to reconcile old wrongs becomes his defining purpose, governing his decisions and actions, although he is completely unaware of this.

This development can also be seen in his efforts to aid Daniel Doyce—as well as the Dorrits—in his battles with the Circumlocution Office. In fact, the determination one would expect to find in Clennam's pursuit of love is quite evident in his dealings with impenetrable bureaucracy. Clennam's persistent attempts to find the answers he needs evince not only his previously mentioned sense of justice, but also the genuine strength of character of which he has consistently denied possession. Clennam's ceaseless inquiry, "I want to know," is not the befuddled request of a desperate man: it is the ultimate realization of individuality. Fundamentally, it is the call of one's self to discover the truth of one's existence. Though many critics have characterized it as symbolic of the futility of action—as when Trilling notes that it "seems to forecast the terrible 'I prefer not to' of Bartleby the Scrivener" (154)—it may also be indicative of a contrary point. First, the very fact that Clennam refuses to accept the Barnacles' ruses suggests that he is not as helpless as everyone else in the novel appears to be. Secondly, the fact that Clennam's persistence drives the Barnacles to such confusion and distress clearly suggests that

Clennam's method slashes right to the heart of Barnacle-ism and threatens to undermine their comfortable existence. Finally, since Clennam must evoke his individuality to serve his ends, he subconsciously reveals an awareness of his ability to act effectively. Clennam wants to "know." This speaks to his larger purpose: to know himself, to know the world, and to know his place in it. Clennam seeks the revelation of secrets—bureaucratic or otherwise—because his usefulness and a concomitant sense of self lie behind them.

Significantly, Amy becomes the initial influence that spurs Clennam's quest of existential discovery, which is inextricably tied to the revelation of his father's sins. Clennam momentarily recognizes that he has feelings for her, but they are misunderstood as "ties of innocent reliance on one hand, and affectionate protection on the other" (189), for Clennam has not yet understood Amy's example of how to properly understand the relationship between the past and present. He can only see her in her youthful aspect—like his vision of *himself* as eternally stuck in childhood—the child in need of attention and devotion. Only after Clennam sinks to the existential depths of writing off his identity and succumbing to the social disease of Merdle-ism does he begin to see the error in his appraisal of Amy's existence—and by extension *his* existence—and in his acceptance of responsibility he seems to rediscover a partial sense of individuality. Clennam dismisses the notion of "nobody", and the first person pronoun "I" resurfaces in his language, as when he informs Pancks: "I . . . who have ruined my partner! . . . I have ruined Doyce! . . . I have ruined him" (681). He finally realizes his oft-ignored adoration for Little Dorrit, and begins to confront his self-negating errors:

> When I first gathered myself together," he thought, "and set something like purpose before my jaded eyes, whom had I before me, toiling on, for a good object's sake, without encouragement, without notice, against ignoble obstacles that would have turned an army of received heroes and heroines? One weak girl! When I tried to conquer my misplaced love, and to be generous to the man who was more fortunate than I, though he should never know it or repay me with a gracious word, in whom had I watched patience self-denial, self-subdual, charitable construction, the noblest generosity of the affections? In the same poor girl! (689)

Thus, Clennam comes to play the titular role, "the Pupil of the Marshalsea," of Book II, Chapter 27, learning to rediscover himself in the shadow of the prison's walls and through the memory of Little Dorrit. Clennam begins to "consider the improbability" (699) that he is an individual capable of feelings and it is not too late in his life to enter into a relationship and reciprocate someone's love, suggesting to himself that Amy "might not have thought him old" (699). Clennam realizes that he had buried his feelings for Amy all along, and, in doing so, he had likewise concealed his own sense of self. Thus, Amy's story becomes Clennam's story, for it is through her example that he finds himself, as the narrator informs us:

> . . . looking back upon his own poor story, she was its vanishing point. Everything in its perspective led to her innocent figure. He had traveled thousands of miles towards it; previous unquiet hopes and doubts had worked themselves out before it; it was the centre of the interest in his life;

> it was the termination of everything that was good and pleasant in it; beyond there was nothing but mere waste, and darkened sky. (702)

Essentially, Amy functions as an angelic figure who exhibits true understanding of her existence and performs noble acts of goodness, and by accepting her love and example, Clennam can come to know himself, and likewise perform some useful role in the world. Thus, Amy gradually becomes the beginning and end of Clennam's life, the means by which he might finally understand his own being. He continues to wrestle with his previous doubts through the novel's conclusion, asserting to Amy that they "must learn to part again" (777), for he still cannot wholly break free from the "they-self" mindset into which he has fallen. But Amy stands by him, helping him to work through his misconceptions. Ultimately, Amy finally seems to break through by modeling the union of past and present in her own presence, wearing her old dress and insisting that others refer to her by "never any other name" (782) than Little Dorrit. Her final exhortation to Clennam that life is not about dwelling on past or present mistakes or on temporary material things such as money helps to finally drag him out of his existential quagmire, as she reminds him that love and duty are paramount among all earthly concerns: "I never was rich before, I never was proud before, I never was happy before. I am rich in being taken by you, I am proud in having been resigned by you, I am happy in being with you in this prison . . . and comforting and serving you with all my love and truth." (778) Thus, Clennam eventually learns how to understand the true nature of his existence through Amy's tutelage, and as a result he learns how to live a "modest life of usefulness and happiness" (787), which is the end result of fully understanding one's existence.

Although this motif of the uses of the past in the understanding of being and morality is most clearly depicted in Little Dorrit, it can undoubtedly be seen in many other novels published subsequent to A Christmas Carol, particularly the very late works starting with Little Dorrit, and in the existential conflicts that many other characters must face within them. Clearly, the struggles of David Copperfield, Dr. Manette, Pip, and John Harmon mirror those we have just seen in Arthur Clennam, for they all must overcome their fractured understandings of their existence in time, particularly related to their past experiences, before they can function as "heroes" of their relative narratives. Similarly, the later novels also give us several examples of characters who never truly realize their existences, just as we find in Little Dorrit that a majority of the characters cannot break out of their limited self-perception—such as Fanny and Tip Dorrit, the Barnacles, most of the Marshalsea's residents, Mrs. General, Casby, and Flora—or they cease to exist before *fully* coming to that realization, as in the cases of William Dorrit, Merdle, Mrs. Clennam, and Blandois. Ultimately, the final purpose of this motif of the relationship between past and present in these novels is to reveal that the study of the past self is a possible window through which being and existence can be "authentically" understood. Importantly, the analysis of existence does not end there, for the sound determination of "authentic" being is merely one step in the process of realizing the "authentic" being of the world, the connections between its inhabitants, and the true morality that is inherent to "authentic" being. As we will see in the next chapter, death is the most important step on this journey, as it clarifies one's purpose in the present and reveals some of the mistaken conceptions of society for the falsehoods that they are.

Chapter 3

"Come up and be dead": Death and Nothingness in Our Mutual Friend

Dickens' concern for the individual's relationship with and understanding of his or her past was accompanied by a similar existential trepidation regarding the individual's relationship with his or her death and the death of others, as well as with the very concept of death itself. In fact, death plays a pivotal role in the struggle of the individual to understand his or her existence in Dickens' works, for, while the past is an element of the individual's existence that needs to be recovered in order to understand that existence, the individual's understanding and acceptance of death serves *two* purposes, as it is something that must be incorporated in one's understanding of one's *daily* existence, while it also serves as the crisis point of self-realization. In this regard, we find another anticipation of existentialism, as death is an essential aspect of the philosophies of the existentialist writers on which we have focused so far, particularly Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, and specifically in that the existentialist concern for the relationship between death and existence likewise centers on the means by which the encounter of death serves as the moment at which one's individual, "authentic" existence is disclosed.

Admittedly, death scenes are fairly common in English literature, particularly from the Victorian period; as Garrett Stewart explains, the death scene was "received by nineteenth-century novelists as virtually the mandate of their narrative mission and the highest calling of their prose, the inalienable bond between story and mortality" (Death

51). Of course, this was not a purely Victorian literary convention or innovation: from the very inception of the novel form, death scenes have played a central role in the expression of a novel's intent; in fact, many of them form the axes of many novels' central themes. But, more importantly, they in many ways betray the author's grasp at transcendence:

> The death scene thereby becomes not just a sounding board of moral ultimates or psychological limits but an isolated field of entirely verbal energies and intersections. Death in fiction aspires beyond mimesis to an absolute poesis of the word. At the same time, the death scene inscribes an inevitable rehearsal of closure not only as inherent sense of limit but as ever-nearing end, the point where all utterance dissipates again to the fund of silence from which it comes. (Stewart, Death 5)

Amidst all of these differences of theme and content, a new focus on the nature of the self emerges, as Stewart elaborates:

> If death in the Victorian novel can be taken to mark something like the intersection between (and at the same time final divergence of) sociology and psychology in their mutual plotting of identity within community, then the manifest removal of self from the populated world is also subjectively defined by the interval, either temporal or spatial, traversed within that self. (Death 50)

So, as the avid reader surely knows, or *should* know, Dickens did not *invent* the death scene; however, one must admit that he certainly took it to another level, particularly in his identification of the correspondence between individual selfhood with the personal

experience of death. As Stewart readily admits, "Fictional identity from Dickens forward is in multiple ways founded on death or figured by its extremity" (Death 10).

As Dickens' works grew in philosophical maturity, Dickens gradually intensified his focus on death, and he eventually developed a theme whereby death is the essential moment of one's existence, and, in order for one to fully understand one's existence—and thereby put the various aspects of daily life into perspective—one must try to imagine and accept one's *own* death through the objective witnessing of the death of others. Ultimately, Dickens eventually began to comprehend that death is an essential element in life, that one's death conveys meaning on one's life, and that one must accept one's death before fully understanding one's purpose in the present time.

It can justly be said that Dickens had very strong feelings about death, particularly when it touched his own life. Dickens' devastated reaction to the passing of his sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, is the most famous example of Dickens' personal experience with death, for it was an event that deeply touched him, and it may have partly inspired some of his early novels and characters. In fact, subsequent to Mary's passing, Dickens' letters contain his most sentimental descriptions in any of his writings, as he described the depths of sorrow to which Mary's death had driven him. "Of our sufferings at the time, and all through the dreary week that ensued . . . no one can imagine what they were," Dickens informed Thomas Beard in a letter shortly after Mary's passing, "You have seen a good deal of her, and can feel for us, and imagine what a blank she has left behind" (Letters I, 259). In his distraught mind, Dickens elevated Mary to a saintly figure, and he thereby felt the pain even more:

> I have lost the dearest friend I ever had. Words cannot describe the pride I felt in her, and the devoted attachment I bore her. She well deserved it, for with abilities far beyond her years, with every attraction of youth and beauty, and conscious as she must have been of everybody's admiration, she had not a single fault, and was in life almost as far above the foibles and vanity of her sex and age as she is now in Heaven. (Letters I, 263)

The loss of Mary would test Dickens for many years, and memories of her would haunt his thoughts and dreams—"I dreamed of her every night for many months – I think for the better part of a year" (Letters III, 483), he admitted to Mary's mother, his mother-in-law—particularly in the odd instance in Italy when Dickens dreamed of her ghost asking him, "What is the True religion?" (Letters IV, 196). Moreover, Mary's death would affect all of Dickens' writings during this period, notably through the deaths of Oliver Twist's mother and, of course, Little Nell (Kaplan 95).

However, even in these dark times, when Dickens could only react to death with superstitious dreams and gushy sentiment, he began to realize the kernel of what would later blossom into a more comprehensive understanding of death. "For her who is dead I can feel no sorrow, for I know that before a single care of life had wounded her pure heart, she has passed quietly away to an immortality of happiness and Joy," Dickens wrote to an unknown correspondent, remarking instead that he worried more for "those who are left behind to recollect what she was here; to miss her sweet face and her winning smile" because they "are indeed objects for sympathy and compassion" (Letters I, 268). Later, Dickens would further expand on these sentiments, in a letter to his friend, Daniel Maclise, immediately prior to his departure for America: "You know I try to

believe that the main usefulness and purpose of Death, is to make us fonder for each other, and to bind us together more closely during the brief term of our existence here. I never felt the Truth of this, more, than when we parted t'other day" (Letters III, 8). As Patrick McCarthy has observed, Dickens' changing understanding of death began to shift its focus from the dead to the living, "for the ways death bore back upon those who survived" (131). Essentially, Dickens' letters show that his feelings gradually began to shift towards a more philosophical understanding of death, whereby it might serve as an opportunity for the survivors of the deceased to reflect on their own condition, their purposes in life, or their understanding of themselves. Ultimately, in his later works, Dickens quite clearly suggested that death serves an important purpose for an individual, for it forces that individual to take stock of his or her life before realizing the truths that death discloses: that human beings are connected together, and the responsibilities that spring from these connections are the most important aspects of existence, as opposed to the acquisition of material wealth or the pursuit of earthly pleasures, the value of which is ultimately struck down in the realization that material possessions and social standing will eventually crumble and fade away into nothing.

Dickens' changing understanding of death can most clearly be seen in his later novels. John Jordan has quite rightly suggested that Dickens "is the great novelist of goodbyes" (32), including both temporary and permanent forms of farewell, for there are arguably few novelists who employ death so frequently or effectively. Indeed, Dickens' works are marked by the presence of death from as early as his second novel, Oliver Twist—whether through the ominous threat of its occurrence to the main characters, the sheer number of mortalities in each narrative, or the preponderance of each novel's

characters on the nature of death—and perhaps to a greater extent than one finds in most other serious novelists' works. However, Dickens would require some time before he was fully capable of dramatizing his opinions in his works, and his earlier works do not establish a solid connection between death and a larger purpose. Even in the case of one of Dickens' most famous death scenes, that of The Old Curiosity Shop's Nell, Dickens clearly had not yet realized a philosophy of death, despite the narrator's poetic waxing that "it is hard to take to heart the lesson that such deaths will teach, but let no man reject it, for it is one that all must learn. . . . When Death strikes down the innocent and young . . . a hundred virtues rise, in shapes of mercy, charity, and love. . . . Of every tear that sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves, some good is born, some gentler nature comes" (659). Indeed, Dickens clearly aspired to make a transcendent point in the novel's conclusion, but the novel's concluding crescendo is hollow, for Dickens' words are ultimately proven to be untrue. Little is learned from Nell's death: her grandfather cannot accept her death and joins her in death shortly thereafter, while the inevitable "righting of wrongs" at each of Dickens' conclusions occurs through the auspices of providence, fate, or good will, and not through any character's having witnessed Nell's passing and reformed in its wake.[38] In a sense, Nell's death has no effect on the novel's world. In fact, it would not be until A Christmas Carol and later novels—particularly his penultimate

[38] The importance of Nell's death is further undermined by the fact that Dickens saw Nell's death as some sort of game with his readers, wherein he might test his abilities to manipulate their sentiments. Dickens gloried in the effusive concern and sadness her death provoked in his readers: "I am inundated with imploring letters recommending poor little Nell to mercy.—Six yesterday, and four today (it's not 12 o'Clock yet) already!" (Letters II, 153), he crowed to his publishers. Essentially, Nell's death is primarily an exercise in sentimental manipulation, and not philosophical speculation.

work, Our Mutual Friend—that Dickens would be fully able to dramatize a more complex philosophy of life and the meaning of death.[39]

Eventually, Dickens' understanding of death would become more complex, with a renewed focus on the effect of death on the living, while he gradually learned to express his ideas more specifically in his novels. As Stewart aptly suggests, Dickens would come to see that death is the key opportunity for human beings to come to realizations about themselves and their existence, for "human meaning at death grows both cumulative and end-stopped, is made comprehensive at last, transparent, bounded, irreversible, and communicable" ("Secret" 178). As we have seen, Dickens' later novels often begin with the main characters immersed in a limited existence, and they have a myopic perspective of their purposes in life or their responsibilities to themselves and others. However, by witnessing the deaths of others, or coming quite close to experiencing their own deaths, Dickens' characters come to realize the error of their ways and they come to see the meaningless void beneath society's values and the divisions between its members. Moreover, Dickens' protagonists begin to understand the primary lessons of death: namely, the revelations of the inherent and unbreakable connections between individuals, and an individual's responsibility to use his or her existence to make life worth living, to pursue one's potential, and to serve a useful purpose to other individuals. Essentially, through death, Dickens' characters come to have a better understanding of life. Indeed, over the course of his mature works and ultimately through his last three complete

[39] Admittedly, what I have written about Nell's death can arguably apply to Paul Dombey's death, for even though Dickens depicts that event with significantly more poetry and profundity, it still lacks any real effect on the novel's other characters or its world. Indeed, as we will see below, Paul's death serves only one thematic purpose regarding death—to reveal his father's attempted denial of death's reality—while it also is a heavy-handed attempt to goad tears from his readers' eyes once again. On the other hand, Dombey and Son's examination of society's fear of death, notably through the characters of Dombey the elder and the skeletal "Cleopatra," is more indicative of Dickens' growing understanding of mankind's often contentious relationship with death.

novels, Dickens would finally develop that earlier idea expressed in the letter to Maclise, whereby he was able to explore exactly how death reflects back on the living, and what one might learn from it.

By placing such an important emphasis on death in his later works, Dickens again anticipated a major element of existentialist philosophy. Clearly, death is a central concept in existentialism—and, admittedly, philosophy as a whole—which has led many critics to see "in this fact . . . an evidence that there is a kind of morbidity in the existentialist outlook, a preoccupation with the weakness and mortality of man rather than with his strength" (Macquarrie 193-4). In fact, it is this accusation that drove Sartre to compose his famous introductory lecture to existentialism, "L'Existentialisme est un humanisme," wherein he explained that existentialism is not so sinister or unnecessarily contrarian, for "by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity" (32). Indeed, as we will see, existentialism approached the concept of death in a markedly similar way to Dickens' treatment of death. Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus' works all concur that human beings naturally run, or "fly," from death because they have a misunderstanding of their present state of material existence. However, for all of these philosophers, death serves as the revelatory moment through which individuals come to a better understanding of the meaning of existence and individuality, for the factuality of death and not-being, or nothingness, ultimately shows that existence is much more complex than human beings tend to comprehend it, as there is much more than material and essential presence to existence.

I. Flight from Death: The "They" Interpretation of Death

In each of Dickens' later novels, the main characters initially share the inability to confront and embrace death, because their understanding of their existence is restricted by their acceptance of the limitations others place on them. As we have seen, each novel's characters partake in a dominant mode of self-perception wherein each individual is wholly defined by how others see him or her, or what others want him or her to be—the "they-self." The "they-self" is an understanding of existence solely according to the immediate—the present—and, just as it involves a rejection or obliviousness of the place of the past in one's understanding of oneself, the "they-self" understanding of existence likewise entails a fear of death and the attempt to somehow flee or avoid death's imminence. This inevitably results in an "inauthentic" understanding of one's existence and the possibilities for development and action within it. Ultimately, each character must struggle to shuffle off the influence of the "Theys" around them by learning to accept the inevitability of death and by subsequently living with the understanding that accumulation of material goods and social status cannot allow one to circumvent it.

This is fairly consistent with the treatment of death in the branch of existentialist thought on which I have focused. Kierkegaard initiates the discussion in The Concluding Unscientific Postscript, in which he elaborates on the various means that non-subjective thinking tends to view certain elements of existence. In particular, he explains how human beings universally are unable to fully understand death:

> On that topic I know what people ordinarily know: that if I swallow a dose of sulfuric acid I will die, likewise by drowning myself or sleeping in coal gas etc. I know that Napoleon always carried poison with him, that

> Shakespeare's Juliet took it; that the Stoics regarded suicide as a courageous act and others regard it as cowardice, that one can die from such a ludicrous trifle that the most solemn person cannot help laughing at death, that one can avoid certain death, etc. . . . However, despite this almost extraordinary knowledge or proficiency of knowledge, I am by no means able to regard death as something I have understood. (Concluding 166-7)

As Kierkegaard elaborates, true subjectivity, as opposed to rational objectivity, allows one to fully consider the ramifications of death: ". . . for the subject it is an act to think his death. For a human being in general . . . to think death in general certainly is not an act; it is merely some such thing in general, and basically it is not easy to say what a some such thing is" (169). Essentially, Kierkegaard suggests that most people are predisposed to think of death as something general, something that happens and will happen to them, but with a dismissive and insouciant air as something that has no real effect on their lives or their existence. They know *of* death, but they do not really *know* death.

Heidegger concentrates a good deal of his analysis of existence on the conflict between the "they-self" understanding of existence and the imminent power of death over life. Heidegger's argument centers around the peculiar phenomenon by which Dasein—man, or the Cartesian cogito—seems always to be in a state of fear regarding death. However, this is not a flaw in Dasein's character; rather, it is an inevitability, for Dasein is always aware of its own death, which is what differentiates Dasein from other entities—like furniture, for instance—and as such cannot help but "know of death in the

manner of a knowing that shrinks back," or shies away from the possibility of non-existence, and therefore "Dasein itself has the possibility of evading its death" (Concept 12E).[40] In other words, the potential awareness of death is what makes Dasein unique in the universe, but when faced with the massive responsibilities of this uniqueness, Dasein runs away from itself.

However, although this is a state of existential misperception that is inherent to Dasein's existence, Heidegger ultimately traces it to Dasein's embrace of the "They," "the publicness with which we are with one another in our everyday manner" (Being 296), under whose flattening influence Dasein loses any "authentic" understanding of existence. According to the "public" interpretation of existence, death loses any relevance or power because of the public knowledge that "someone or other 'dies' . . . people who are no acquaintance of ours are 'dying' daily and hourly" (Being 296-7). As such, death becomes merely another "everyday" phenomenon, "a well-known event occurring within-the-world" (Being 297)—innocuous, insignificant, and taken for granted, like the regular appearance of the morning sunrise or the neighborhood bus. Admittedly, the possibility of death is not dismissed *completely*; rather, its consequence for the individual is transformed into a non-event: something "must duly arrive from somewhere or other, but which is proximally *not yet present-at-hand* for oneself, and is therefore no threat" (Being 297). As such,

> Death is not at all conspicuous, but is simply taken for granted as part of everyday life. Thus death sinks to the status of a completely normal occurrence, something that crosses the ken of one's existence fleetingly,

[40] It should be noted that Heidegger does not mean to imply that Dasein can *evade* its death as such; rather, Dasein is able to evade *thinking* about its death. In short, Dasein can be in denial regarding its own death.

> without leaving any traces, without exciting any special notice or raising any special question; it is reduced to a condition of bland inconspicuousness. (Demske 29-30)

Within the public understanding of existence, death's limitations on one's existence are thereby accepted almost half-heartedly as something that will occur, but Dasein does not actually grapple with the reality and implications of its own death. Death is made impersonal in that it "is perverted into an event of public occurrence which the 'they' encounters" (Heidegger, Being 297). In short, death's essentially personal character—personal in such a way that an individual's death is only his or her own and cannot be taken by another—is stolen away, and, by extension, Dasein's "authentic" understanding of its existence can never be recovered as long as Dasein holds onto this misapprehension.

Dickens' works often address this "public" understanding of death, whereby death is understood *to happen*, but never fully accepted. Even though numbers of human beings continue to die in each novel, most of the characters—particularly those who are most connected to the "public" element of existence, those involved in the upper reaches of society—can go from day to day without noticing those dying around them. Although we, the readers, are especially attuned to notice the sheer prevalence of death in each novel, the characters within the world are unable or unwilling to confront the presence of death directly in front of them. In fact, these same characters are surprised when they are confronted with the bare facts of death's occurrence. Thus, in Bleak House, for instance, when Jo the crossing-sweeper is taken in by Esther and her maid, Charley is initially surprised that Jo might be willing to sleep outside, for she asks of him, "but don't you

know that people die there," to which Jo responds that, "They dies everywheres . . . they dies more than they lives, according to what *I* see" (492). This sentiment is repeated again upon Jo's death when the narrator calls out to the various "Theys" in the novel to notify them that Jo is "Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, everyday" (734). Dickens may be accused of blatant sentimentality in this and similar passages, but there is a significant point here. In the world of Bleak House, the Dedlocks, the Smallweeds, and even sympathetic characters like Esther do not have a real sense of death because they are able to distance themselves from it, and so they can live as if they will never die until they are confronted with their own deaths. However, Jo is able to see the dying people around him because death is a very real and personal possibility for him; confronted with its occurrence on a daily basis, Jo is thus aware that his continued presence on London's streets and back alleys will have an inevitably fatal conclusion.

Moreover, Dickens observes that the sanitized and impersonal understanding of the death of others unavoidably results in the dehumanization of others, whereby dying individuals become mere numbers of corpses. By dehumanizing the dead, the various "Theys" are able to rob death of its significance; as a result, it becomes a non-event that can be recompensed with money, turned into a darkly humorous subject, or simply laughed off. The most striking instance of this can be found in A Tale of Two Cities, where we find that the death of others becomes no more than a horrifying game in which the list of the deceased evolves into only a macabre tally or score. Significantly, this understanding of death is shared by many groups of characters in the novel, and not only

the infamous raging hordes of the French Revolution. The Marquis D'Evremonde, representative of the pre-revolution French nobility as well as all upper classes of every nation, is the cause of the first death in the novel, and his reaction to it is consistent with this common disregard of death. Upon learning of his complicity in the death of a child, his sole response is to opine that "it is extraordinary" that the peasants "cannot take care of [them]selves and [their] children," and he seems more concerned with the effect the accident has had on his horses (115). Later, when he is informed that "so many die of want; so many more will die of want" on his estate, his only reaction is absolute disinterestedness: "Again, well? Can I feed them?" (122). Eventually, the Marquis' disregard for the lives of his subordinates is absorbed into his sense of his rights and privileges, as he complains to Darnay that France is in a "very bad, very bad" state because his "not remote ancestors held the right of life and death over the surrounding vulgar" (127), but the nobility have since lost this perquisite of their position. This may be an accurate portrayal of the nobles' treatment of the less fortunate that precipitated the violence of the revolution, but Dickens also clearly makes a statement regarding those in power in *any* society: they cannot appreciate the value of the lives of those beneath them, and, as a result, the death of the common man is a meaningless occasion with little application to their own lives.

Importantly, Dickens' depiction of the Marquis cannot be read only as an attack on the wealthy and powerful, or merely as an accurate recreation of the social realities of pre-revolutionary France because this disregard for death is likewise exhibited in those characters from the lower classes. As Dickens continues with his account of revolutionary furor, he weaves a "numbers-of-dead" motif into each blood-soaked scene.

Significantly, though bloodshed and violence seem to overwhelm the typical reader's imagination to the point of desensitization, the quoting of numbers seems to stand out uncomfortably from the gradually less horrifying brutality. The motif begins with the aftermath of the raid on the Bastille when out of the crowd of peasants the narrator focuses on "seven dead faces . . . seven gory heads on pikes" (230). Later, Dickens focuses on the Guillotine, the "Cross" of a new religion of violence, whose efficiency is noted by the "twenty-two friends of high public mark, twenty-one living and one dead, it had lopped the heads off, in one morning, in as many minutes" (284). The motif culminates with the account of Carton's death as one of fifty-two condemned prisoners. Interestingly, while Darnay and, subsequently, Carton wait for death, there are two countdown sequences that precede it: first, the countdown of the hours until his fate—"nine gone for ever, ten gone for ever, eleven gone for ever, twelve coming on to pass away" (363)—and secondly, the prisoners in line before Carton, ticked off rhythmically through the conclusion, "count One . . . count Two . . . count Twenty-Two" (389). The coincidence between the passing of the hours and the passing of individuals is a clear reminder of the earlier quoted sentiment from Bleak House: Dickens sees that society is at a point where individuals cease to see the humanity in death, despite the fact that hundreds are dying around them with every hour. This point is made even clearer in his effort to re-humanize those empty numbers through the conversation between Carton and the innocent seamstress, for we cannot read this passage without being confronted with the fact that these statistical figures have real faces and lives. However, this realization is made only by Carton—as he attempts to comfort her and provide some dignity to her passing—and by the reader, for the rabid members of the mob who witness the

executions see only "count Twenty-Two" and "Twenty-Three" (389). The lesson is lost on the characters in the novel's world, but it stands out to Dickens' audience. Thus, Dickens clearly passes judgment on society's understanding of death: we fail to see those dying around us, and even if we do, it is ultimately meaningless to us, because death has been made so impersonal and abstract. Significantly, this judgment is levied against all individuals in society, and not simply those at the top: every member of society—from noblemen to bourgeois revolutionaries—is complicit in this process by which death is dehumanized, made impersonal, and generally disregarded.[41]

Heidegger notes that this process whereby the death of others is made public, converted into an innocuous everyday event, and subsequently disregarded, is not only symptomatic of the "They's" inherently insular point of view, but it is also ultimately for the purpose of facilitating the "they-self's" control over the individual's self-perception. The "They's" power over the individual mind relies on the individual's acceptance that one's existence can only be understood according to a state of existence with or among others, and that existence is relegated only to the everyday or the present. The facticity of death is a threat to this understanding of existence because it is an inherently personal event that can only be experienced uniquely by each individual, or as Heidegger notes, "*No one can take the Other's dying away from him*. . . . Dying is something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself at the time. . . . death is in every case mine" (Being 284). This belies the understanding of one's existence according to the "They," because it

[41] Dickens' journalism likewise evinces an awareness that the public dehumanization of death leads to a commoditization of it, against which he railed in articles such as "Some Recollections on Mortality" and "Trading in Death," wherein Dickens noted the callous habit of making profit off of the dead, as evinced in the gaudy funeral preparations surrounding the Duke of Wellington's demise, for "a system of barbarous show and expense was found to have gradually erected itself above the grave, which, while it could possibly do no honor to the memory of the dead, did great dishonor to the living" (Selected 438).

reveals an innately *individual* phenomenon of existence, which occurs regardless of one's environment or of other individuals. In short, death discloses the fact that there is more to existence than "existence-with-others."

Moreover, the reality of death implies a different state or form of existence at a future date, which thereby negates the idea that existence is only manifested in the everyday—at some point, the everyday will be no more, or, at any rate, it will be different. Thus, Heidegger establishes that there is a conflict between the possibility of death—"a distinctive potentiality-for-Being which belongs to Dasein's ownmost Self" (Being 297)—and the dominant ethos of the "They," which aggravates the *temptation* to cover up from oneself one's ownmost Being-towards-death" (Being 297). As we have seen, the "They" attempts to rob death of its revelatory power by providing "a *constant tranquilization about death*" (Being 298), whereby death is converted into a far-off occurrence, happening to others but not to oneself, which thereby makes death a non-event, and something which the individual need not consider or confront. As John Macquarrie explains, Heidegger realizes that, "Throughout the ages men have shunned the sight of death and the mention of death, and they have devised innumerable ways of assuring themselves, when the reality of death inevitably confronts them, that death does not really change anything and that after death it will be business as usual" (197-8). Heidegger thus postulates that if Dasein chooses to confront its death—as we will see below—"the '*they*' collapses" and is pushed "into insignificance" (317).

Sartre likewise takes up this point in L'Être et le néant, wherein he acknowledges that human beings tend to have a conflicting relationship with the possibility of death or non-existence. Sartre recalls Kierkegaard and Heidegger's assertions related to the

experience of "anxiety," and he unites their seemingly contradictory explanations of anguish as the recognition of the possibility of nothingness and freedom. In fact, for Sartre, "anxiety," or "anguish" as it is sometimes translated, is the apprehension that one's existence is always experienced as lacking because Sartre insists that consciousness is always "consciousness of being," which in turn is consciousness of one's future being; Sartre suggests—in his customary circumlocutive manner—that this consciousness of the future is experienced with horror because one *is* and *is not* one's future self simultaneously, for "*I am the self which I will be, in the mode of not being it*" (Being 68). Thus, anguish and lack are the individual's expressions of the acknowledgement of the individual's multiple possibilities—which can be understood as the acknowledgement of what the individual is not (nothingness) or what the individual ultimately will be (death or not-being). Sartre also observes human beings play "a permanent game of *excuses*," like that of the "they-self," that "reduc[e] us to *never being anything but what we are*" (Being 79), which Sartre characterizes as a "flight before anguish" (Being 81). In this concept of "flight," Sartre clearly echoes Heidegger's notion of the "they-self's" flight from death, as he suggests that "we flee from anguish by attempting to apprehend ourselves from without as an Other or as *a thing*" in "an already constructed process , expressly designed to hide from ourselves anguish" (Being 82). This "constructed process" is part of what Sartre terms "Bad faith" (Being 83). Like Heidegger's "they-self," this "bad faith" is a means of escaping the truth of one's existence and the uncomfortable elements involved in it, the most notable of which is death; however, it is ultimately a foolhardy enterprise, as with the "they-self," for "I flee in order not to know, but I can not avoid knowing that I am fleeing; and the flight from anguish is only a mode

of becoming conscious of anguish" (83). In short, individuals reject their individuality and accept a false state of objectification because of the uncomfortable possibilities of death and non-existence. However, they are only fooling themselves, for they are in fact denying the fundamental aspect of their existence because, as we will see below, non-existence and death are intrinsic elements of existence.

Sartre's fictional and dramatic works also take up this idea. For example, Sartre later dramatized this point in Les mouches. In the play, Orestes is the sole individual who is conscious of his freedom, while the rest of Argos' population blindly embraces a culture of "bad faith," whereby the dead are thought to roam freely and are greatly feared. In the "Roads to Freedom" series, we discover multiple examples of "inauthentic" understanding of death. For example, in Le Sursis, we find that the French government attempts to deny the reality of death so as to motivate the masses, insisting that death in battle "wasn't so very terrible, it was an occupational accident" (Reprieve 112). We hear the proprietor of a Parisian bar admit: "My trouble is . . . that I've a horror of death. Ever since I was a small boy" (Reprieve 333). Mathieu, the closest thing to a main character in the series, likewise voices a "bad faith" opinion of death's reality and imminence, when, confronted with the sheer numbers of dead that may result from a German invasion, he callously rationalizes the potential loss: "It isn't a question of numbers. . . . Humanity replenishes itself, none is missed and none awaited. Humanity will continue on its futile journey, the usual people will ask themselves the usual questions and wreck their lives in the usual way" (Reprieve 210). However, Mathieu eventually comes to understand the totalizing power of death, the end product of war, although no one else seems to share this realization, as he thinks: "The war takes and embraces everything, war preserves

every thought and every gesture, and no one can see it, not even Hitler. No one" (Reprieve 325). Yet, despite all of these instances of denial, death hovers over the narrative: "Death, eternity, not to be escaped—the soft insinuating onset of eternity; green and viscous leaves overhead; the inevitable heap of early dead leaves" (Reprieve 129). In short, Sartre suggests that most of humanity shares an unreasonable fear of death, and, for this reason, most individuals fail to understand themselves or their potential completely—as a result, all of the characters in the series end up being quite miserable.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, Dickens' later novels frequently begin with a state of society that is dominated by a limited "They" whose respective philosophies of life are continually foisted upon the individuals within society. Ultimately, each novel is only resolved when the heroes and heroines are able to break free from the limited role that they have been assigned. Consistently, each novel's "They" has a mutual antipathy toward death, whereby those who accept their "they-selves" ignore or deny the possibility of their deaths and live as if they will never die, as represented by the accumulation of material goods, the rejection of what Dickens sees as transcendent truths—such as social obligations and one's responsibility to be useful and become what one has the potential to become—and the reluctance to consider the past or the future, thereby privileging the present time. Ultimately, through several motifs whereby death is aligned with money, property, and the belief in social divisions,[42] Dickens suggests that to live one's life in such a manner is not really living, but a sort of "death-in-life," for to exist only by way of the temporary and material is tantamount to consigning oneself to the end results of

[42] Alexander Welsh has also noted the confluence of money, death, and the "earthly city" (65) in The City of Dickens, which is fairly consistent with this reading, as the city would be the most representative symbol of mankind's faith in materialism and social divisions.

material existence: pain, death, and decay. On the other hand, as we will see below, Dickens makes a case that one might somehow redeem oneself by witnessing death and learning the lessons of death, specifically the lesson that materialism in all its forms is a limited understanding of existence that ultimately robs life of what makes it worth living.

Dombey and Son provides an excellent example of this theme, for its titular character—the arch-capitalist Paul Dombey—is the exemplar of the novel's "They," as he sits atop the pinnacle of society and espouses society's empty values. As in later similar characters, such as Podsnap, Dombey ignores everything around him except for the material and temporary, including his possessions and his social reputation and standing. Dombey is clearly the novel's representative of the "They's" flattened and limited perspective of existence and responsibility. More importantly, Dickens consistently implies that Dombey is in a state of frank denial regarding the possibility of death and the lessons to be learned from it. When Paul Dombey is born, Mr. Dombey sees this as a great event because it promises an opportunity for him to cheat death—from Dombey's warped perspective—as he will make a clone of himself in Paul, and he will thereby continue to exist eternally. When his first wife dies in childbirth, Dombey seems to be remarkably unaffected by the event, as during her funeral, he "remained as impassive and gentlemanly as ever" (115), seeming more concerned with his deportment than the significance of his wife's passing. Thus, as the narrator notes sternly: "it might have been well for Mr Dombey, if he had thought of his own dignity a little less; and had thought of the great origin and purpose of the ceremony in which he took so formal and so stiff a part, a little more" (115). Indeed, the narrator observes that Dombey's "arrogance contrasted strangely with [the funeral rite's] history" (115), clearly suggesting

that one's exposure to death would force a reconsideration of one's values, particularly if one's values are—like Dombey's—fixated on life's material and temporary pleasures. Even after the death of his son, his most treasured possession, Dombey again seems somewhat unaffected and more concerned with his reputation, as his servants note that in its aftermath, Dombey "is not 'brought down' . . . by sorrow and distress of mind. His walk is as erect, his bearing is as stiff as ever it has been" (311). Instead of mourning his son and recognizing that he played a significant role in his son's early passing, Dombey goes about things much the same as ever, attempting to start again by marrying Edith. Essentially, Dombey learns nothing from the deaths of those around him—in fact, he seems to deny that they even occurred—and it is not until his world has fallen completely apart that Dombey begins to understand the manner in which he has wasted his life.

In Dombey and Son, Dickens provides a great deal of evidence that over-privileging the material aspect of existence is tantamount to a sort of living death. The world follows Dombey in his pursuit of materialism, and its occupants embrace new technologies without pausing to consider their best employment or effects on the population. This is illustrated by the famously apocalyptic depiction of railroad construction sites, which had struck the suburbs of London like "the first shock of a great earthquake" (120). Later, as Dombey rides the railroad, Dickens takes the occasion to remark on the true nature of the "mighty course of civilisation and improvement" (121), which is a manifestation of "the triumphant monster . . . the remorseless monster . . . the indomitable monster, Death" (354-5). Mr. Morfin, Dombey's junior partner, likewise observes that a society built on and worshipful of materialism robs its individual members' lives of meaning or substance and makes them devoid of any passion or

feeling. In his words: "we go on in our clockwork routine, from day to day, and can't make out, or follow, these changes. . . . One don't see anything, one don't hear anything, one don't know anything. . . . We go on taking everything for granted, and so we go on, until whatever we do, good, bad, or indifferent, we do from habit" (559-60). Significantly, this same habit, Morfin notes, "confirms some of us, who are capable of better things, in Lucifer's own pride and stubbornness . . . that hardens us from day to day" (840) because this sense of habit depends on one "believing that all was right about me, because I was used to it" (841). Most importantly, according to Morfin, the end result of this sort of "jog-trot life" (559) is that one looks back from one's death-bed and expresses regret that "I was deaf, dumb, blind, and paralytic, to a million things, from habit" (560). Essentially, Dickens intimates that one blindly goes about living an empty and meaningless life when one only pays attention to the material and temporary, and only at the end does one realize that one never really lived at all.

In David Copperfield, David is under the spell of the novel's respective representative of the limiting "They," in the figure of Steerforth. As we have seen earlier, Steerforth serves as the voice of society for he is undoubtedly the novel's social ideal, and he frequently espouses society's values and exhibits a faith in the validity of society's divisions. Thus, David's struggle to control Steerforth's influence over him is symbolic of David's struggle to place social values in a proper perspective. Steerforth likewise displays a denial of death's possibility, as is apparent from virtually every aspect of his character. As Lawrence Frank has noticed, Steerforth "manifests a life force that is blind, chaotic, as destructive as it is potentially creative" (79), as evidenced by his consistent action without regard to consequences, particularly that of death, which is the final and

inevitable sum of Steerforth's misdeeds. Steerforth only seems to seriously consider the short and fragile nature of existence on one occasion, when David discovers him sitting pensively by Mr. Peggotty's fireplace, and Steerforth admits: "I have been sitting here . . . thinking that all the people we found so glad on the night of our coming down, might . . . be dispersed, or dead, or come to I don't know what harm" (301). Yet, Steerforth rapidly turns this serious consideration back to self-pity and haughty superiority, as he laments: "it would be better to be this poor Peggotty, or his lout of a nephew . . . than to be myself, twenty times richer and twenty times wiser, and be the torment to myself that I have been" (301). Ultimately, and to no genuine surprise, Steerforth dismisses any self-reflection: "Tut, it's nothing, Daisy! Nothing . . . I told you . . . I am heavy company for myself, sometimes" (302). Later, Steerforth casually dismisses the imminent death of Barkis, as he observes arrogantly: "It's a bad job . . . but the sun sets every day, and people die every minute, and we mustn't be scared by the common lot" (396). Indeed, Steerforth pays no attention to death or its lessons, for his ethos is similar to that of the Dombeys and Podsnaps of Dickens' universe, to "Ride on! Rough-shod if need be, smooth-shod if that will do, but ride on! Ride over all obstacles, and win the race" (David 396). For Steerforth, life is about fulfilling sensual desires, whether through drink, adventure, or sexual relations—or, as David noted in a rare instance of questioning Steerforth's methods, "pursuing any fancy that he took" (396)—without consideration for where he, or his horse, is headed.

As Edwin Eigner has noted, it is this seemingly vibrant approach to life that holds David's attraction to Steerforth, for Steerforth "seems to provide an escape from death and the grief death causes" (50). David, partly in thrall to the values of the world, is

consistently portrayed as having a stark fear of death, as evidenced in his fascination with his dead parents and the graveyard visible from his bedroom window. As Robert Lougy has observed, all things in David's life seem fated for decay and ruin, and David's narrator frequently "anticipates the consequences of time and mutability . . . in David Copperfield time always threatens to destroy the dream, the memory, the ideal" (78). Steerforth's zest for "living," as ignorant and self-consuming as it is, ostensibly represents a possible—though ultimately fictional—counterpoint to death; Steerforth's status as the novel's social darling likewise appeals to David, for in Steerforth's figure David might find the worldly security of which he has been bereft since the early days of his childhood. Therefore, Steerforth embodies both aspects of the "They" which hold such attraction for insecure individuals: freedom from death and freedom from care. It is likewise unsurprising that David should find Steerforth, for David is always running from death, persecution, and starvation. Under Steerforth's aegis, David subconsciously hopes he might find the safety for which he has searched. As Steerforth's satellite, David likewise evinces the same denial of death, such as when he explores his old house and his mother's grave, thinking of "the figure I was to make in life, and the distinguished things I was to do" (300), thereby turning his reflections on death into considerations of how best to achieve worldly success. Ultimately, David's task in the novel—and the reader's task as well—will be to pay closer attention to the deaths of others around him, and to accept that death will come to him as well, as Mrs. Creakle informs him early in the novel: "You are too young to know how the world changes every day . . . and how the people in it pass away. But we all have to learn it, David; some of us when we are young, some of us when we are old, some of us at all times of our lives" (122). In turn, only after

David has confronted his own death, can he learn the true significance at the heart of death: that one's duty is to make life worth living through useful service to others, or, as Mr. Omer, the enlightened undertaker puts it:

> . . . when a man is drawing on to a time of life, where the two ends of life meet . . . he should be over-rejoiced to do a kindness if he can. . . . And I don't speak of myself, particular . . . because, sir . . . we are all drawing on to the bottom of the hill, whatever age we are, on account of time never standing still for a single moment. So let us always do a kindness, and be over-rejoiced. (675)

As we will see below, David eventually heeds "the call of care," the sense of a lack in his identity and existence that only can be addressed through a serious consideration of death and its ramifications on existence, and makes of himself the better person that he has always striven to be.

Dickens returns to the theme of the connection between materialism and death in Bleak House. One of the clearest instances of this is in his depiction of the Dedlock clan, for Sir Leicester and his relatives seem to be completely oblivious to the deathly nature of materialism and the inevitable result of their way of life. Chesney Wold, the ancestral seat of the Dedlock family, bears extensive evidence of the death that surrounds them, as this insular world "wrapped up in too much jeweler's cotton and fine wool . . . is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air" (20). Indeed, Chesney Wold is more often than not, described in the same terms as a mausoleum, where neither life nor any consideration of anything beyond the material might thrive. As Dickens' narrator notes: "there is not much fancy otherwise stirring . . . if there be a little

at any odd moment, it goes, like a little noise in that old echoing place, a long way, and usually leads off to ghosts and mystery" (105). Even the house itself seems to be on its deathbed, as the narrator observes that "all things have an end—even houses that people take infinite pains to see, and are tired of before they begin to see them" (111). This stifled life of finery and frippery has a likewise stultifying effect on its residents, as Dickens' narrator regularly points out that Lady Dedlock is "bored to death" (21). We likewise learn that the Dedlocks are a dying breed, and their family history is written on "The Ghost's Walk," which turns out to be no more than a catalog of violent and unexpected Dedlock demises. The Dedlocks even have a family disease, gout, which the narrator notes, is "a troublesome demon, but still a demon of the patrician order. . . . It has come down, through the illustrious line, like the plate, or the pictures. . . . It is among their dignities" (255). Essentially, the Dedlock way of life is in actuality a way of death, a limited existence without any real life to it.

The same can be said of Krook and Grandfather Smallweed, both of whom exist solely for material gain. Krook's living is made through scavenging for the cast-off possessions of others, including virtually everything of which he might get hold, as he brags: ". . . I have so many things here . . . of so many kinds, and all, as the neighbours think . . . wasting away and going to rack and ruin. . . . And I have so many old parchmentses and papers in my stock. . . . all's fish that comes to my net" (70). Most notably, Krook is unabashedly miserly, as he admits, "I can't abear to part with anything I once lay hold of" (70). His violent end, while highly implausible, is undoubtedly Dickens' condemnation of Krook's way of life, for he has done nothing but accumulate and hoard, and this greed seems to have reached a miraculous critical mass. The

aftermath of Krook's demise has much in common with Scrooge's prophesied death scene, for the entire neighborhood—including the Smallweed family—convenes for the purpose of "rummaging and searching, digging, delving, and diving among the treasures of the late lamented" and "twice when the dustman is called in to carry off a cart-load of old paper, ashes, and broken bottles, the whole court assembles and pries into the baskets as they come forth" (633). In short, when one over-privileges material existence—most notably by taking materialism to the extreme of hoarding diverse forms of matter, simply for the sake of owning matter—one's fate is to never realize transcendence from this existence, whether spiritually, emotionally, or intellectually, and thus one might as well be dead already. The elder Smallweed likewise exemplifies this theme, for his body is rotting away before the readers' and characters' eyes, despite the fact that his fortune increases at compound interest. Smallweed is practically an invalid, as he physically manifests the corrosive effect of limited self-perception, for "he is in a helpless condition as to his lower, and nearly so as to his upper, limbs" (332). Dickens further emphasizes Smallweed's constricted perspective, as the novel's narrator opines that Smallweed's mind, although "unimpaired," contains only "a certain small collection of the hardest facts" and nothing beyond that; he has no sense of imagination or an ability to see beyond the immediate, for "Everything that Mr Smallweed's grandfather ever put away in his mind was a grub at first, and is a grub at last. . . . he had never bred a single butterfly" (332), and he heads a long familial line "that . . . has had no child born to it, and . . . the complete little men and women whom it has produced, have been observed to bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds" (333). The elder Smallweed has become an empty shell of a human being, rotting from the inside and in

need of having "his internal feathers beaten up" (338) before being returned to his chair like a macabre puppet. As in Krook's case, Smallweed is ostensibly dying rather than living, and such, according to Dickens, is the fate of those who cannot see beyond materialism and society's empty values.

The development of Sydney Carton's character in A Tale of Two Cities likewise establishes the tomblike nature of having a limited "they-self" existence. Carton may not have the lust for money, power, or property that we have seen in the previous characters, but he too succumbs to the "They's" influence, for he has wholly embraced a limited existence as a decadent and seemingly useless drunk. Carton may not be as ostensibly negative as a Steerforth or Dombey, and he may seem to harm only himself, but it is clear that Dickens does not approve of Carton's behavior or sense of purpose, for Carton has allowed himself to be pigeonholed into a limited and unproductive existence, and, as a result, neglects the enormous potential that Dickens takes great pains to show exists within him. In this regard, Carton's character might be grouped with two other "heroes" of Dickens' later novels—Little Dorrit's Arthur Clennam and, as we will see below, Our Mutual Friend's Eugene Wrayburn—who are characters of whom Dickens and the readers cannot help but be fond, although they frustratingly accept the limitations that society places upon them. In Carton and Wrayburn's cases, Dickens ostensibly establishes that the proscribed existence according to what society or other individuals desire is tantamount to a condemnation to death. This is made quite clear in the passage that concludes the "Jackal" chapter, wherein we first learn the state of Sydney's soul: "Waste forces within him," the narrator informs us,

> and a desert all around, this man stood still on his way across a silent terrace, and saw for a moment, lying in the wilderness before him, a mirage of honourable ambition, self-denial, and perseverance. In the fair city of this vision, there were airy galleries from which the loves and graces looked upon him, gardens in which the fruits of life hung ripening, waters of Hope that sparkled in his sight. A moment, and it was gone. Climbing to a high chamber in a well of houses, he threw himself down in his clothes on a neglected bed, and its pillow was wet with wasted tears. . . . sadly the sun rose; and it rose upon no sadder sight than the man of good abilities and good emotions, incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own help and his own happiness, sensible of the blight on him, and resigning himself to let it eat him away. (95)

What makes this all the more pathetic is that Carton is clearly conscious of his choice to deny his potential, as evidenced by the "wasted tears" on his pillow, yet he makes every possible excuse for why he does nothing to change, as when he tells Darnay: "You know me as a dissolute dog, who has never done any good, and never will" (215). Carton also makes similar excuses to Lucie Manette, as she wavers as to whether she might save him: "It is too late for that. I shall never be better than I am. I shall sink lower, and be worse" (156). Carton consciously negates himself, failing to acknowledge his potential self or the prospects for change. However, although Carton's speech smacks of conceited self-pity, he realizes a crucial aspect of his existence, for Carton compares his situation to that of "one who died young" because "all my life might have been" (156). In this regard, Dickens clearly suggests that acceptance of society's judgment and the hopelessness of

one's place in it invariably leads to apathy regarding one's potential, which is certainly akin to having died at a young age: if one is to shut oneself off from one's potential self, and neglect the individual that one might be, then one might as well be dead, for life—according to Dickens—is about production and change and becoming the "better man" one knows oneself to be, and not merely physical existence. Ultimately, as we will see below, Carton's only possible redemption is in death, for only then can he free his mind from the limitations of material existence, and create new life and a new world.

Great Expectations' Pip is the most famous example of this type of character, as he is eminently sympathetic, although he exhibits the very worst impulses of the "They." As we have seen, Pip is constantly assailed with others' expectations for him, as well as assumptions as to who he is and what he should be, which thereby induces Pip's tenuous state between aspiration and guilt. Before Pip's rise in society, he has already set himself the task of becoming a gentleman—or, in other words, he aspires to embrace a limited role within society—and consequently, he also has a dismissive perspective of death and its lessons. This is quite surprising considering that death has played a major role in Pip's life and character formation, for he is initially presented as "the small bundle of shivers" (4) in a country churchyard, his knowledge of his parents and siblings is limited to what he might derive from their tombstones, and his present existence is akin to a miraculous escape from death since he and Mrs. Joe are the lone survivors of their kin. Moreover, Pip seems to be subconsciously aware of the deathly nature of material existence, as evidenced through his occasional hallucinations of a dead and spectral Miss Havisham. "A strange thing happened to my fancy," Pip explains,

> I turned my eyes . . . towards a great wooden beam . . . and I saw a figure hanging there by the neck. A figure all in yellow white, with but one shoe to the feet; and it hung so, that I could see . . . that the face was Miss Havisham's, with a movement going over the whole countenance as if she were trying to call to me. (64)

Indeed, as we will see, Pip experiences a subconscious recognition of his empty existence, and these visions should call him to realize the destination of the path on which he is set. However, once Pip becomes enamored with the glories of social success and reputation through his exposure to Miss Havisham's lifestyle, he begins to ignore his odd prophetic visions. Instead of understanding that his fate is eventually to die and be divested of all personal possessions, Pip latches onto an alternative destiny, believing that "Miss Havisham was going to make my fortune" (133), and that he in turn would restore life to Satis House. Even when death enters into his life once again, by way of the passing of his sister, Pip still ignores the significance of that event and celebrates instead: "It was the first time that a grave had opened in my road of life, and the gap it made in the smooth ground was wonderful" (278). Mrs. Joe's death allows Pip to believe that he is fully divorced from his lowly origins, but subconsciously he knows this is not true, and that there is something he might take away from this event, as Pip feels the "perpetual suggestion of the sound of her voice or the turn of her face or figure, as if she were still alive and had often been there" (278). Essentially, Pip has more insight into his existence than he admits, but he continues to run away from his obligation to face death and reexamine his beliefs, instead taking solace in the myths of the social world. As John Jordan has observed, "Pip's reluctance to acknowledge the inevitability of parting flies in

the face of everything that experience has presumably taught him and indicates the extent to which he remains invested in fantasy solutions to his life story" (30). Ultimately, Pip will finally begin to question his values and his responsibilities, but only when he witnesses death intimately and is disabused of some his previously held beliefs.

II. Standing Witness to Death: Re-interpreting Life in the Face of Death

In response to this state of affairs, Dickens' main characters frequently sense the emptiness of their existence, while they begin to recognize the sensation of anxiety regarding that existence. This is generally experienced as a sense of dissatisfaction that cannot be satisfied through material gain or social advancement, or as a directionless sense of guilt, whose origin seems to be unfixed or uncertain. In many ways, Dickens' later heroes—such as David Copperfield, Arthur Clennam, Sydney Carton, Pip, and John Harmon—have much in common with the characters one finds in the fictional and dramatic works of Kafka, Dostoevsky, Sartre, Camus, Jean Genet, and Samuel Beckett, for they are preeminently unhappy with the states of their lives and what society and life have to offer them—it is as if they have been cast into a hostile and meaningless world with which they have no connection and with no supervising god or overarching truth by which to guide themselves or in which to take solace. Their development depends on the quest to find meaning in an absurd world, to somehow reshape the world into something more accepting of their hidden selves, and to act meaningfully—to have a real place and purpose. In this regard, Dickens was able to dramatize the seemingly impracticable issues one finds at the heart of existentialism, particularly what it means to face death and learn from that encounter. As we have already seen, Dickens presented characters who are

firmly constrained by a limited existence according to what role they must play in society and how they must behave according to society's values; every novel also provides a means for the characters to escape from this limitation, which is made possible through the repeated opportunity to witness the deaths of others and vicariously imagine or contemplate the imminent reality of their own deaths. As a result of these incidents, the characters consistently reject their previously-held notions of life and responsibility and begin to live in such a way as to be of use to others. The characters find the means to make life worth living again, and to escape from the deathly constraints of materialism and limited existence. Essentially, Dickens clearly felt that the acceptance of death can teach us something—namely, it puts one's life and values in perspective and reveals how important one's actions in the present are. We may run from it and refuse to face it, but in reality all we run from is the truth about ourselves. Thus, the acceptance of one's death leads to a revivification of one's life and a more comprehensive understanding of existence as a whole.

As noted earlier, the witnessing of death is a major aspect of existential thought, particularly in the works of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus—though for slightly differing reasons in each. All three agree that death must be confronted by the individual and that nothingness is an inherent component of being, but these two points have different levels of significance for each author. Similarly, they all concur on the idea of "anxiety," or "anguish," and how it relates to the realization of death's inevitability.

Heidegger's Dasein is incomplete until death, and thus its present existence is characterized by a sense of lack; as Heidegger notes, "in Dasein there is undeniably a constant 'lack of totality' which finds an end with death" (286). However, as we have

seen, Dasein fears its possible future forms of being, specifically death and nothing. "Anxiety" is the state of being Dasein feels when confronted with these potential forms of being. As Heidegger suggests in the essay, "What is Metaphysics?":

> The receding of beings as a whole that closes in on us in anxiety oppresses us. We can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings only this 'no hold on things' comes over us and remains.
>
> Anxiety reveals the nothing. (101)

By revealing the other side of being, the nothing, anxiety likewise reveals the inauthenticity of Dasein's existence under the influence of the "They," for the absolutely personal nature of death discloses that "death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein," thereby signaling the unique quality of each individual, the unique existence of each, beyond existence with and among others, and "thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*" (Being 294). Even under the influence of the "They," Dasein is constantly aware of this lacking potential being, for "*even in average everydayness, this ownmost potentiality-for-Being, which is non-relational and not to be outstripped, is constantly an issue for Dasein*" (Being 299). Heidegger suggests that feelings of guilt and anxiety are manifestations of Dasein's awareness of its incomplete being, and function as a sort of "call," whereby Dasein is called to realize the various potentialities of its existence, especially the possibility of not being: "the call of conscience has the character of an *appeal* to Dasein by calling it to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self" (Being 314). Thus, Heidegger postulates that conscience—awareness of one's existential state—"*manifests itself as the call of care*"

(Being 322): the call coming from within, and the care being the care for one's self, the care to realize one's "authentic" being. Essentially, ". . . the one who is called is Dasein . . . absorbed by the world, and existing in the *present* . . . that to which it is called is 'authentic' Dasein, which projects itself, as thrown into the *future*" (Dastur 31). These feelings of guilt, anxiety, and inauthenticity can ultimately only be resolved or alleviated through facing death, the potential state of being that, according to Heidegger, belongs to all of us and yet belongs only to each one of us.

Sartre and Camus also see "anxiety" as being intrinsically connected to one's death and the potential disclosure of "authentic" existence. Specifically, Sartre focuses on "anxiety" to further his investigations into the relationship between being and "not being." As we have seen earlier, Sartre's "anxiety" or "anguish" is the self-doubting recognition of an individual's lack, the nothingness that lies at the heart of being. However, within Sartre's work, this is but a small part of a larger argument, and it does not lead to Heidegger's promising conclusion that completion and "authenticity" can be found at the end of anxiety's "call." Rather, for Sartre, "anxiety" is yet another piece of evidence that "non-being [is] a perpetual presence in us and outside of us, that nothingness haunts being" (Being 44), which is ultimately the central tenet of his philosophy. Camus also incorporates the notion of anxiety as a catalyst for existential awareness; in The Myth of Sisyphus, he notes that "Weariness"—Camus' notion of "anxiety" or "angst"—"comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. . . . In itself weariness has something sickening about it. . . . Mere 'anxiety,' as Heidegger says, is at the source of everything" (Myth 13). Essentially, anxiety, in its many forms and linguistic permutations, is an

important concept for existentialism, for it is the manifestation of one's awareness of one's lack, the hole in one's existence. As we will see below, Dickens' heroes frequently receive just such a "wake-up call" to re-examine their own lives and learn the lessons of death.

Heidegger recognizes that it is theoretically impossible for an individual to experience his or her own death, but he suggests that "a termination . . . of Dasein becomes 'Objectively' accessible" whereby Dasein can . . . gain an experience of death," which subsequently allows an "ontological delimitation of Dasein's totality" (Being 281) and a better understanding of Dasein's existence. Thus, Heidegger considers whether an individual can somehow employ others' deaths in coming to terms with his or her own death, while admitting that it is never the same experience, but "at most we are always 'there alongside'" (Being 282). Since an essential aspect of Dasein's existence is "being-with-others," the existence with other entities, Heidegger suggests that one Dasein "*can be represented* by another" (Being 283), and thus Dasein can begin to anticipate his or her own death through witnessing the passing of an Other, by imaginatively putting himself or herself in the place of the deceased. Essentially, anticipation of death is "to comport ourselves towards *death . . . as a possibility*" (306), or, in other words, to accept the reality of death, though not in the passive and insouciant manner of the "They," but in a real consideration of its imminence and importance for existence. It is, as Heidegger postulated in the earlier lecture, "The Concept of Time," a "*running ahead*" to "*the authentic future of one's own Dasein*" (Concept 13).

Ultimately, death is important for Heidegger and later existentialists because it serves as the point at which existence is most nakedly revealed to mankind. This is

because nothingness, or non-being, lies at the heart of existence, and thus "the end of life is thought of not as incidental to life itself, but as structurally integral to it" (Chanter 31). In other words, while Heidegger's study of Being seems to get lost in a tangential thought in its concentration on Being's opposite, he actually realizes his original objective: ". . . the analysis of death directs our view toward nonbeing, which in turn opens up the prospect of being itself. The death analysis thereby takes the first step toward the question of being, precisely by making a detour through the land of nonbeing" (Demske 73). For Heidegger, acceptance of the possibility of death reveals some fundamental aspects of existence: "the more unveiledly this possibility gets understood, the more purely does the understanding penetrate into it *as the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all*" (Being 307). In short, genuine acceptance of death reveals the existence of nothingness, and the fact that something can very easily become nothing; it also discloses the real limits and value of material existence: "we then observe not only that we are 'something' real, but also that we are creative creatures, capable of letting something emerge from nothing" (Safranski 163). Anticipation of death also exposes the uniqueness of Dasein itself, not just in that death is a unique event only felt by the individual, but also that Dasein is unique in the universe, for only Dasein is "that entity whose kind of Being is anticipation itself" (Being 307)—only Dasein can foresee and anticipate the inevitability of its death. Ultimately, the anticipation of death has one final, and most important, significance: "*anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concernful solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned freedom towards death—a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the 'they,' and which is*

factical, certain of itself, and anxious" (Being 311). Essentially, the sincere anticipation of death frees Dasein from the limitations of the "They," and allows Dasein to develop an independent—and thus, for Heidegger, authentic—perspective on itself and existence. Indeed, contemplation and acceptance of death frees an individual from the limitations of earthly existence—both material and social limitations—and discloses the fact of Dasein's independent self.

Notably, this point is also taken up by Sartre in that death is the moment at which an individual's totality is limited because "by death the for-itself[43] is changed forever into an in-itself[44] in that it has slipped entirely into the past" (Being 169). Moreover, L'Être et néant's predominant theme—as evidenced by its title—is the endlessly reciprocal relationship between being and nothing, for both define each other, and sometimes both *are* each other, and thus, existence is always tentatively "not-nothing."—if you wish to know being, then you must look, in part, to nothing. In Sartre's fictional and dramatic works, the clarifying nature of death is much more clearly expressed. In the play Les mains sales, the character Hœderer voices the most clear expression of this notion, when he says: "To know what life is worth you have to risk it once in a while" (No Exit 231). Most of the characters in the Les Chemins de la liberté series eventually come to this same conclusion, which is inevitable in that they have all been thrown into the midst of the Second World War. The invalid Charles, lying in bed next to a deceased man, envisions how his imminent death brings his life to completion: "Dead. His life was there and everywhere, impalpable, complete, as full and hard as an egg, so compact that all the forces of the world could not have introduced an atom into it" (Reprieve 62). Mathieu, in

[43] Sartre's concept of the cogito or consciousness—in essence, Sartre's Dasein.
[44] A combination of many different ideas, but—simply put—one's "essential being" or one's presence to the world.

the presence of the same corpse, discovers a temporary release for his anxiety, for the promise of death provides an answer to Mathieu's question of his freedom:

> Mathieu thought: "I had a peaceful future." Indeed he had; he had loved and hated and suffered, and the future was here and everywhere, overhead and all around him, like an ocean, and every burst of anger, every disaster, every laugh, drew sustenance from that invisible and insistent future. . . . Years and years of peace to come had gathered upon his world of objects, matured them, and set them aglow. . . . (Reprieve 86)

Sartre suggests that after confronting death, or having to accept the inevitable, and possibly approaching occurrence of one's own death, one's life cannot help but be experienced differently; as Mathieu realizes, seeing a couple of soldiers who—due to the infamous agreement at Munich—avoided battle: "All these men had striven to get away dry-eyed, all of them had suddenly seen death face to face, and all, with varying degrees of self-command, had made up their minds to die. And here they were, dazed and baffled, embedded for one more moment in a life that they no longer knew how to use" (Reprieve 443). Finally, Mathieu realizes that death clarifies his life's purpose and meaning, or rather, the lack thereof: "No more sentiment for him: all that was over now. 'Here and now I have decided that all along death has been the secret of my life, that I have lived for the purpose of dying. I die in order to demonstrate the impossibility of living; my eyes will put an extinguisher upon the earth and shut it down forever'" (Troubled 229).

For Camus, the facing of death likewise reveals an individual's being; however, what is revealed through death is the inherently absurd nature of existence, which can be found in death: "the absurd and the extra life it involves . . . *do not depend on man's will*,

but on its contrary, which is death" (Myth 63). Ultimately, however, the absurd condition of human existence redefines the nature of daily life, just as we have seen in Heidegger and Sartre's work, for recognizing absurdity discloses that "the point is to live" (Myth 65). Thus, when man is freed from the notion of fate or destiny beyond death, he is able to find happiness, like Sisyphus, for he knows that "the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling" (123). In short, Camus' concept of death ultimately teaches that there is no "higher purpose" to life and that the only purpose of existence—or the only thing that one can do with existence—is to make the most out of what life we have, to experience as much as there is to experience.

In his "mature" novels, Dickens takes a similar approach to death, thereby anticipating many of the themes of this branch of existentialism. As we have seen, many of Dickens' characters are initially complicit in the "They" philosophy of society, as they accept their limited roles within society while embracing its empty, temporary values. However, Dickens' heroes are never fulfilled or satisfied by their social existence, as they frequently detect its incompleteness. In short, Dickens' heroes often receive what might arguably be recognized as Heidegger's "call of care"—from another perspective, the call of "anxiety"—the call of the self to probe into one's existence, although it is often manifested in sentiments of ennui, guilt, uncertainty, morbidity, or simple unhappiness. Plagued by these sentiments, Dickens' heroes become aware that they must reinterpret their identities and self-conceptions, but they do not always know how to go about doing this. Ultimately, it is only through witnessing death in other characters, that Dickens' protagonists are able to truly begin the process of self-reflection and change. As we will

see, this motif runs throughout Dickens' later novels and culminates in his great novel of death, Our Mutual Friend.

David Copperfield provides an interesting example of Dickens' development of this theme, for, as we have seen, David's life is constantly haunted by the specter of death, and ultimately David can only comprehend and realize his identity, happiness, and freedom by facing death and learning its lessons. As David eventually begins to understand, he has wandered through the years of his youth blindly, admiring Steerforth and his class while subconsciously seeking social acceptance by wedding the beautiful and wealthy Dora, who is eventually revealed to be totally unfit for him. David frequently misses his chance to find true companionship with Agnes, and it is only providence—or authorial intervention—that seems to preserve her for him until he can see the error of his ways.

The dominant sentiment of the novel seems to be regret for what might have been, for David often bemoans that, "if I had known then, what I knew long afterwards" (480) then certain events might have had different outcomes. Strangely enough, David seems to receive numerous signals as to his life's improper course—sensations noticeably similar to what Heidegger has termed "the call of care"—but he always ignores them. For example, when David confesses his love for Dora to Agnes, he does not notice Agnes' attractions or goodness, as he is so concerned with wedding Dora; in the midst of this, David hears the distant enlightening call of a beggar—"Blind! Blind! Blind!" (480)—that so aptly characterizes his existential situation. However, David disregards the discomfort this stirs in his soul and presses on, determined to take Agnes for granted and make Dora his great "reward" (481). Although, death takes many of David's friends and relatives,

this only seems to make him *more* terrified of death. Even when David observes the peace with which Barkis passes away—for ultimately "Barkis is willin'" (413) for death as well—or the calm insight into life that is evinced by the mortician Omer, he still runs from death. David even seems to ignore the lessons of Dora's death. He cannot force himself to face her imminent demise, despite the fact that all of the other characters have accepted it:

> Do I know, now, that my child-wife will soon leave me? They have told me so . . . but I am far from sure that I have taken that truth to heart. I cannot master it. . . . I have tried to resign myself, and to console myself; and that, I hope, I may have done imperfectly; but what I cannot firmly settle in my mind is, that the end will absolutely come. . . . I cannot shut out a pale lingering shadow of belief that she will be spared. (705)

Although Dora has been depicted as silly and childish for the length of the novel, at the moment of her passing, she suddenly seems to understand their shared errors, while David continues to deny them. "I am afraid, dear, I was too young," she admits, "I don't mean in years only, but in experience, and thoughts and everything. I was such a silly little creature! . . . I have begun to think I was not fit to be a wife" (705). Dora realizes that their fiction of wedded bliss would not have lasted, for her beauty would have faded, and she was never David's intellectual equal, as she observes:

> . . . as years went on, my dear boy would have wearied of his child-wife. . . . He would have been more and more sensible of what was wanting in his home. . . . after more years, you never could have loved your child-wife better than you do; and, after more years, she would so have trifled and

> disappointed you, that you might not have been able to love her half so well! (705-6)

In short, Dora suddenly matures and gains insight into her life and character, and David is able to witness this personally. Yet, he does not allow himself to face death's reality, as all he sees is "darkness" (706).

In fact, it is not until the tempest that claims Steerforth's life that David finally begins to hear the interminable "call of care." Robert Lougy is quite correct when he suggests that "the chapter moves primarily toward a recognition of his own death that David can no longer conceal or evade" (87). Although the storm serves to kill off two of the novel's main characters, its primary purpose is to serve as the moment whereby David begins to accept death. The tempest happens to coincide with the climax of David's doubt about his future and his life as a whole. Thus, immediately prior to the storm's raging culmination, David seems uncertain about everything, including his identity and even his very existence:

> I was seriously affected, without knowing how much, by late events; and my long exposure to the fierce wind had confused me. There was that jumble in my thoughts and recollections, that I had lost the clear arrangement of time and distance. . . . I could not eat, I could not sit still, I could not continue steadfast to anything. Something within me, faintly answering to the storm without, tossed up the depths of my memory, and made a tumult in them. (725-6)

However, it is only after Steerforth has passed away that David finally recognizes that he must answer that "something" inside of him, for Steerforth's demise ultimately reveals to

David the absolute foolishness of his previous values. David had embraced the temporary and material values of the world, he had made Steerforth his hero, he had attempted to imitate Steerforth, and he had acquired a socially-acceptable companion, only to find that all of these things fade away into nothing.

Therefore, David finally decides to face that from which he has been fleeing throughout the novel. His trip through Europe serves as a physical retreat from England, but also a departure from society, so that David may face his existential crisis alone and as an individual. Importantly, David must decide who he is and what his purpose should be, and he must determine exactly what mistakes he has made, and how he has hurt himself and others, so that he might later atone for them. His retreat from civilization becomes a quest to make amends for the past and to shape the future, for the benefit of other human beings, as "greater calamities would nerve me on, to be yet better than I was; and so, as they had taught me, would I teach others" (750). David departs on this trip on which he is "haunted by the ghosts of many hopes, of many dear remembrances, many errors, many unavailable sorrows and regrets" (748); although he is consumed with grief—"the hopeless consciousness of all that I had lost . . . of all that had been shattered" (748)—David eventually finds a sort of tranquility in the sense that "some better change was possible within me" (749). Moreover, David finally faces his true feelings for Agnes: "I made no effort to conceal from myself, now, that I loved her, that I was devoted to her" (753). Significantly, David does not allow his feelings for Agnes to become the same empty obsession with social acceptance that his pursuit of Dora had been; rather, David has finally matured to the point where his emotional connections with others result in positive action for someone besides himself, so David decides that his love should be

"a means of making me more self-denying, more resolved, more conscious of myself, and my defects and errors" (753). As David eventually tells Agnes, he is able to find a "better knowledge" (792) of himself through his retreat from society and the reflection upon what death might teach him. Essentially, death allows David to finally understand who he is and what he must do; only by embracing death is David able to comprehend who the protagonist of his own story is: he is the hero of his own life, but only because he faced his greatest fear and braved death.

As we also see in A Tale of Two Cities, Sydney Carton's redemption likewise occurs through the auspices of death. However, Carton's case is different, because his story focuses on the influence of one's death and "not being" on the world and others. Significantly, Carton's death serves as the supreme example of Dickens' moral code, for it is an instance of the ultimate sacrifice for the purpose of assisting or protecting others. Although Carton has been developed as a self-destructive, aimless, and seemingly useless individual, and his sacrifice does not come until the novel's conclusion, he has long understood that his only opportunity to make amends for his mistakes is self-sacrifice in the name of others, as evidenced by his foreshadowing promise to Lucie, midway through the novel: "O Miss Manette . . . think now and then that there is a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you" (159). More important, Carton does not sacrifice himself for just anyone; rather, Carton is ultimately redeemed because he replaces Charles Darnay, an individual who holds great importance for a large circle of people. Thus, Dickens suggests that Carton's death is not simply a matter of sacrifice or suicide, but an act that has real wide-ranging effects, which is ultimately what makes Carton's act truly moral.

Carton's execution also suggests that death is not the end of existence, but rather it is the beginning of another form of existence. Specifically, this new existence should not be confused with a traditional afterlife, despite Dickens' recurrent references to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it is further unlikely that Dickens is talking about heaven or hell as Carton does not think of either place before his execution, but of later events on this earthly plane.[45] Rather, this afterlife is the existence in others' memories and one's continued existence through the evident effects of one's actions in the world.[46] Therefore, Dickens concludes the novel with Carton's famous death vision, wherein he clairvoyantly anticipates the future progress of the other characters, for Dickens' point is to emphasize that one lives through others, or as Carton foresees: "I hold a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants" (390). Importantly, Carton foresees the rebirth of the world in a more ideal state, where all wrongs have been made right, where "long ranks of the new oppressors," such as Barsad and Defarge, likewise perish "by this retributive instrument," the guillotine, and where his friends' lives are "peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy" (389). Also notable is that Carton envisions the birth of Lucie's son, also named Sydney, who continues Carton's

[45] I think Dickens' employment of the "resurrection and life" citations and images is actually a sophisticated—albeit brief—analysis of Jesus as an archetypal figure. If one examines the instances of citation, they all seem to point to the prevalence of resurrection in various forms, such as Jerry Cruncher's side-job as "resurrection man," Manette's "return to life," or Carton's conclusive prophetic vision, which serves to demystify resurrection from death as an act only available to God or his son. Essentially, Dickens seems to suggest that miracles of this nature occur recurrently to *regular* people, and it is only a matter of perspective for one to recognize them. Moreover, most of the quotations of the "resurrection and life" passages point to Carton's internal conflict, and it is highly unlikely that Dickens is apotheosizing him; rather, it is more likely that this involves an understanding of Jesus and Carton as similar characters, willing to sacrifice themselves for others, and thus it is the *action* that is transcendent and not the man. In this regard, we see another similarity with Sartre's work, particularly in the shared focus on action.

[46] This is also an idea shared by Heidegger and Sartre, whereby Heidegger notes that death can serve as the transition point "from Dasein's kind of Being (or life) to no-longer Dasein . . . something present-at-hand" (Being 281), and Sartre observes that the death of others increases one's responsibility to them, for people only exist after death in the memory of others, or otherwise "they along with their pasts are annihilated" (Being 166). In essence, existence after death in the memory of others is part and parcel of one's existence as a whole.

redemption through his own achievements, "winning his way up in that path of life which once was mine" and "winning it so well, that my name is made illustrious there by the light of his" (390). Clearly Carton's death is more than a typical hero's glorious demise; rather, it is a portrayal of the unfixed and changing nature of existence. Indeed, through Sydney Carton, Dickens seems to suggest that one's existence can transcend the destruction of one's material existence, for one is never really gone as long as some evidence of one's existence remains, whether in the memory of others or through the consequences of one's actions.

Pip's story in Great Expectations also provides an example of this conflict and its resolution. As we have seen, Pip wholly embraces the "They" of society and as a consequence takes an adversarial position in relation to death. But Pip is never content with his success, and he constantly feels the sense that his existence is an empty one and that he is always missing something. This is not surprising, despite Pip's frequently reprehensible behavior and shameless snobbery, for Pip is insightful and capable of deep self-reflection, as evidenced by his perceptive self-examination in the wake of his first "crime": "I was too cowardly to do what I knew to be right, as I had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong. I had no intercourse with the world at that time, and I imitated none of its many inhabitants who act in this manner. Quite an untaught genius, I made the discovery of the line of action for myself" (41). From the very beginning of the novel, Pip is constantly haunted by uncertain feelings of guilt or fear, which are ostensibly the manifestations of his awareness that his existence is vapid and useless. For instance, on his return home, Pip feels a sensation of dread, but he cannot seem to locate its source: "I could not have said what I was afraid of, for my fear was

altogether undefined and vague, but there was great fear upon me. . . . I felt that a dread, much exceeding the mere apprehension of a painful or disagreeable recognition, made me tremble" (230). Although Pip ascribes this sentiment to recollections of "the terror of childhood" (230) it is clear that it is substantially more than that, for, at this point, Pip's new and old selves are colliding, and he is confronted with the naked meaninglessness of his current existence. After a visit to Newgate with Wemmick, Pip stands again at the convergence of his past and his present yet again, and he once more feels an odd sensation of guilt:

> I consumed the whole time thinking how strange it was that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime; that . . . I should have first encountered it; that, it should have reappeared on two occasions, starting out like a stain that was faded but not gone; that, it should in this new way pervade my fortune and advancement. (264)

Ultimately, this speculation leads Pip to wonder "what *was* the nameless shadow which again in that one instant had passed" (264), which is ostensibly a reference to that uncertain anxiety of which Pip is almost always aware—the shadow of his unrealized "authentic" self.

However, despite this consistent awareness of the vapid quality of his existence, Pip does not change for quite some time. Pip's character constantly vacillates between self-hatred and self-centeredness, whereby he despises his life among the elites, yet he strives to be more widely and fully accepted in their circles. Pip may see the inauthenticity of his existence, but he refuses to make the choice to change. Ultimately, it is only through his witnessing of death and his subsequent near-death experience that Pip

comes fully to understand what he must do to reform and make amends for his mistakes. Pip misses the lessons of his sister and Miss Havisham's deaths, but he begins to seriously rethink his behavior in the wake of his two near-death experiences, when Orlick attempts to kill him and when he succumbs to illness after Magwitch's unsuccessful escape attempt. Significantly, through these near-death experiences, Pip begins to consider a future world without his presence, the first step toward accepting the possibility of his not-being; in so doing, Pip likewise questions every element of his character, which ultimately will lead to the destruction of his socially-constructed and limited identity and the formation of a new and better Pip. Pip explains, as he recounts his kidnapping by Orlick:

> My mind, with inconceivable rapidity, followed out all the consequences of such a death. Estella's father would believe I had deserted him, would be taken, would die accusing me; even Herbert would doubt me, when he compared the letter I had left for him, with the fact that I had called at Miss Havisham's gate for only a moment; Joe and Biddy would never know how sorry I had been that night; none would ever know what I had suffered, how true I had meant to be, what an agony I had passed through. (425)

Indeed, Pip accepts that his death is upon him, and he realizes what most individuals recognize at the onset of death: that one must use one's time to a better purpose, and that time is short. More importantly, Pip's acceptance of his imminent demise leads to reflection on the results of his actions, and that one's continued existence after death depends on the memories of others; thus, Pip opines that "the death close before me was

terrible, but far more terrible than death was the dread of being misremembered after death" (425). Indeed, Pip finally understands that the formation and maintenance of one's identity are ultimately out of one's hands, and an individual's identity is partly made of the impressions of others. Furthermore, Pip realizes that one must use one's present time in the best manner possible, in order to forego the hell of ignominious memory.[47] In the wake of this incident, Pip's behavior changes noticeably, which is most clearly evinced in his treatment of his benefactor; whereas Pip had once looked on him with the opinion of society—disgust and the dread that Pip might be thought to be associated with Magwitch—Pip now understands Magwitch in a more honest light: "my repugnance to him had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor. . . . I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe" (446). Therefore, Pip becomes willing to defy the opinion of society, rejecting Magwitch's plea to avoid him in jail, understanding that it is his duty to Magwitch to be "as true to you, as you have been to me" (447). Moreover, it is because he has passed through one near-death experience, that Pip can slowly become an individual who ministers to others—as he cares for Magwitch in prison—instead of someone who relies on the services of others, which is who Pip has been for most of the narrative. Pip's second near-death experience completes the transformation, for it is quite clear that any remnants of his old character are washed away in the tempestuous nightmares of his illness, as he dreams:

[47] I see some similarity in this sentiment to the conclusion of Sartre's Huis Clos, wherein the character Garcin famously realizes that "Hell is other people" (No Exit 45): in short, the continuous pressure of redefining one's identity or knowledge of oneself according to others' perceptions is akin to eternal torment.

> That I had a fever and was avoided, that I suffered greatly, that I often lost my reason, that the time seemed interminable, that I confounded impossible existences with my own identity; that I was a brick in the house-wall . . . that I was a steel beam of a vast engine . . . that I passed through these phases of disease, I know of my own remembrance, and did in some sort know at the time. (462)

Indeed, as Pip suffers through his illness he seems to hallucinate about the very nature of his existence, for he is in the midst of the process whereby his old identity is being erased and replaced with the new and improved version of Pip. As we have already seen, Pip must embrace his past self in order to progress, but it is only through the cleansing influence of a near-death experience that Pip is able to make that commitment and promise Joe that "I shall never forget" (471). More importantly, facing death has allowed Pip finally to decide to become a useful human being and to "make it a better world" (473). Ultimately, Pip is vindicated in the happiness he is able to bring to those around him—including Joe, Biddy, Herbert, and Clara—and by a recurrence of the "rebirth" motif that we have already seen in the conclusion of A Tale of Two Cities, for Joe and Biddy's son, the new Pip, seems to offer the possibility of a Pip who is *always* generous and productive, and whom Pip hopes might "grow up a much better man than I did" (479).

IV. Death and Nothingness in Our Mutual Friend

As countless critics have noted since Our Mutual Friend's first appearance in 1864, it is undoubtedly one of Dickens' most somber novels, largely due to its unusual

preoccupation with death. Indeed, death has a strong presence in the novel, as five characters meet their respective demises, several other characters are nearly killed, and two of the novel's protagonists, Eugene Wrayburn and John Harmon, are believed to be dead at some point. In addition, we also encounter the waifish Jenny Wren, who spends her free time "playing dead" on her rooftop. In truth, J. Hillis Miller is quite correct in his assertion that "no other novel by Dickens is so obsessed with death" (Charles 316), for death presides over the narrative of Our Mutual Friend more completely than in any other novel—with the possible exception of the necessarily bloody A Tale of Two Cities. Many readers of the novel have ascribed this morbidity to Dickens' own brush with death during the early stages of the novel's creation, in the horrific train accident that, according to his own account of it, very nearly took his life. Dickens himself lends credibility to this reading in his postscript to the novel, where he notes that "I can never be much nearer parting company with my readers for ever, than I was then" (800). However, Dickens certainly did not require a near-death experience to awaken him to the imminence of his own death during the twilight years of his life, and Dickens' personal correspondence testifies to the fact that he was often preoccupied with the looming potential of his own passing, particularly when he was continually confronted with the passing of many lifelong friends, as when he noted the catalog of his fallen friends and co-stars from the time of The Frozen Deep in an April 1863 letter to Wilkie Collins: "Think what a great Frozen Deep lay close under those boards we acted on! My brother Alfred, Luard, Arthur, Albert, Austin, Egg—even among the audience, Prince Albert and poor Stone—all gone!" (Letters X, 238). In short, Dickens quite clearly had death on his mind—as is only natural when one senses the imminence of one's end—and Our Mutual

Friend's morbid character may, in some small part, arise from Dickens' contemplation of his forthcoming demise.

However, one cannot simply ascribe the thorough and insightful investigation of death's significance to Dickens' awareness that he was close to the end of his life, particularly when one notes the trajectory of Dickens' treatment of death through the two novels that immediately preceded Our Mutual Friend. As we have seen, Dickens had often contemplated the individual's understanding of death and its relationship with the typical individual's understanding of his or her existence. In light of this, Our Mutual Friend and its ostensible morbidity can be seen as the culmination of this theme, wherein Dickens is finally able to articulate his interpretation of death fully. Through his caustic portrayal of society, he again depicts the individual's struggle between an "authentic" understanding of his or her individual existence and an "inauthentic" "they-self" interpretation of the self, whereby one embraces a collective ethos of conformity, accumulation, insular perspectives, rigid social divisions, and a freedom from responsibility. Significantly, confrontation with death—including both imaginative and actual meetings with one's death or the death of others—serves as the opportunity for characters to free themselves from the limitations of society's interpretation of existence and approach an authentic understanding of themselves. Thus, Dickens provides several accounts of characters facing death, as in the narratives of Wrayburn and Harmon's real and symbolic confrontations with death and Jenny Wren's game of "playing dead." Ultimately, Our Mutual Friend's seemingly morose "obsession with death" reveals a more hopeful theme: facing one's death, imagining the possibility of non-existence, and

accepting its inevitability allow one to reject society's temporary values and begin to live fully.

As noted earlier, Dickens' attack on society and its values is withering; almost every character exhibits an unprecedented avariciousness, centered on the pursuit and accumulation of material wealth or—more commonly—the attempt to raise oneself in society's eyes. More specifically, the scathing portrayals of characters like Headstone and Wegg display Dickens' observations of the dangers of becoming too possessed with one's social identity, for it is their preoccupation with this identity that leads to the beliefs that one is defined solely by what one has acquired and that others can be owned or thrown away like common goods. On the other hand, Dickens provides several examples of characters who choose an alternative path—the rejection of society's values and the limitations placed on an individual's existence by this group mentality—but only after they have withstood an ordeal that shakes the foundations of their existential self-conception. Notably, through the examples of Harmon and Wrayburn's symbolic deaths, and the subsequent events of the novel that allow them to witness their own "non-existence," as well as through Jenny Wren's mysterious "playing dead" game, Dickens seems to make a clear case regarding the convergence of death and life, and specifically how they reflect and define each other. Ultimately, Dickens clearly suggests that one must contemplate the enigma of non-existence, which will thereby disclose the transitory and essentially meaningless significance of the material world in order for one to wean oneself off of the empty "delights" and restrictive self-centered perspective of the material world, and be able to see beyond that shallow existence. Moreover, unlike in Dickens' immediately preceding novels, in which he was clearly developing this idea, it

is not merely enough to witness the deaths of others. That is too easy to ignore, and in fact is often dismissed quite casually by the members of society, as is clear from Betty Higden's private funeral—which allows for the narrator to opine that "we turn up our eyes and say that we are all alike in death," although we rarely "turn them down and work the saying out in this world" (507)—and the multiple instances of "grave robbing," whereby the dead's possessions are scavenged and hoarded by the whole range of society's denizens, from river rats to millionaire dust contractors. Rather, it seems necessary that most individuals in the novel's world require a metaphysical exercise in which they question the nature of their existence, and indulge in the reflection of what the world might be like if they did not exist. Furthermore, they must accept the reality of their deaths—which, as we have seen, is often stated by people, although rarely believed—in order to receive true insight into their existence. Essentially, Dickens suggests that one must negate oneself, or imagine one's negation, if one is eventually to discover one's true self for the first time.

In light of this theme, Jenny Wren's game in which she "plays dead" is revealed as the most important metaphor for the self-reflective journey most characters must take in order to free themselves from the static perspective of materialism. In general, most critics have tended to give Jenny's character short shrift, either echoing the comments of earlier reviewers who commonly have likened her to yet another Dickensian grotesque—as a young Henry James venomously noted: "she is a little monster . . . she belongs to a troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and precocious children who have carried on the sentimental business in all Mr Dickens's novels" (Collins, Dickens: the Critical Heritage 471)—or have interpreted her from a feminist perspective, either as a powerful woman

who is capable of taking care of herself and her father, or as a weak victim of society's misogyny. However, Jenny clearly serves a much larger purpose within the novel, as she ultimately is the voice of ideas that transcend a single timeframe or society, and she rebels against limitations that are more abstract—and therefore more insidious and more difficult to diagnose—than either of the aforementioned interpretations might entail.

From Jenny's introduction, it is clear that she is an outsider, an individual forced to act and think independently because the rest of the world does not think her worth converting to their values. "I can't bear children," Jenny informs Headstone and Lizzie, "*I* know their tricks and their manners. . . . always running about and screeching, always playing and fighting, always skip-skip-skipping on the pavement and chalking it for their games! . . . Ever so often calling names in through a person's keyhole, and imitating a person's back and legs" (224). Jenny's infirmity has forced her into a state of exile, where she must watch others go about their normal routines—games for children, greed for adults—without ever being able to participate; however, this is clearly a blessing in disguise, for being cast out of the collective consciousness and allowed to atrophy in her home, Jenny has been given the opportunity to develop her own perspective of existence and the world, and thus she does not need to overcome the limitations to which so many characters are subject. Thus, Jenny has insight into her own existence and she understands the relationship between existence and nothingness; moreover, she can see the limitations of existence as defined solely by existence with others, the "they-self." By contemplating non-existence, Jenny is able to place material and social existence in its proper place, as simply another form of existence, and, more specifically, an ostensibly painful and disheartening form of existence, as she explains to Fledgeby:

> You see, you don't know what the rest of this place is to us. . . . It's the quiet and the air. . . . and you feel as if you were dead. . . . Oh, so tranquil! . . . Oh, so peaceful and thankful! And you hear the people who are alive, crying, and working, and calling to one another down in the close dark streets, and you seem to pity them so! (279)

Jenny finds solace in the imagined experience of not being, for "such a chain has fallen from you, and such a strange sorrowful happiness comes upon you" (279). She again finds consolation through her insight into non-existence upon her hopeless father's death, as she realizes that it is for the best, and it does not matter that she cannot spend any money on his funeral or his grave, or that she will not receive any compensation or inheritance for her loss:

> I see the service in the Prayer-book says that we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we can take nothing out. It comforts me not being able to hire a lot of stupid undertaker's things for my poor child, and seeming as if I was trying to smuggle 'em out of this world with him, when of course I must break down in the attempt and bring 'em all back again. As it is, there'll be nothing to bring back but me, and that's quite consistent, for I shan't be brought back, some day! (714)

Clearly, through this imaginative game, Dickens suggests that social existence is akin to a prison, a forced incarceration in a single form, subject to the pain of hunger, abuse and aging, as well as to the emotional pains of rejection, frustration, or rage at a lack of acceptance or worldly success; non-existence, on the other hand, is freedom from all of these things, for awareness of death and its inevitability allows one to see the absolute

triviality of material things and to refocus on the aspects of mortal existence that really matter. Admittedly, it is a melancholy liberty, for "not being" also frees one from the opportunity to partake of what joys the mortal coil offers. However, even this is not a genuine limitation of non-existence, for as Jenny tells Lizzie, her imaginative contemplation of life led to acceptance of another sort, as the children who rejected her are replaced with angelic children who "were very different from any others that I ever saw" and "swept about me and took me up, and made me light" (238), thereby finally giving Jenny acceptance and friendship. Essentially, in non-existence, or, at any rate, some form of existence beyond the material, one is still bound to other individuals, for the connections between people that are denied or perverted in the material world transcend the limitations of time, space, class, gender or blood.

Furthermore, just as Jenny is able to see through social and material limitations, she is likewise able to throw off Blake's famous "mind-forg'd manacles" whereby existence is twisted and constrained by reason into the limitations of man-measured space and time. Although Jenny has been born into a twisted body, with a "back . . . so bad, and . . . legs so queer" (223), she is still able to be more productive than virtually every other character in the novel; moreover, her back and legs do not seem to inhibit her movement so extremely as to prevent her from appearing at almost every location in the novel's final scenes—at almost all of which she arrives *on her own*. Like Amy Dorrit, Jenny has a strange anachronistic position in her private world, as "it was difficult to guess the age of this strange creature, for her poor figure furnished no clue to it, and her face was at once so young and so old" (224). Similarly, Jenny must play an adult role ahead of her time, as she becomes the parent for her profligate father, while he fulfills the role of the

hopeless child that was previously held by William Dorrit. In short, Jenny transcends normal limited existence in every way, not simply in her ability to see through the artificial construct of social divisions and rules, but also in her manner of defying unbreakable physical limitations, thereby exposing how human expectations regarding nature and the universe are likewise limited in their own way.

Moreover, this privileged perspective bestows on Jenny a rare insight into people's souls and into life, whereby she is rarely tricked by the deceits and pleasures of the material world. She immediately does not like Headstone, as she appraises his character as: "Selfish. Thinks only of himself" (337). Moreover, unlike most other characters who encounter Headstone, she recognizes the violence that lingers beneath Headstone's façade of respectability:

> If he—I mean, of course, my dear, the party who is coming to court me when the time comes—should be *that* sort of man, he may spare himself the trouble. *He* wouldn't do to be trotted about and made useful. He'd take fire and blow up while he was about it. . . . He wouldn't blow up alone. He'd carry me up with him. . . . Mightn't exactly want to do it, my dear . . . but a lot of gunpowder among lighted lucifer-matches in the next room might almost as well be here. (341)

Ultimately, Jenny concludes that it would be best if she and Lizzie did not know Headstone—or his kind—as she sneers: "I wish he was so very strange a man as to be a total stranger" (342). Jenny also recognizes Fascination Fledgeby for what he is, despite his numerous disguises and prevarications. She knows that Fledgeby is virtually hopeless of ever seeing beyond material existence, for his life and character are so completely

identified with what he might squeeze out of others, and thus she tells him that he cannot participate in her game: "But *you* are not dead, you know . . . Get down to life" (279). Fledgeby seems to catch on to the significance of Jenny's game, and he tries to tempt her to divulge Riah's part in Lizzie's hiding by playing along, offering her the fruits of materialism by way of shares in his fraudulent enterprise: "Miss Jenny! Instead of coming up and being dead, let's come out and look alive. It'll pay better, I assure you. . . . it'll pay better in this way. It'll lead in a roundabout manner to your buying damage and waste of Pubsey and Co. at a nominal price, or even getting it for nothing" (698-9). Jenny may be temporarily confused regarding Riah's loyalties, but she never doubts those of Fledgeby, whose "Little Eyes" betray that he is "too cunning by half" (699), and she is never in the least tempted by his offers of money and property, as she simply plays along for the purpose of determining Riah's complicity in Fledgeby's duplicitous actions. Finally, Jenny also sees more in Wrayburn than he can see in himself, as when he disinterestedly whines that he is incapable of being useful because he is "a bad idle dog," to which she counters, "then why don't you reform and be a good dog" (234). Moreover, when Wrayburn tries to exact Lizzie's secret address from her with promises of giving her work, Jenny cuts right through his deception: "Let me first tell you, once for all, that it's of no use your paying your visits to me. You wouldn't get what you want, of me, no, not if you brought pincers with you to tear it out" (523). Therefore, because of Jenny's ostensible insight into Wrayburn's character, Wrayburn recognizes that he needs Jenny to guide him through his post-assault penance and redemption, for she has seen into his soul and can provide him with the magic word, "Wife," by which he might finally realize the significance of usefulness and service to others.

As noted earlier, Dickens clearly suggests that insight into the human condition—or anything else, for that matter—is clearly useless if it does not lead to some sort of action; for Dickens, theory must always lead to praxis. Just as we have seen in the cases of Amy Dorrit, Arthur Clennam, Sidney Carton, and Pip, a solid understanding of oneself must lead to a positive form of action. Therefore, Dickens shows that Jenny's death-derived insight into her existence leads directly to a work ethic that becomes the basis for her philosophy of life. Significantly, Jenny finds a transcendent joy in her work, where she is able to rise from the stench and offal of the material world into a realm of bliss, as she confides to the literal-minded Wrayburn:

> I wonder how it happens that when I work, work, working here, all alone in the summer-time, I smell flowers. . . . this is not a flowery neighborhood. It's anything but that. And yet as I sit at work, I smell miles of flowers. I smell roses, till I think I see the rose-leaves lying in heaps, bushels, on the floor. I smell fallen leaves, till I put down my hand—so—and expect to make them rustle. I smell the white and the pink May in the hedges, and all sorts of flowers that I never was among. (237-8)

This is obviously not a commonplace event for Jenny, for she is able to smell the aromas of botanical life of which she had been previously unaware; as she admits, "For I have seen very few flowers indeed, in my life" (238).[48] On the surface, this is ostensibly the blossoming of Jenny's vivid imagination. However, Dickens clearly seems to suggest that work—or, rather, usefulness and production, as opposed to Wrayburn's languid

[48] An interesting side note: Catholics who have claimed to witness the appearance of the Virgin Mary around the world have long reported a similar experience. Of course, even though Dickens' anti-Popery sentiments had quite diminished by this point in his life, it is doubtful that he would have known, or trusted, similar contemporary accounts.

disinterestedness—allows one to break away from the painful and limited bonds of material existence and transcend one's condition. In short, work can save an individual and keep him or her away from the traps and snares of material existence, as Jenny opines: "How can I say what I might have turned out myself, but for my back having been so bad and my legs so queer, when I was young! . . . I had nothing to do but work, and so I worked. I couldn't play. But my poor unfortunate child could play, and it turned out the worse for him" (713). Thus, not only does work allow one to see beyond the painful realities of material existence, it also allows an individual to avoid the mistakes that most human beings make when they become too taken with the temporary pleasures of the material world. Moreover, we must not forget that Jenny does not work to make money for the sake of making money; rather, she does so to care for her father and keep a roof over his head: her work gives her something to do, while it also assists her in her parenting of her father. When this is compared to the behavior of the other characters, there is a clear distinction: those like the Veneerings and Podsnap do not seem to work themselves, while those that *do* work during the course of the narrative—such as Silas Wegg in the ultimate sinecure, or Rogue Riderhood and his underworld business—seem to do so simply to accumulate money, the totem of the "They."[49] Thus, Dickens employs Jenny as the manifestation of what he suggests is the most exemplary behavior: work, as opposed to play, and for a purpose greater than oneself, such as service to others. Importantly, this is not some irrelevant predetermined philosophy that Dickens happily grafted onto his other insights. Rather, Jenny's work ethic and philosophy of usefulness spring naturally from the fact that she has contemplated her death and accepted the

[49] One exception is obviously Rokesmith's work as a secretary, which I will deal with below.

significance of that event regarding her present condition.[50] The implication is that contemplation of death allows one to see beyond the material world and the artificial social realm and to understand the ultimately empty and temporary satisfaction of the delights of both; thus, there must be something to make life worth living. One must have a purpose, and one must produce something with the ultimate aim of becoming something better than what one is.

As we saw in the earlier case of Little Dorrit, Our Mutual Friend describes a female figure who has a natural insight into existence and responsibility and is able to rise above the limitations of the "They" as a result. However, Dickens again looks to a male character to depict the progress by which individuals must learn about existence and reject their socially-constructed identities. In this case, the novel actually provides two male characters who undergo this sort of existential reevaluation, John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn. In both situations, the two characters are confronted with their deaths and realize their true identities and responsibilities because of this experience. Ultimately, Dickens seems to use both of these characters' stories as examples of the method by which the admittedly abstract and nebulous concepts of existential self-reflection and the contemplation of non-existence shift from theory to praxis.

Harmon's "symbolic kind of suicide" (Palmer 492) provides perhaps the stronger example of this philosophical exercise, for Harmon's conflict is arguably the centerpiece of the novel. Dickens' conception of Harmon precedes every other aspect of the novel, as the first ideas of the novel originate from two notes in his memoranda book, wherein he considered the notions of a "descriptive bill upon the wall" (Dickens, Charles 8)

[50] Admittedly, we also can see Carlyle's obvious influence on Dickens from this conclusion. I will deal with this convergence in the next chapter.

regarding a drowning, and a character who "feigns to be dead, and *is* dead to all intents and purposes external to himself, and . . . for years retains that singular view of life and character" (Dickens, Charles 19). Moreover, Harmon's story is unique in the novel, for the individual known as "John Harmon" is quite dead for most of the novel. Importantly, Harmon is not merely physically dead, but rather he is deceased in the eyes of society. From his first appearance through to the end of the novel, Harmon is consistently portrayed as an unsettlingly ambiguous presence—a ghost of sorts—with no background, family, or property of which to speak. Before his "murder" comes to light, Harmon is first introduced in a conversation in which his origins are thrown up for question, as the Veneerings and their guests haggle over whether to refer to him as "The Man from Nowhere," "The Man from Somewhere," or, in a bit of upper class disinterestedness, "The Man from Tumwhere" (23). All of these possibilities suggest that it is not so much Harmon's origins that are questionable, but whether or not he even originated *in the first place*. Likewise, Harmon's lack of references signals his unstable standing in society and his suspect identity. Because of his inability to provide the appropriate verification of his identity, sometimes due to purposeful misdirection, and at other times to his ostensible absence in society, Harmon is forced to paint himself as "a stranger in London" (46), a traveler with no identity, country, or family. He has no family to which he can refer, as when interrogated by the Boffins he claims that his only sibling is "dead long ago" and his relatives are likewise "dead – if I ever had any living" (329). He does not have the Victorian equivalent of official identification, a visiting card, as he informs the inspector investigating his death: "I should not object [to leave one], if I had one; but I have not" (35). Harmon does not even have a fixed age, as he simply claims, "I am not yet thirty"

(329). Of course, the age of the man may not seem incredibly important by twenty-first century standards; however, for the Victorians, whose only real records were those of birth and marriage, Harmon would have presented a perplexing anomaly. Essentially, he does not exist by the standards of Dickens' world, having no verifiable history or advocate in society, and thus, "John Harmon," by all of society's standards, no longer exists, if he ever did.

Harmon does not simply allow society to believe him dead, for he reinvents himself as a character whose sole purpose is to serve. Purposely disguising himself as a faceless and nameless secretary, Harmon models Dickens' notion of the good life for both his fellow characters and Dickens' readers. As Boffin's secretary, Harmon lowers himself in society and eliminates his ego, for, from a certain perspective, a secretary does not possess his own identity, as he does not speak for himself: a secretary is merely the mouthpiece of his employer, as he writes correspondence and notes attributed to his employer. A secretary's life is of secondary importance to that of his employer; a secretary is no more than a living machine that makes the world more orderly for those who can afford to employ him. That Dickens purposely chooses this occupation in order to produce this effect is made quite evident by the sample letter that Harmon writes to acquire his position:

> Mr. Boffin presents his compliments to Mr. John Rokesmith, and begs to say that he has decided on giving Mr. John Rokesmith a trial in the capacity he desires to fill. Mr. Boffin takes Mr. John Rokesmith at his word, in postponing to some indefinite period, the consideration of salary.

> It is quite understood that Mr. Boffin is in no way committed on that point. (182)

Who is speaking in this letter? Clearly, Harmon has written it, and it reflects his own desires for employment, but it is presented as the words of Mr. Boffin, in a mock correspondence with Rokesmith/Harmon. In writing this letter, Harmon actively contributes to the erosion of his selfhood; although he has taken on an alternative persona, this other "self" is clearly objectified, removed from the writing of the letter, and distanced from the production and expression of its thoughts. Everything in the letter is attributed to Boffin; he owns the words and the credit for writing such a letter, just as he will own Harmon as his secretary. Moreover, Harmon will become only an extension of Boffin while under his employment, for, in theory, Harmon is another object that Boffin's money might purchase, and such an objectifying and unequal power relationship is underlined by Boffin's initial misunderstanding of what a secretary is, as he states: "We have always believed a Secretary to be a piece of furniture, mostly of mahogany, lined with green baize or leather, with a lot of little drawers in it" (180). Of course, Boffin is a different sort of employer, not subject to the tyrannical egotism typical of the nouveaux riches, so he quickly assuages Harmon's feelings pledging him not to "think I take a liberty when I mention that you certainly ain't *that*" (180). Boffin may not intend to treat Harmon as a subaltern, but the point has already been made: one in a position of servitude is dehumanized and objectified, like the Hands of Hard Times' factories.

On the surface, Harmon purposely chooses this form of employment so as to stay close to the Boffins and Bella, but there is also a completely different intention at work

here.[51] Part of Harmon's reinvention of himself involves an active destruction of his previous self and the experience of his non-existence. Moreover, this death allows him to work out what had led to his assault, and how he must go about "righting wrongs." Certain good things have come of his death, resulting in his reflection upon why "John Harmon should not come to life":

> Because he has passively allowed those dear old faithful friends to pass into possession of the property. Because he sees them happy with it, making a good use of it. . . . Because they have virtually adopted Bella. . . . Because there is affection enough in her nature, and warmth enough in her heart, to develop into something enduringly good. . . . she is already growing better . . . Because her marriage with John Harmon, after what I have heard from my own lips, would be a shocking mockery. . . . (366)

Essentially, the world is a better place without the figure of John Harmon in it: a just world has arisen from the dust of his grave, and it would be untoward to interrupt it for his own personal needs. Thus, Harmon realizes that he must crush the greed and self-concern endemic to the human heart in order to create the best of all possible worlds. His death allows him to bury his ego and its needs, and thereby become the sort of person worthy of the Harmon property, because he will know how to put it to its best use.

A crucial aspect of Harmon's sacrifice is that it must be a continuous and painful process conducted without the reassurance of a centering ego. Harmon becomes "the

[51] Of course, many critics such as Barbara Hardy, Camille Colatosti, Syd Thomas, and Hillary Schor have read this part of the plot as a paradigmatic example of Dickens' misogynous views, as it seems that Bella is manipulated into becoming a desirable bride for Harmon, and thus Harmon and Boffin are no different than the novel's negative characters. I think, rather, that this plot is more indicative of an instance wherein Dickens' philosophical ideas take precedence over the neatness or plausibility of the plot, and Boffin and Harmon's good-natured chicanery are evidence of Dickens' awkward attempt to fit the concept of a man rethinking his existence into a coherent suspense story. After all, there are certainly more logical ways to test Bella's prospects as a wife and partner.

living-dead man" (367), straddling the line between existence and nothing. He is a body without an internal agent to move it, human and alien at once, as he notes in a lengthy soliloquy: "there was no such thing as I, within my knowledge" (363). Harmon actively obliterates the existence of "John Harmon," at times "[burying] John Harmon many additional fathoms deep" (372). Harmon's negation of his self is an endless task by which his identity is "buried under mountains" (378). The name, too, must be erased from the globe: when Mrs. Boffin seeks to rename her adopted orphan as John Harmon, the original Harmon advises against such a thing, for since "the name has always been unfortunate" and it "has died out" (330) there is no reason to sustain it. Indeed, the name represents a great deal: it is Harmon's life, the key to his property, and the only thing that he truly owns. His rejection of this name and all that it entails, specifically in favor of a life of service, is the ultimate sacrifice, and an important facet of Dickens' argument. Essentially, Harmon observes a world wherein he does not exist, and this eventually allows him to be free from the limited perspective most characters seem to share. Therefore, although events eventually turn out favorably for Harmon, there is a sense that he deserves it because of this willingness to destroy himself and become nothing for the good of others.

Harmon's other pseudonym, "Our Mutual Friend," emphasizes another aspect of his virtually negated self. Whereas the moniker "Secretary" calls attention to his service, the title of "Mutual Friend" emphasizes his connections to the other characters, which form the basis for the novel's overall themes. Here, too, there is the same element of negated selfhood, as Harmon is bereft of both a proper name and individuality. He is distinguished purely by his connection with others, existing solely to be a friend to other

characters who have their own identities. The word, "Mutual," implies connections, not between Harmon and others, but between others who have a shared acquaintance with Harmon. Therefore, Harmon is not an individual seeking connections with others, but a conductor of friendship through which others might commune: essentially, he becomes the connection *itself*. While wearing the guise of the "Friend," Harmon again receives nothing; he merely provides his acquaintance as the means by which others may form connections with each other. Moreover, as far as the narrative is concerned, Harmon's "friendship" provides a narratological device by which the various characters might meet and interact, and the plot might move forward, as his story "sets the whole thing going" (Kettle 214). Harmon also serves to "[connect] the area of wealth with the area of poverty," indirectly bringing together Wrayburn, Lightwood, Lizzie Hexam, and the Veneerings, sometimes in direct contact or merely through conversation (Kettle 214-5). Through this "bridging," Dickens emphasizes an important element of the enlightened individual's lifestyle. Not only must one be free enough not to worry about one's own needs, but also one must forget about one's place in society and form attachments with those of like minds, regardless of anyone's respective wealth or class background.

As Dickens makes quite clear, this sort of reevaluation must result in action, and thus Harmon's self-annihilation eventually ends in behavior indicative of real change. Harmon comes to realize through his self-negation that one's purpose is to make the world a better place for others, as he tells Bella: "No one is useless in this world . . . who lightens the burden of it for anyone else" (511). Having come into his fortune, Harmon could very possibly descend into the limited view and behavior of society's "They," but instead he chooses to wield his power so as to improve the world and ease the sufferings

of others, and in this he has the assistance of his reformed wife and the saintly Boffins. Thus, the narrator informs us that "Mr. and Mrs. John Harmon's first delightful occupation was, to set all matters right that had strayed in any way wrong, or that might, could, would, or should have strayed in any wrong, while their name was in abeyance" (782). Essentially, Harmon's experience has prepared him for the position of leadership and power, making in him a Carlylean personage who might lead society out of its misperceptions of existence and do away with the brutal philosophy of life and responsibility that has come to dominate society.

A similar experience of non-existence and an instance of subsequent redemption can likewise be found in Eugene Wrayburn's story. As Barry Qualls has noted, Wrayburn has a very similar character as that of Headstone, for they are both initially confined within their limited roles in society (129). Indeed, Wrayburn at first seems to be the typical bourgeois dandy, concerned only with himself and his decadent lifestyle; he is a spoilt child who puts forth a pretense of hating his wealth and privilege, and who loves to talk of nothing else, pointing out that he is a "man to be doubted" and "a bad idle dog," incapable of reform because he has found "nobody who makes it worth my while" (234). Wrayburn does nothing for anyone else, and he blames his domineering father, complaining that: "I hate my profession. . . . It was forced upon me" (29) and:

> My respected father—let me shorten the dutiful tautology by substituting in future M. R. F. . . . having always in the clearest manner provided . . . for his children by pre-arranging from the hour of the birth of each, and sometimes from an earlier period, what the devoted little victim's calling

> and course in life should be . . . pre-arranged for myself that I was to be the barrister I am . . . and also the married man I am not. (149)

Ostensibly, in his rebellious reaction to his father's efforts, Wrayburn clearly recognizes that his conflict is the same conflict that all of the characters must face—whether to find one's own self or to accept the dictates of society or authority. However, Wrayburn deals with the problem in an unproductive fashion by complaining about it in a self-centered manner, and doing nothing to rise above the "they-self" that has taken over his self-conception. Moreover, he refuses to reflect on who he is and what he might do with himself, simply falling back on the well-worn excuse of boredom regarding the tedium that is existence without reflection, as he bemoans to Lightwood:

> I know less about myself than about most people in the world, and I don't know. . . . You must take your friend as he is. You know what I am. . . . You know how dreadfully susceptible I am to boredom. You know that when I became enough of a man to find myself an embodied conundrum, I bored myself to the last degree by trying to find out what I meant. You know that at length I gave it up, and declined to guess any more. (283)

Instead, Wrayburn acts out the very worst aspects of that "they-self," rebelling against his father by taking up another limited role in society. Thus, Wrayburn trades one stereotype—that of the well-to-do bourgeois gentleman—for another equally confining stereotype—that of the wasteful, decadent flaneur. Significantly, Dickens' initial development of Wrayburn's character makes him an anomaly in the Dickensian world, as Brian Cheadle has noticed (87), for he is somewhat sympathetic to the reader, like the commonly employed reformed rake of the eighteenth century or the anti-hero of many

late twentieth-century American novels, but we cannot tell for certain what Dickens had meant to do with Wrayburn until his conclusive redemption.

Eventually, Wrayburn's character gradually shifts away from his seemingly boundless narcissism, as he subtly becomes more concerned with the welfare of another person, Lizzie Hexam. We observe that Wrayburn develops a mysterious preoccupation with someone other than himself, as is manifested in his doodling of "a lady's head upon his writing-paper" (156), or in his admission that the "lonely girl with the dark hair runs in my head" (168). Lightwood also observes that a conflict is coming to a head in his friend's soul, as, after Wrayburn's first encounter with Lizzie, Lightwood notes "that a change of some sort, best expressed perhaps as an intensification of all that was wildest and most negligent and reckless in his friend, had come upon him. . . . he found something new and strained in him that was for the moment perplexing" (168). Admittedly, Wrayburn's interest in Lizzie is not wholly indicative of a change, as he seems to waver between genuine feeling and a perverse intention to sexually exploit her, as he admits to Lightwood that his thoughts about Lizzie make him "feel like a dark combination of traitor and pickpocket" (163). This is largely because he refuses to reflect on what is happening to his character, as he tells Lightwood dismissively: "My dear fellow, I don't design anything. I have no design whatever. I am incapable of designs. If I conceived a design, I should speedily abandon it, exhausted by the operation" (292). Thus, Wrayburn continues to vacillate between doing what he can to help Lizzie, such as by teaching her to read, and subtly attempting to manipulate her into becoming his sexual conquest, by playing on her feelings for him and his superior position in society:

> He knew his power over her. . . . For all his seeming levity and carelessness, he knew whatever he chose to know of the thoughts of her heart. . . . where the wonder that his occasional tones of serious interest . . . that his lightest touch, his lightest look, his very presence beside her in the dark common street, were like glimpses of an enchanted world, which it was natural for jealousy and malice and all meanness to be unable to bear the brightness of, and to gird at as bad spirits might. (399-400)

This internal conflict eventually culminates in Wrayburn's reflective soliloquy during his pursuit of Lizzie along the Thames, wherein he faces the two opposing poles of his nature and attempts to come to some realization about his character, as he wrestles with the notions that it is "out of the question to marry her . . . and out of the question to leave her" (682). Ultimately, Wrayburn hopes to address the possibility of rejecting social conventions and marrying her, while also wondering if his feelings are real or contrived: "I should like to see the fellow . . . who would undertake to tell me that this was not a real sentiment on my part, won out of me by her beauty and her worth, in spite of myself, and that I would not be true to her" (680-1).

However, Wrayburn cannot find these answers as he wrestles with himself, for he is too tightly bound by his limited self-conception and conformity to society's values and rules. He cannot fully break free from the delusions of the material world until he must face the reality of his own death. Only death seems able to place all of Wrayburn's feelings and values into proper perspective, and Headstone's vicious attack provides just such an opportunity. Importantly, as we saw in Harmon's case, Wrayburn is considered to be dead by virtually everyone—Lizzie, Headstone, Lightwood—and it is not until his

"deathbed" scene near the novel's conclusion that even the reader is certain that Wrayburn has survived the attack. Significantly, witnessing his own death has taught Wrayburn a serious lesson, and he has made a remarkable change in his character as a result of it. This is immediately evident in that he seeks Jenny Wren's counsel, for he has recognized that she is free from society's limitations and that she has discovered some alternative transcendent existence beyond it; thus, Wrayburn asks her "if she has seen the children. . . . if she has smelt the flowers" (718), for he also seeks the revelations of Jenny's visions. Moreover, Wrayburn seems determined no longer to be the selfish and useless dandy that he was, as he expresses regret to Lightwood as to the impositions he has placed on Lizzie:

> I trust to you that the perpetrator [of his attack] is never brought to justice. . . . Her innocent reputation would be ruined. . . . She would be punished, not he. I have wronged her enough in fact; I have wronged her still more in intention. You recollect what pavement is said to be made of good intentions. It is made of bad intentions too. Mortimer, I am lying on it, and I know! (719)

Moreover, Wrayburn wonders if "it is not the best thing I can do, to die" if he is to continue on with his "trifling wasted youth" (735). Wrayburn finally understands what he must do to make amends to Lizzie and to ensure her safety and happiness in the future, finally finding the keyword to his happiness, "wife," through his experience with death and the assistance of Jenny Wren. Ultimately, it is quite clear that he has died, in a manner, and, through this experience, he has been reborn as a different person, freed from the limitations of his dandy self and the arbitrary rules of society, thereby allowing him to

pursue the destiny made possible to his character, in defiance of the judgment of M.R.F. and high society. Like Harmon, Wrayburn too has awakened to the true Dickensian purpose of life, care for others and the necessity of useful employment, as a result of a confrontation with death, for it is a force that reveals the temporary and artificial nature of everything but feeling and service to others.

Of course, one's encounter with death does not always lead to change and redemption, as is made quite clear in the case of Rogue Riderhood. He is constantly exposed to the reality of death around him—like the Hexams, he has been "baptized unto Death" (175) by making his living off of the Thames' drowned victims—but he consistently ignores it, which is behavior that is more commonly seen in the "They" of high society. Like the members of the upper crust, Riderhood lives a completely deluded existence, whereby he elevates his despicable calling to a noble practice, as he notes: "I gets my living by the sweat of my brow and it's good enough for *me*" (352). This ignorance culminates in his own encounter with his death, whereby he is run over and drowned by a Thames-borne steamer, although he still manages to return to life. Riderhood is given an obvious chance to reform, as one of the witnesses of the event observes: "I don't mean to preach; but I hope . . . that this escape may have a good effect upon you" (443). However, the event obviously has no effect on Riderhood, as he is immediately determined to derive financial gain from it—"I'll have the law on her, bust her! and make her pay for it" (443)—or somehow to find a superstitious means to defeat death itself, as he celebrates: "I've been brought out o' drowning, and I can't be drowned" for "it's well known to water-side characters like myself, that him as has been brought out o' drowning, can never be drowned" (623). Riderhood has ostensibly learned

nothing from the occurrence of his death and resuscitation, and thus, it becomes a non-event, removed of all of its power and potential for revelation, or, as Dickens' narrator wryly notes, his accident has become nothing more than a "little turn-up with Death" (443) and as inconsequential as any other quotidian incident.

In short, Dickens clearly suggests that this philosophical exercise—whereby one rethinks one's existence by way of facing one's death—is an opportunity to open one's eyes to the unreality of limited material existence, but it is not a sort of existential Morrison's pill. One must approach the event with an open mind and a willingness to change if one hopes for any positive effect. Riderhood does not fail because he is naturally bad: he fails because he lacks vision. Harmon and Wrayburn also are both confronted with the possibility of ignoring their deaths and continuing along the same path of existence upon which they were previously, and they express very real doubts about their respective abilities to change, yet they ultimately choose to take the opportunity and use it to its full potential. On the other hand, Riderhood makes the opposite choice. Thus, it is quite evident that Dickens does not suggest that one will magically reform if one witnesses death, or one's own death in particular; rather, witnessing or experiencing death and non-existence is merely the catalyst for change, but one must follow through and incorporate the lessons of the experience into one's behavior and philosophy of life.

Ultimately, despite the fact that some may ignore the death of others around them, and although some may deny the inevitability of their own demises, the conclusion of the novel is ultimately uplifting and reaffirming, for it suggests that death has indeed reflected back on the living, and that some individuals have been able to learn the lessons

of how to make life worth living. Moreover, the conclusion suggests that this nuanced understanding of existence and action is not reserved for a select enlightened few, but is open to others—as evident from Riderhood's tale—and eventually will filter down through the rest of society. The novel leaves us with three couples—the Harmons, Wrayburns, and Boffins—possessing the power and influence to make an immediate change in society. Through their example, the rest of society can see that money and materialism are self-consuming fixations, that marriage between the classes is possible, that these reveal the basically false and arbitrary nature of social boundaries and limitations, and that one must use whatever one has to be useful to others and society as a whole.

Our Mutual Friend is clearly the culmination of Dickens' thought on the relationship between individual existence and death. Essentially, Dickens' final point in this long study of death and existence is that the individual can have an effect on society, although not through the exterior action of government—as evidenced through his renewed assault on the new Poor Law via the Betty Higden narrative—or violent rebellion, but rather through the gradual education of others, through personal example, as to one's philosophy of life and moral responsibility. Ultimately, this is Dickens' aim when he invites his readers, along with his characters, to follow Jenny Wren's suggestion to "come up and be dead" (280): to contemplate the freedom of non-existence, and thereby to release themselves from the chains of materialism and to realize a more fulfilling way of life.

Chapter 4

"Not all thelf-interetht after all, but thomething very different": Dickens' Morality and the Anxiety of Presence

As is evident to even a casual reader, Dickens is as much a moralist as he is an entertainer. As his correspondence and works testify, Dickens saw the novel as a means by which his audience might be instructed while they were entertained; therefore, every novel has its own moral "message" to impart to its readers. As Dickens' novels grew in complexity, there was an evident increase in his focus on moral questions; he grew beyond the relatively simple morality of his early works—wherein pure good wrestles with and inevitably overcomes pure evil—and he created a philosophy of life that was much more complicated than that for which he is often given credit. However, despite all of the evidence of the growing complexity in Dickens' moral vision, his overt moralizing is arguably the aspect of his work that is most responsible for the critical beating that his reputation has taken over the years, in part, it seems, because it is assumed that moralizing authors lack real ideas or even a rudimentary understanding of life's complexity. In fact, it seems that among most critics the moralizing characteristics of any of Dickens' novels are generally considered to be the weakest or least interesting aspects of that work.

Undoubtedly, the harrowing reception of Dickens' moralizing has been due, in large part, to its deceptive simplicity. One source of concern is the seeming rapidity with which moral issues are resolved in each novel, as if the moral had been the predetermined

destination of the central characters or a trite "tacked on" solution, as opposed to an organic ending that grows out of the characters' development and reasonably meets our expectations for what is to become of the characters. For instance, as Barbara Hardy has suggested, Dickens' development and resolution of conflict in each novel depends heavily on a staged "change of heart" that "Dickens shows . . . as quick, simple, and settled," and which are "startlingly rapid in comparison" (30-1) to those of more "sophisticated" novelists like Henry James and George Eliot.

Moreover, even Dickens' supporters have had trouble explaining away the "mawkish" quality of Dickens' philosophy. At its very best, Dickens' moral sense has been characterized as what "looks like an enormous platitude: If men would behave decently the world would be decent" (6), as George Orwell famously observed.[52] The best that George Santayana, an avowed fan of Dickens' work, was able to say in Dickens' defense was that Dickens' work has "distilled in it . . . the perfection of morals" in so far as "he put the distinction between good and evil in the right place, and that he felt this distinction intensely" and that "love of the good of others is something that shines in every page . . . with a truly celestial splendour" (149). However, Santayana reluctantly allowed that Dickens "has no constructive suggestions, not even a clear grasp of the nature of the society he is attacking. . . . All he can finally say is, 'Behave decently,' which . . . is not necessarily so shallow as it sounds" (168).

Other critics have been less forgiving. The novelist Margaret Oliphant suggested that, despite Dickens' status as a great artist, "his influence has not been of an elevating order" and "has left us nothing but the weakest, sloppiest, maudlin exhibitions of

[52] Admittedly, in the same essay, Orwell admits his own debt to Dickens, and that Dickens' central message "is not such a platitude as it sounds" (23)—though he does not ultimately succeed in proving it to be anything to the contrary.

goodness, big in complacency, but poor in every other point" (qtd. in Collins 559). Upon the publication of John Forster's biography of Dickens, an anonymous critic for the journal Temple Bar observed that Dickens incompetently delved into matters well beyond his intellectual capabilities—a standard criticism of Dickens throughout the last century and a half—as he "announces truisms and tritenesses with an air of conviction, hardly provoking, it is so simply foolish, flourishing solutions of problems, which have long perplexed the gravest and ablest minds in the higher ranges of thought" (qtd. in Collins 582). Even Dickens' consistently sympathetic contemporaries had difficulty swallowing his treacly philosophy, such as R.H. Hutton of The Spectator, who noted upon the occasion of Dickens' death that:

> Still, the last moral service we should think of ascribing to Dickens's literary influence would be the diffusion of a genuine reverence for absolute sincerity and realism. The great writer himself falls into the most mawkish and unreal sentimentalism. . . . Mr Dickens has brought people to think that there is a sort of piety in being gushing and maudlin,—and this is anything but a useful contribution to the morality of the age. . . . His greatest service to English literature will, after all, be not his high morality, which is altogether wanting in delicacy of insight, but in the complete harmlessness and purity of the immeasurable humour into which he moulds his enormous stores of acute observation. (qtd. in Collins 490-1)

On the contrary, as I have consistently suggested, I do not think that Dickens' morality is so simple or platitudinous, particularly as it developed through his later

novels. In fact, it is quite clear that the Dickens of Old Curiosity Shop, for one instance, is not the same author as the Dickens of Little Dorrit. He may have relied heavily on maudlin sentiment to make his points in earlier novels, and he admittedly would return to that *on occasion* in later novels, but his treatment of moral questions ostensibly evolved from the trite admonitions to "be good," into something much more complex, particularly in its connection to Dickens' growing understanding of existence and temporality. In short, Dickens' central theme of performing good deeds for others did not change, but the depth of his understanding of the possible causes, results, and justifications for that attitude clearly grew. Although Dickens may have pled with his audience in his early novels to "behave decently," in the second half of his career, Dickens would suggest much more than that, and he would also provide some philosophical grounding to substantiate his assertions. Ultimately, in his later novels, Dickens successfully unites his conception of the nature of existence with a more complicated ethical system, which is derived directly from those quasi-existential observations. Clearly, a serious reader of novels like Little Dorrit and Great Expectations would be hard-pressed not to admit that "behave decently" is a great deal more complicated than it sounds.

I. The Question of Benevolence

One mistake that critics make when criticizing Dickens' moral sense—and why it is so easy to misread Dickens' skill at characterization—is to include all the positive characters in one empty generalization. Humphrey House has observed that the goodness that all of Dickens' positive characters share can be characterized as "personal affection

and general philanthropy," or, in a word "benevolence" (39). House easily breaks up Dickens' vision of benevolence into four "symptoms":

> (1) Generosity, in money, and in kindness that costs nothing. . . . (2) An acute feeling for suffering in all forms, whether caused by poverty, sickness, cruelty (mental or physical) or injustice. . . . (3) Righteous, if ineffectual, indignation against all anomalies, abuses, and inefficiency in social organizations or government which cause suffering of any kind. . . . (4) An equable and benign temper in the benevolent person, which is on the whole immune from the changing moods which make human beings interesting in themselves. (46)

House likewise suggests that there is no rationale for the characters' behavior, for they simply seem to act morally because that is their purpose in the novel:

> They are all good-natured, and seem to act as they do because they cannot act otherwise. Not one of them has a moral policy, or a considered opinion about why he does good. They seem to have no temptations, difficulties, or struggles: they are uniforms, unruffled, and unreflecting. . . . The benevolent characters of the Pickwick-Brownlow-Garland-Cheeryble type are never themselves the mouthpieces of destructive Benthamite criticism: their facile charity forbids censoriousness; they are too busy being happy to think. (39)

Of course, it is easy for House to make this generalization if he is only going to focus on the so-called "Father Christmas" figures from the early novels. Early characters like the Cheerybles and Brownlow are flat types whose only purpose is to arrive at the end and

save the main characters from the novels' villains, thereby delivering the requisite happy endings. However, this generalization does not account for later characters who provide some aid or mentoring to the protagonists. In Dickens' later novels, the "benevolent" characters are clearly more developed, and retain certain character traits and flaws to make them as real as the protagonists.

Upon a closer look, we can see that many of House's generalizations are inaccurate. For one, the assistance these "benevolent" characters provide to others does, in fact, cause them to suffer often. Moreover, these "heroic" figures do not always concern themselves with social problems, and, when they do, they do not always feel "righteous indignation" about them. Finally, many of these characters cannot be said to be so happy that they are incapable of thought, or to be immune to oscillating moods. For example, David Copperfield's Aunt Betsey seems to defy virtually all of these limitations: she almost goes into bankruptcy because she has spent her money on David, Mr. Dick, and her ex-husband, she is little concerned with worldly issues, and she is notably grumpy and violent-tempered. John Jarndyce is another excellent example: he seems to be perfectly willing to offer all he has to his wards and friends, he is more saddened than indignant about the Court of Chancery's inefficiency, and he is forced to retreat to his "Growlery," where he might brood alone because he is so subject to his moods. For a final example, Joe seems to defy these conventions as well: he would share all he has with others, although he does not have much, he does not seem to express sympathy for the less fortunate in society—such being too large of a concern for him, perhaps—and he does not worry about society or the government's operations or abuses. Dickens' benevolence, it seems, comes in many forms.

More importantly, Dickens' notion of "benevolence" is more complicated than simply "being good to others," particularly in that it springs directly from his understanding of temporal existence. Whereas the young Dickens would often employ his "Fathers Christmas" as deus ex machina figures through whom he might conclude his novels with happy endings, in the later novels, Dickens consistently connected moral behavior to his characters' growing understanding of themselves in time. "Benevolence" is often linked to the characters' past suffering or unhappiness; it is not blatantly unmotivated or unrealistic, but rather, it springs from the characters' desire to make up for their mistakes or to help others avoid their sufferings. Once characters have come to terms with their pasts, they find motivation to help make amends to their victims or for their victimizers, so that the errors of the past are not repeated in the future. As such, "benevolence" is inspired by past encounters with "evil," and is employed as a means by which to counter its effects.

Moreover, the characters' reflection on their existence inevitably leads to a revelation that human beings are all connected together through the actions of each individual. Dickens seeks to suggest this in the very form of his novels. Despite the fact that each novel features literal hordes of characters, all of these characters are bound together inextricably, even when they are unaware of these connections. Virtually every character has some relation to the others, whether through reputation, past experiences, business, friendship, or seemingly accidental encounters. Although characters may come from opposite ends of the social spectrum, they cannot escape their relations with each other. Even though characters seem to have left the scene for good, the reader can be well assured that they will come back into the picture, for the bonds between individuals

cannot be broken—even, it seems, by death. The strength of these connections reveals the importance of one's actions. Because individuals are all connected, the actions of one individual inevitably have an impact on those around the individual. Dickens seems to suggest that, since individuals are so closely connected, there is an inherent responsibility for the individual to other people. Our lives and actions are intertwined from the very beginning: we are born with the duty to others.

II. The Doctrine of Usefulness

Moreover, it is clear that Dickens' vision of the moral life involves more than simple "benevolence." In fact, it seems that offering kindness to others is not enough to justify one's life. A crucial aspect of Dickens' moral philosophy is the individual's obligation to be useful. In each novel, we find that the protagonists must find places for themselves in the world whereby they might serve a larger purpose for the human race. It is not enough for the protagonists to give their money and possessions to others. These characters must have jobs, and they must do their best to succeed at those jobs. Thus, we find that many characters are not truly "saved" until they have a career: David begins to succeed as an author while he simultaneously finds existential enlightenment, Arthur Clennam returns to his partnership with Doyce having learned his lesson about his past and the influence of society, Pip finally gives up his life of luxury and gets a job of his own, and Wrayburn seems to be ready—at long last—to put his law articles to good use. Many characters who do not work—or do not take their work seriously—are held up as examples of human profligacy, such as the unreformed versions of Pip and Sidney Carton, Richard Carstone, Harold Skimpole, and the various Barnacles. In fact, in the

moral sense of the Dickens world, these characters' offenses are held to be almost as egregious as those characters who murder or connive for personal gain.

However, this emphasis on the importance of usefulness should not be mistaken for a mere trumpeting of Victorian bourgeois values—an apparent echo of the doctrine of Samuel Smiles et al—as so many critics have chosen to see it. Dickens certainly does not intend for people to get lost in the pursuit of financial success: that is the single error of his age against which Dickens sought to warn his readers. Rather, Dickens' emphasis on his protagonists' employment serves to illuminate the divide between the moral and immoral life, as Dickens re-envisions the earlier conflict between victims and victimizers as a new distinction between producers and consumers. As is apparent to most readers, Dickens had come to understand modern society as being dominated by a few consumers, and his novels repeatedly play out this conflict. The great masses of producers labor for pittances, while the privileged elite sit atop society and devour or accumulate society's wealth. Those lucky few who manage to rise from their positions at the bottom of society and gain power do not change society for the better, as one might expect them to do, seeing as how their backgrounds must open their eyes to disparity within society; rather, like their predecessors, they blindly become consumers in the same fashion. Virtually all of society seems to mindlessly accept the status quo, which inevitably leads to rampant corruption and inefficiency in nearly all of society's institutions. Therefore, Dickens seems to raise the question as to whether the whole system should be scrapped in a fit of anarchic revolution. Of course, Dickens did not support such a course of action. Rather, as a remedy, Dickens sought some middle ground between the two: his heroes serve a

useful purpose and consume only what they need; ultimately, they do not succumb to the disease of society.

Dickens' emphasis on work clearly serves as a metaphor for the importance of action in the moral life. For Dickens, it is not enough to believe privately in different values than the rest of society; an individual must take deliberate action in response to his or her independently developed value system and in such a way as to benefit others. When there are evident abuses being inflicted on the less-fortunate, it is the enlightened individual's responsibility to take some form of action to change the circumstances. As Valerie Wainwright has observed, Dickens seems to reevaluate the very concept of human will, whereby human agency is ideally designed to function as "an empowering force for the good; a force which is manifest in the quality and fitness of the moral response to others" (171). Dickens thereby redefines the very idea of agency—the individual's ability and desire to act—as ideally being one's capacity to effect change in the world, although it is so often perverted in the pursuit of material gain. Therefore, an essential aspect of Dickens' proto-existentialist reexamination of the self is the assertion of the place of the will in the human individual, and the subsequent necessity of employing that will for the correct purposes. Thus, as Carl Dennis has noted, Dickens' protagonists gradually evolve from "passive," hopeless, and useless characters into individuals who seek to act definitively and for the benefit of others (1242-3). This can be readily seen in such "will-less" characters as David Copperfield, Esther Summerson, and Arthur Clennam, all of whom eventually realize that they possess an individual will and that their will should be wielded in the realization of others' happiness or peace. However, this revelation is more complicated than it might seem, for the characters must

come to this awareness while they exist in a society that emphasizes and rewards the very opposite notion, for, as we have seen, Dickens' vision of society is comprised of various groups or sub-communities that promise peace and happiness to individuals if they forsake their own senses of themselves and their own private senses of justice and morality for each group's "herd mentality," or "they-self." For the most part, Dickens characterizes this herd mentality as the emphasis on action for personal and worldly gain—and for virtually nothing else. Thus, there is an overwhelming sense that this communal existence in society is a largely static existence, wherein everyone practices "How not to do it," as inactivity is the best means of preserving one's privileged place in the world. Moreover, the acceptance of the "they-self" leads individuals to develop a myopic vision of the world around them, which allows for the massive social abuses and dysfunction that we find in each novel's world. As John Lindberg has observed, this great social "evil comes from the ignorance and complacency of all who compose the ranks among whom the individual wishes to rise" (122), or rather, of the elites of society, who think of nothing but their empty values.

Undoubtedly, on this point the discerning reader can clearly detect some level of influence on the part of Carlyle in this particular element of Dickens' moral system. Carlyle was, after all, the preeminent prophet of usefulness and the importance of work—though not necessarily prosperity—in the individual life. As we know, Dickens read Carlyle thoroughly, and was well acquainted with particular works such as "Signs of the Times" (Goldberg 20), wherein he would have found Carlyle's exhortation that, "Our grand business undoubtedly is, not to *see* what lies dimly at a distance, but to *do* what lies clearly at hand" (Carlyle, "Signs" 61). As we have seen, the notion that an individual

must act upon a problem, as opposed to looking at it or talking about it, is a major element in Dickens' work and his treatment of society; in Dickens' vision of the world, there are a lot of people who talk about making a change, or complain that everything is awful as it is, but there are few people who actually seek to do anything about it. In general, Dickens saw very little in the way of action, or production, or work of any kind in society, as many people seem content to sit back and allow others to shoulder society's burden of labor.

In this regard, Dickens certainly seems to echo Carlyle's fulminations on the same subject. In Sartor Resartus (1833-4), Carlyle, through Teufelsdröckh, exhorts his fellow man to become a creator, as opposed to a user:

> I too could now say to myself: Be no longer a Chaos, but a World, or even Worldkin. Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it in God's name! 'Tis the utmost thou hast in thee; out with it then. Up, up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called To-day, for the Night cometh wherein no man can work. (149).

In Past and Present (1843), Carlyle again would encourage his readers to become part of his solution to social stasis. In that work, instead of indulging in so many of his trademark angry jeremiads, Carlyle changes his tactics, and chooses instead to enlarge on the dignity work bestows on the human spirit, as he insists that, "All work, even cotton-spinning, is noble; work is alone noble" (155). In fact, Carlyle explains how one's work has the potential to immortalize its subject, for it is all that truly matters: ". . . our work, – behold that is not abolished, that has not vanished: our work, behold, it remains, or the

want of it remains; – for endless Times and Eternities, remains. . . .” (158). Ultimately, Carlyle concludes that one’s work is the one thing that makes one an individual, and, as a result, one who has no occupation or creates nothing does not exist in the first place: “We apprise thee of the world-old fact, becoming sternly disclosed again in these days, That he who cannot work in this Universe cannot get existed in it: had he parchments to thatch the face of the world, these, combustible fallible sheepskin, cannot avail him” (175). If one wants to look into the secrets of one’s life or existence, then one must look to one’s work, for that is what discloses truth to an individual: “. . . the real desire to get Work done will itself lead one more and more to truth, to Nature’s appointments and regulations, which are truth. . . . Think it not thy business, this of knowing thyself; thou art an unknowable individual: know what thou canst work at; and work at it, like a Hercules” (196).

Dickens certainly drew some inspiration from this in his own work, although to what extent is certainly questionable. As I have shown, Dickens’ characters must have a purpose in life: they produce instead of consuming. They must *act* to make the world better. But, as we have seen, that is only part of it. Work is an important element of his philosophy, but it is not the only obligation for the enlightened individual. Ultimately, finding one’s purpose is only one of the things that one must do so as to be led out of the darkness of the “They’s” influence on the journey toward true individual existence.

III. Retreat and Reformation: The Establishment of Alternative Communities

The notion of positive creative action in turn leads to an additional aspect of Dickens’ moral life: the necessity of rejecting Society’s values—to give up one’s social

existence and thereby free oneself from the dominant limitations of the "They." As we have seen earlier, Dickens understood how negative the influence of social existence on one's understanding of oneself and the nature of existence can be. Society corrupts virtually every individual, and it is practically irredeemable—at least for the moment. This is because, as Monroe Engel has noted, there is, in Dickens' works, "the hope" for "a kind of inevitable dissolution" of Society and all of its problems, yet "the obduracy of the old bad system . . . makes the hope for gradual or peaceful improvement seem so small" (123). Indeed, Dickens clearly came to see the unavoidable truth of the impossibility of effecting social change in the traditional manner—as O. F. Christie has suggested, Dickens had "become hopelessly disillusioned about the methods of politicians" (157), though I do not think he truly believed that the only means to realize change was through the "drudging work in Parliament" (178), or, as Engel has suggested, that Society should be allowed to slide into anarchy. Rather, Dickens suggests that it is necessary for the individual to pull out of Society so as to understand the fictional and arbitrary nature of Society's values and limitations. This is because Dickens clearly operated under the "supposition" that the individual was inherently moral (Dennis 1237), and that true moral values can be found in one's heart, but that existence-with-others has a tendency to color and corrupt that natural understanding. It is only once Dickens' characters have withdrawn from society that they finally arrive at that supposedly sudden "change of heart" of which Barbara Hardy has spoken, "by seeing what they are" (Hardy 55), and resolving to live differently.

However, Dickens did not intend to suggest that a man can be an island unto himself. Dickens' vision of the moral life cannot be realized in a vacuum. Dickens clearly

felt that human beings require connections and interactions with others, and a crucial tenet of his moral beliefs is the requirement of every person to aid others in times of need. Moreover, the influence of other individuals is an essential facet of true self-understanding when held in moderation and put in its proper place, so one cannot be *completely* removed from all forms of socialization. Essentially, Dickens does not advocate hermit-like existence, for that would be just as wrong-headed as to fully embrace society's values. Rather, Dickens "opposes the social world . . . to the communal world" (Jahn 369); essentially, the problem is not the association with other human beings—it is one's potential self-abnegating adherence to the dictates of society. Although Dickens might be quite readily recognized as one of the more prominent critics of social existence, we see that he is also among the ranks of the great "communitarian" philosophers, as Valerie Wainwright has sought to prove, as she suggests that a novel such as Hard Times "envisions the practice of 'community' values and virtues and explores some of the implications of certain 'communitarian' forms of life," such as

> that the community model provides its members not only with essential life goods . . . but also, and significantly, with a robust sense of personal identity. . . . The self flourishes when nourished on a diet of intimacy and care, when it finds purpose and direction in commitments to the well-being and aims of community members. (173)

In short, Dickens does not condemn all existence-with-others outright, but only the empty existence one finds in society, as opposed to *limited* existence-with-others, particularly when these "others" share the protagonist's beliefs in the freedom of the independent will an the need for moral action. Instead, Dickens seems to suggest that the formation of a

true community is not only essential for authentic self-understanding, but it is also a moral imperative.

Dickens develops a theme in his later novels, wherein the protagonists must retreat from society and reform a new community with other likeminded individuals. Ronald Librach has suggested that Dickens does not "propose for the man who seeks escape an authentic place of refuge" (543) from society, while Richard Levine has speculated that "by no means are the later novels counseling a total removal from society" (171). As the conclusions of all of Dickens' novels consistently testify, the opposite is actually the case. In virtually every novel's conclusion, we find that the main characters end—or, at the very least, restrict—their public existence. On many occasions, the heroes must physically leave society, symbolic of their disenchantment with it and their willingness to found a new community. By the very end of every novel, the protagonists instead coexist only with their friends and loved ones, largely isolated from the rest of society, forming a new community on *the model* of a family.

Alexander Welsh has suggested that if society—by way of the symbolic city—is "the problem," then "his answer can be named the hearth" (142), or namely, the "modern conjugal family, in which refuge is sought from the day's work" (144). I do not think it is as simple as that, for not every family is positive, nor is every family necessarily composed of relatives by blood or marriage. In fact, there are just as many dysfunctional families in Dickens' novels—the Gradgrinds, the Jellybys, the Steerforths, the Dorrits, for only a few examples—as there are positive working ones. Rather, Catherine Waters is quite correct when she observes the paradox by which Dickens is "renowned as the celebrant of the hearth," yet he "nevertheless invested his imaginative energy in the

depiction of grotesque or fractured families" (120). Some critics have taken this as evidence of Dickens' negativity towards the idea of family, as when T. A. Jackson has suggested that "Dickens' attitude to the bourgeois family was a radically critical one" (278). This, I think, is taking the point a bit too far. Dickens' depiction of the typical family is not always kind, but he does not specifically condemn the notion of family—far from it. Rather, Dickens clearly criticizes society through the figures of the bad families, for he sees the effects that a corrupt society has on its smaller subdivisions. For Dickens, the family exists as the basic nexus of interaction between individuals, and clear evidence of the connections between individuals, yet he also observes that society's empty values have perverted even these undeniable relationships, and that relatives, who should be supportive and protective of each other, have turned against each other in competition for worldly prizes. Therefore, we see how Dombey, Murdstone, Mrs. Joe Gargery, and Mrs. Havisham can abuse their children—foster or otherwise—while Gradgrind and William Dorrit can prostitute their own daughters. Apparently, even the concept of the family needs to be re-imagined, and Dickens does not so simply resolve society's problems as to advise his readers platitudinously to "go home and spend time with their families."

Rather, he seems to suggest that enlightened individuals with the right values and beliefs must find a family of their own, or, more specifically, a community wherein they might share their values and find the interpersonal connections so necessary to authentic existence. As Alan Lelchuk has noted, Dickens "presents alternatives" to the social world for the enlightened world, "counter-societies" where "the repressed emotions enforced by industrial society are liberated, and distorted energies are redirected into healthy channels" (417). Therefore, every novel concludes with the creation of a new community,

on the model of—and exhibiting the intimacy of—a family that is devoid of the bad influence of society and dedicated to the mutual happiness of every member of the group. If the protagonists had earlier expressed a desire for fame and fortune, by the end of their stories they have long since forgotten or rejected such vainglorious pursuits in favor of lives of quiet usefulness, surrounded by close friends. The heroes and heroines have learned the lessons that life teaches, and they have been given "the second chance that comes after chastening and acceptance" (Engel 167). In short, it is in this particular sort of family—and not necessarily their own families—that the characters find "the reconciliation of past and future, memory and hope" (Carlisle 91). After the protagonists reevaluate their lives and change who they are for the better, they finally complete their quests in search of their true selves by finding a community in which they truly belong without any of the false and venal behavior seen in the wider world. In these "enlightened" communities, there is the promise of a brighter tomorrow, for all of the community's members share the same transcendent values, and there is a suggestion that these values will eventually spread to the larger world.

In Dombey and Son, the narrative concludes with the creation of this type of alternative community, led this time by Walter Gay and Florence Dombey, and including Sol Gills, Captain Cuttle, Toots, Susan Nipper, Miss Tox, and the reformed Mr. Dombey. All of the negative influences of the world have been removed, and the differing system of values held by this community is made evident by the alterations in Dombey's character, as he has long since given up the ever present influence of the world, "Ambitious projects trouble him no more," and "His only pride is in his daughter and her husband" (970) and eventually his grandchildren. Significantly, Walter and Florence

must leave England to effectively demonstrate their rejection of society's values, and, when they return, they gather their new community around them. Through this community, there is a sense that the larger world will follow suit at some future point, as it is believed that "another Dombey and Son will ascend" (974)—Dombey's firm being representative of society itself—under the new management of Florence and Walter.

David Copperfield's resolution likewise involves the physical retreat of its hero. As we have seen, over the course of the novel David succumbs to society's influence for some time before his eyes are finally opened by the climactic demises of Steerforth and Dora. Yet, David cannot realize the change in his life that he knows he must make while he remains in England. In fact, David seems to require complete solitude from any human companionship so as to come to terms with what he must do in his life. Thus, David "left all who were dear to me, and went away" (748) to Europe, "passing on among the novelties of foreign towns . . . as a dreamer might" (749). "Sometimes I had proceeded restlessly from place to place," David tells us, "stopping nowhere; sometimes I had lingered long in one spot. I had no purpose, no sustaining soul within me, anywhere" (749). Gradually, David realizes his purpose in life, to learn life's lessons and "as they had taught me, would I teach others" (750), presumably in his writing—as Dickens does—which is why this realization is immediately followed by his returning to work "in my old ardent way, on a new fancy, which took strong possession of me" (751). Moreover, David realizes his errors in becoming infatuated with Dora—how he had "bestowed my passionate tenderness upon another object; and what I might have done, I had not done" (752)—and he comes to understand what the novel's readers have known all along, that Agnes has always been the ideal companion for him, and that through his

relationship with her he might find a "means of making me more self-denying, more resolved, more conscious of myself, and my defects and errors" (753).[53]

Upon David's return we see the immediate establishment of the alternative community centered on David and Agnes' marriage. Although some of David's friends have gone forever, enough still remain to populate the ideal community—as testified to in Dickens' inevitable "last Retrospect" in which David notes the "faces" that "are the most distinct . . . in the fleeting crowd" (802)—including Peggotty, Aunt Betsey, Mr. Dick, Mr. Wickfield, Tommy Traddles' family, and Doctor and Annie Strong. Gone is Steerforth, the negative ideal of society, while Uriah Heep and Littimer are locked away. As I noted earlier, David's pursuit has always been to find a place in which to belong: the novel's conclusion grants David's wish, as David finds acceptance finally in a community of his own making. As Joseph Gold has observed, "it is a strange achievement that" David's "entire, long and agonizing quest should end at home. It is a story of the heroics of the hearth. . . . David's search is in a sense a striving for perfect ordinariness, the quiet fulfillment of a totally human peace in hearth, home and family" (183). Or, to be more specific in this case, David Copperfield is the story of the "totally human peace" of genuine communal existence in a "family" of one's own creation.

In Bleak House, we find yet another example of the conclusive creation of an alternative society. Significantly, this alternative community at the end of the novel is actually a revision of an earlier attempt. The original Bleak House to which Esther,

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[53] Significantly, many of David's friends must also depart England, including Mr. Peggotty, Emily, and the Micawber family. Their departure is clearly an indication of the need to retreat from society's negative influence, for the characters must leave because of the sheer impossibility of surviving in English society. Emily, as a "fallen" woman, will have great difficulty in establishing a decent life for herself, while Mr. Micawber has never been able to live up to his own advice of "Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness. . . . annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery" (170).

Richard, and Ada are drawn is clearly established as a refuge from the greed and stasis of the larger world, and as a place where John Jarndyce can protect the less fortunate in society, as he even foolishly extends that offer to Skimpole. Yet, the original Bleak House is not a true sanctuary from the corruption of society, although it does serve as a clear improvement. Rather, we find how the evils of society seep into the first Bleak House's cozy confines, as Jarndyce must continually resort to his "Growlery," he and his wards become embroiled in a murder investigation, Richard succumbs to the Chancery disease, and Skimpole is revealed not to be "a mere child in the world" (90). That the original Bleak House has been subject to society's corruption is made even more evident in Esther's infection with smallpox: if even the heroine of the novel cannot escape society's contagious diseases, whether genuine or metaphorical, what hope do the rest of us have? Clearly, the community must be reformed anew. Once again, Dickens removes the negative influences and characters from the readers' view, including the cloying Skimpole, the flawed Richard, the venal Smallweed family, Krook, Tulkinghorn, and virtually all of the upper class—although, admittedly, the Dedlocks do find their own form of redemption. The protagonists find a new Bleak House—a home this time modeled according to the "little tastes and fancies . . . little methods and inventions" (963) of the novel's ethical paradigm, Esther. Subsequently, Dickens again closes his narrative with an account of how all of the heroic characters—including Esther, Jarndyce, Allan Woodcourt, Ada, Charley, and Caddy—come together and live happily ever after in their newly formed utopian community. Moreover, Dickens concludes with a hopeful sentiment for society, as the scars of Esther's disease have not truly deformed her, and she is even more beautiful than she was previously. Dickens' message is quite clear here:

if Esther can survive a vicious disease and even come out better for it, society might also experience such a recuperation from its own diseases of greed and stasis and possibly improve in the long run.

Hard Times serves as something of a departure from this theme in that the main characters do not eventually pull out of society and form their own community. Rather, the alternative community coexists with the flawed community throughout the novel, although we only see it in brief intervals. The society of Hard Times may be dominated by Gradgrind's "Facts" and the choking smoke that pours from its factories, but along Coketown's margins we find a traveling community—Sleary's Circus—that follows very different rules. The circus folk are remarkably different from the other characters depicted in the novel, particularly from the upper middle class characters, such as the Gradgrinds and Bounderby. While these middle class characters—this particular society's elite—live by a code of accumulation and strict logic, the circus performers represent a far different ethos:

> They all assumed to be mighty rakish and knowing, they were not very tidy in their private dresses, they were not at all orderly in their domestic arrangements, and the combined literature of the whole company would have produced but a poor letter on any subject. Yet there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an untiring readiness to help and pity one another, deserving, often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction, as the everyday virtues of any class of people in the world. (41)

The circus community's unique values are made immediately apparent, particularly in their opposition to Bounderby and Gradgrind's cold philosophy, for when Bounderby harshly tells Sissy about her father's desertion of her, the circus folk cannot help but react with resentment: "They cared so little for plain Fact, these people, and were in that advanced state of degeneracy on the subject, that instead of being impressed by the speaker's strong common sense, they took it in extraordinary dudgeon" (43). More specifically, the key difference between this community and society as a whole, as articulated by Thomas Gradgrind, is the distinction between wisdom of the Head and wisdom of the Heart. Naturally, the former of these leads inevitably to a community of predators and prey, while the latter philosophy is that "something – not an Ology at all" that Thomas Gradgrind and, it seems, the rest of Coketown have "missed, or forgotten" (201)—the secret to finding peace in the world. As Sleary opines, "there ith a love in the world, not all Thelf-interetht after all, but thomething very different" (292). This philosophy is obviously more complex than Sleary's later axiom—on which so many critics tend to focus—that "People mutht be amuthed" (292), for it posits that there is the possibility of an escape from society and that the individual can live by a different set of values, as those of society are not universal. However, it is quite significant that this alternative philosophy remains largely secret, as the circus community continues to holds itself at a distance from the rest of society, for it remains to be seen if society is ready to accept their philosophy en masse.

Although the circus community remains withdrawn from society, Dickens still provides a sense of hope that their philosophy of life might spread gradually to the rest of society. Through Sissy Jupe, we find that this "wisdom of the Heart" is employed at the

very nucleus of society, as Sissy manages to survive the influences of her caretakers and live the circus philosophy for the benefit of others. Because she was raised among the circus folk, Gradgrind's philosophy never takes much of a hold in Sissy's mind or spirit. Despite Gradgrind's best efforts, Sissy is doomed to remain "extremely deficient in . . . facts" and "altogether backward, and below the mark" (94) in his eyes. She can never grasp the cold sciences of "Political Economy" (60) or "National Prosperity" (62), for she cannot disregard the lives of individuals and reduce human beings down to empty numbers, for such would run contrary to her instincts and upbringing. She can never become a Louisa because she is guided by her heart. She exists to serve others—"I would be something for you, if I might" (227), she begs Louisa—and for this reason she is one of the few characters to find happiness in the novel. Significantly, from her seemingly innocuous position, Sissy has a serious impact on society, for she undermines Gradgrindery at its very core, educating Louisa and Jane in its alternative and even managing to convince its founder of its fallacy. At the novel's conclusion, the Bounderbys and Bitzers and Harthouses of the world still exist, but there is a suggestion that they have lost some of their preeminence, and that, though it might take a long time, society may eventually come around to the circus philosophy. In this regard, Sissy's story serves as something of a curious reversal of the direction of influence that we find in Bleak House, for this time the enlightened community seems to infect the rest of society with its philosophy, as opposed to merely weathering the deleterious effects of society's mass insanity.

Little Dorrit's conclusion creates an interesting problem, specifically in that Dickens does not take the reader through the typical "retrospective" chapter at the end,

the sense of hope is somewhat muted (though not completely silent), and we do not discover much about what happens to the central characters, beyond that Amy and Arthur "went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness" (787). As I have noted earlier, critics have therefore often understood Little Dorrit's ending—as well as the rest of the novel—to be remarkably pessimistic, and perhaps the most morbid among all of his works. I think that is quite clearly not an accurate interpretation of the novel or Dickens' intentions for it. Dickens does not spell everything out for his reader, but he still provides a sense that the Amy-Arthur alliance will effect some change in the larger world. Clennam has suffered some serious losses of money, faith, and identity by the end of the novel, but Clennam's story is not the same story as that of Dostoevsky's Gambler or The Idiot's Prince Myshkin, both of which are accounts of the failure of idealism, particularly as seen in the vanity of human endeavors to make changes in the world. Rather, Clennam has clearly been redeemed by the novel's conclusion, having learned through Amy's influence to accept and understand the past. More importantly, Clennam has survived his existential crisis so as to continue fighting against society's corrupt bureaucracies and institutions, for, as Daniel Doyce advises him:

> There was an error in your calculations. I know what that is. It affects the whole machine, and failure is the consequence. You will profit by the failure, and will avoid it another time. I have done a similar thing myself, in construction, often. Every failure teaches a man something, if he will learn; and you are too sensible a man not to learn from this failure. (783)

Indeed, Dickens suggests that Clennam will employ these hard-earned lessons in his dealings with the world, for Clennam rejoins Doyce in their business—presumably also

accepting the opportunity to lock horns with government agencies again—and he and his wife likewise develop an unseen alternative community that serves as refuge for "Fanny's neglected children" (787) and the impotent Tip. When the newly married Amy and Arthur subsequently go "quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed," while their fellow Londoners "made their usual uproar" (787), I do not think Dickens in any way suggests the vanity of their enterprise; rather, in the interests of his art, Dickens downplays his usually boisterous endings for something more ambiguous and, by extension, more profound. His point has not changed: society still continues on as it had before, but the main characters are safe in the enlightened community they have created, and they try to make a difference in the world in whatever way they can.

A Tale of Two Cities is admittedly quite different from the previous novels, and might even seem to pose as a possible exception to this theme. Dickens does not *specifically* focus on criticizing the England of his day and age—or during his lifetime—as a good deal of the action takes place in eighteenth century France. However, I believe that Dickens clearly intended the French masses to stand in for English society; after all, there is nothing particularly French about them, and one would think that an author with such a reputation for observational talents, and who had spent so much time in the country, would be able to make a more coherent distinction between the French and English peoples. A Tale's vision of society can be described as apocalyptic, at best, for everyone in France has descended into a state of bloodthirsty insanity. Of course, this violent turn is really only the logical extension of the myopic pursuits of more "proper" Englishmen. Dickens consistently makes clear that English society is fallen into a state of madness as well—albeit an admittedly more "civilized" form of mass insanity

characterized by the pursuit of profit instead of blood. But the difference between these two forms of mass psychosis is not so clear cut: when one is concerned only with accumulation, one tends to see others only as numbers, tools, or obstacles, and it is only a small step between callously taking advantage of others, and murdering them for sport or gain. Clearly, French society serves as Dickens' "there but for the grace of God" example of what might happen to English society if it were to continue on its current path.

Thus, I would argue that Dickens again pursues his favorite theme in A Tale of Two Cities, for although the setting and era of the action has changed, the manner in which his protagonists interact with the French revolutionaries is no different from that in which Dickens' previous heroes have dealt with their own societies. In A Tale, we again find a small community of likeminded individuals, tied together by the "golden thread" (83) woven by Lucie Manette. This particular community is again surrounded by a society governed by an anti-humanitarian philosophy, while its members practice and defend a different set of values than the rest of society. Therefore, this community must exist outside of society, and limit its interactions with the rest of society, if only for the purpose of self-preservation. From a certain perspective, in describing A Tale's alternative community, we discover what would have happened had Dickens concentrated on Hard Times' circus community instead of that novel's generally flawed society, for A Tale shares this notably different "outsider's" perspective on the relationship between the alternative community and society as a whole.

More importantly, in relation to this theme of the establishment of the good community, Carton's sacrificial death takes on added significance. Although I have earlier downplayed its significance within Dickens' overall philosophy, I would not argue

that it is unimportant, particularly in regard to what it says about Dickens' belief about community: namely, that the preservation of the enlightened community is so important, that it overrides the personal desires or survival of any single individual. First of all, Dickens makes it quite clear that a life without connections is an empty one, or to be more specific, not a life at all, as is illustrated many times in the novel, such as when Lorry agrees with Carton that his "seventy-eight years would be seventy-eight heavy curses" if he could say to himself: "I have secured to myself the love and attachment, the gratitude or respect, of no human creature; I have won myself a tender place in no regard; I have done nothing good or serviceable to be remembered by!" (322). Essentially, the true interpersonal connections that one discovers are the only thing by which one's life is defined. Moreover, the intended beneficiary of Carton's act is clearly the community as a whole, and not *only* Lucie, as readers tend to see it. Rather, Carton directly and implicitly saves *Darnay's* life, and not Lucie'; by extension, he allows Lucie, Lucie's father, and Lucie's children to continue living happily. When Carton has his "death vision," the recipient of his action is made quite clear, as he reflects on the notably plural "lives for which I lay down my life" (389), and his future place in "*their* hearts" (390, emphasis added), before recounting the later happiness of Lucie, her father, her children, Darnay, and Jarvis—the model community—living happily ever after. Only at his death does Carton, the lonely and scavenging "Jackal," finally find a pack to which he belongs. In short, the community and its relationships are more important than anything else, for they truly define the happy life and form the basis for one's moral decisions, and as a result one must go to any lengths to defend them. Thus, while I do not think that Dickens uses Carton as a Christ figure, or a vehicle by which he might finally express some hidden

Christian evangelicalism, or a belief in life after death in heaven, as many critics have speculated, I do not deny that Carton's sacrifice is ultimately quite important in the larger scope of Dickens' works. Rather, I would argue that Carton's death is truly important because it reveals the significance of the true community in each of its members' individual lives.

Great Expectations adds a slight wrinkle to this theme, for it raises doubts about the immediate efficacy of establishing the alternative community. At its conclusion, Pip has reformed and rejected society's values, while he simultaneously and symbolically withdraws from English society. However, when Pip returns to England he neither forms the novel's alternative community, nor does he join one that has been created by his loved ones. In fact, Pip's future seems to be rather uncertain, as he seems almost to be denied a place in which he belongs, and he seems destined to "continue friends apart" (484) with not only Estella, but Joe and Biddy as well. This is because the novel seems to suggest that individuals' personal changes in self-perception may not have an *immediate* effect in the wider world. In fact, Pip is consistently presented with the existence of idealistic alternative communities throughout the novel, such as Joe's forge or Wemmick's "Castle," yet he cannot find a place in any of them. Dickens makes it quite clear that these communities are quite different from the rest of society, and that one cannot easily straddle the divide and belong to both. Pip, before his redemption, cannot exist in the small forge, and Joe does not belong in society. This is because social existence is inherently inauthentic, and one is never one's true self when participating in society, as when Wemmick points out to Pip the difference between the office and private life. Thus, Wemmick represents the dangers of trying to exist in both worlds, for in one

he is his real self, a generous man "with pleasant and playful ways" (412), while in the other—the business world—he is merely a "cunning impostor" (412), pretending to be concerned only with "portable property" (291).

For most of the novel, Pip is only concerned with social existence, and once he reforms and rejects society's values, we find that he yearns for a place in the ideal community of the forge. However, Dickens denies Pip a place in the community, which is represented symbolically by Biddy's "rejection" of Pip's marriage proposal. In so doing, Dickens seems to acknowledge that an individual may make the personal changes in one's life and yet still not find "authentic" communal existence. Moreover, Dickens seems to admit that an *immediate* change in society as a whole may also be impossible, as the interactions between the alternative communities and society as a whole remain limited, as even Joe must admit that: ". . . life is made of ever so many partings welded together, as I may say, and one man's a blacksmith, and one's a whitesmith, and one's a goldsmith, and one's a coppersmith. Diwisions among such must come, and must be met as they come" (224). However, Dickens still ends the novel with a sense of hope for the future. Although Pip does not seem to find a place of his own, he is replaced in the forge's alternative community with a new Pip—Joe and Biddy's son—who promises "to grow up a much better man" (479) than his namesake. Essentially, the Pips of today may succumb to the evils of society, and they may suffer for it, but the Pips of tomorrow will be endowed with independent self-conceptions and a stronger set of values, and the world will be better for it.

Our Mutual Friend does not add a great deal to this theme of the establishment of the alternative community, as it more or less follows it exactly as I have explained it, yet

it is remarkable in that it provides possibly the most hopeful assessment of the alternative community's effectiveness at spreading its values to the rest of society. In fact, it is the only novel that ventures a suggestion that the alternative philosophy of life may very well succeed at becoming the dominant philosophy in society. By the novel's conclusion, a great deal of wealth and power is in the hands of the novel's alternative community, which is composed of the Harmons, the Wrayburns, the Boffins, and Lightwood. Therefore, the alternative community seems to be in a good position to make important changes in society *immediately*. Moreover, the power of society's elites seems to be in decline, as the Veneerings are about to have a "resounding smash" (792). The once unified voice of society, originating with the opinions of Lady Tippins and Podsnap, is thrown into chaos, as Twemlow dares to question the elites' insistence on social differences and the power of money. For this reason, Our Mutual Friend has possibly the happiest conclusion of all of Dickens' novels, for it ends right at the point when society seems to be turning over and improving.

IV. The Image of the Home

Dickens frequently employs the image of the family home to illustrate the success or failings of a particular family or community. As has often been observed, Dickens' authorial reputation is closely connected to the image of the home, as he has frequently been perceived as "a prophet of the hearth" and "the purveyor of domestic bliss" (Waters 120).[54] Virtually every novel establishes a certain "ideal"—the confluence of

[54] From a certain perspective, Dickens' novels seem to represent fully what Gaston Bachelard has termed "the poetics of the house" (xxxii), wherein his focus on the home as a crucial existential space, representative of transcendent values, clearly reveals his understanding of the home as a psychological construct and much more than a location in which one resides. We can see how Dickens undoubtedly

spiritual/existential and domestic bliss—as George Orwell noted, of a comfortable middle class home, inhabited by a small and loving family where: "Everything is safe, soft, peaceful and, above all, domestic" (55). As we see in virtually every novel, the state of a home often indicates the state of its residents' interior lives, for, as Dorothy Van Ghent has observed, Dickens' work relies heavily on "the connections between moral and physical phenomena" (29), and thus we find that "the atoms of the physical world have been impregnated with moral aptitude" (30). Corrupt individuals live in decaying or empty homes, while positive characters dwell in places that exude warmth and familial good cheer. Bad families live in veritable dumps, while good "families" live in quiet and orderly domiciles. However, despite how clear-cut this might sound, there is more to this distinction than has commonly been accorded to it. Van Ghent has speculated that "in Dickens, environment is literally *un*natural," and that Dickens' settings differ from the settings of more realistic authors, such as Balzac, whose fictional environments "correspond to the human nature for which they provide the scene, and . . . set physical and in time spiritual bonds to the human development within them" (27). It is quite true that Dickens' houses are quite unnatural in that they do not behave or exist in the same manner as "normal" houses; however, they do have a particular logic of their own that explains the consistently unnatural light in which Dickens chose to depict them. As I have already mentioned in the second chapter, Dickens clearly felt that individuals leave traces of their existences in their environments—this would later be a common observation in existentialist philosophy. For Dickens, interior existence—the interior of

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understood how, in Bachelard's words, "imagination augments the values of reality. . . . build[s] "walls" of impalpable shadows, comfort[s] itself with the illusion of protection," as well as how "an entire past comes to dwell in a new house" (5). In essence, the home becomes the privileged zone of existential realization for Dickens, wherein the individual begins to find a unity in him or herself, both socially and in time.

the self: namely, emotion, spirituality, intellect—is closely connected to physical existence in many ways, such as in how one's environment has an effect on one's inner life and vice versa. Moreover, Dickens felt that society has an interior life as well, and that the collective ills of society do not need merely to be speculated on or theorized about, for they are clearly evident: the problem is that people refuse to open their eyes. Thus, we find the increasing tendency in Dickens' later novels to have society's problems manifested in physical forms—for example, the famous mud and fog of Bleak House, the ever present smoke of Hard Times, the shadowy milieus of Little Dorrit's morally uncertain world, and Our Mutual Friend's ubiquitous dust heaps—with houses serving as the most common instances of Dickens' foregrounding of interior existence. There are "profound philosophical implications" to this dichotomy, for Dickens seems to suggest that "the physical world *is* the moral world for modern man, and the moral world must inescapably be the physical world" (Wilkinson 225).

We find an early example, in Dombey and Son, where Dickens stresses the evident contrast between Dombey's stately mansion and the home that Florence keeps. Dickens takes great pains to inform us of the morbid physical qualities of Dombey's house:

> It was a house of dismal state, with a circular back to it, containing a whole suite of drawing-rooms looking upon a gravelled yard, where two gaunt trees, with blackened trunks and branches, rattled rather than rustled, their leaves were so smoke-dried. The summer sun was never on the street, but in the morning about breakfast-time. . . . It was soon gone

> again to return no more that day. . . . It was as blank a house inside as outside. (74-5)

"Ugh!" the narrator exclaims in reference to Dombey's library,

> They were black, cold rooms; and seemed to be in mourning, like the inmates of the house. The books precisely matched as to size, and drawn up in line, like soldiers, looked in their cold, hard slippery uniforms, as if they had but one idea among them, and that was a freezer. The bookcase, glazed and locked, repudiated all familiarities. (109)

Here, the dominant sentiment is the ostensible deathlike existence we find within Dombey's home: nothing can live or grow or thrive there. It is, in fact, more of a museum than a house. The condition of Dombey's house is not due to any lack of spending, for as Dombey observes, "I directed that no expense should be spared; and all that money could do, has been done" (583). Rather, Dombey's house is so gloomy and inaccessible because it is not a *home*; it is stately and expensive, but it is not a family's residence, as Florence realizes: "it was no home then, for anyone, though everything went on luxuriously and regularly" (592).

This stands in stark contrast with the domiciles of Sol Gills, and, later, Florence and Walter. Dickens emphasizes that his positive characters are very attentive to the needs of a household, for this is symbolic of these characters' shared concern for their community. For example, when Florence first seeks asylum in Sol Gills' shop, having nowhere else to go, we discover how concerned Captain Cuttle is with the establishment of a comfortable and loving home for her. Although Sol Gills' rooms are "very clean already," Cuttle does his best to dress them up for his female visitor, as he "converted the

bed into a couch, by covering it all over with a clean white drapery," and "converted the little dressing-table into a species of altar, on which he set forth two silver teaspoons, a flower-pot, a telescope, his celebrated watch, a pocket-comb, and a song-book, as a small collection of rarities, that made a choice appearance" (764). In so doing, Cuttle magically transforms the bachelor's apartments into a "bower" (764) for Florence. The next morning, Cuttle endeavors to cook for Florence, and we discover that not only does he cook "with extraordinary skill," but that he also takes great joy in doing so, as "there was never such a radiant cook as the Captain looked, in the height and heat of these functions" (773). On the following day, Cuttle continues to see to Florence's domestic needs, as he hires a housemaid of sorts, so that "Florence found everything about her as convenient and orderly, if not as handsome, as in the terrible dream she had once called Home" (778). Subsequently, we learn what joy Cuttle has in the homemaking task of creating a more permanent room for Florence:

> There was an empty room above-stairs at the wooden Midshipman's, which in days of yore, had been Walter's bedroom. Walter . . . proposed that they should carry thither such furniture out of the little parlour as would grace it best, so that Florence might take possession of it when she rose. As nothing could be more agreeable to Captain Cuttle than making himself very red and short of breath in such a cause, he turned to (as he himself said) with a will; and, in a couple of hours, this garret was transformed into a species of land-cabin, adorned with all of the choicest moveables out of the parlour, inclusive even of the Tartar frigate, which the Captain hung up over the chimneypiece with such extreme delight, that

> he could do nothing for half-an-hour afterwards but walk backwards from it, lost in admiration. (790)

Florence provides an even stronger example of this characteristic. Florence "is the estranged child of humanity crying to be let into the house of love and community" (Milner 481), so she has the insight into the inadequacies of her father's home, as well as an instinctive desire to build and tend to any home, as we find that she immediately engages in "quiet housewifery . . . in assisting to clear the table, arrange the parlour, and sweep up the hearth" (Dickens, Bleak 775), while taking refuge at Sol Gills' home. In fact, while the rest of the world dreams about accumulating money, Florence's one constant dream is to have a home of her own, even if that might mean working as a governess:

> She had indistinct dreams of finding, a long way off, some little sisters to instruct, who would be gentle with her, and to whom, under some feigned name, she might attach herself, and who would grow up in their happy home, and marry, and be good to their old governess, and perhaps entrust her, in time, with the education of their own daughters. (772)

However, it is Florence's tragedy that in her young life she has never had a real place to call Home: she has always been "Somewhere – anywhere – but never home!" (788). So, when Florence finds a family of her own, she takes to it with her whole being, as she informs Walter, she is: "Nothing but your wife. . . . I am nothing any more, that is not you. I have nothing dear to me that is not you" (885). Later, after she has a son, she reiterates her commitment to her family: "He is the darling of my heart, Papa. I would die for him" (940). Finally, Florence commits the ultimate act of benevolence in the novel, as

she forgives her father, tends to him through his illness, and brings him into the novel's alternative community.

Bleak House offers further examples of the equivalence between homemaking and morality. As J. Hillis Miller has observed, Dickens "shows the possibility of a truly moral life" (217) in Bleak House and the effects of this behavior "can be seen in the good households in the novel" (219). From the novel's earliest pages, Dickens strives to draw a comparison between the two chief locales of action in the novel, the Dedlock home at Chesney Wold and the titular edifice—and not, as might surprise some, the infamous Court of Chancery. Conveniently, both of these settings serve as the chief residences of, on one hand, society's elites, and, on the other hand, the novel's postulated alternative community; essentially, they exist at opposite ends of society. Physically, these two homes could not be more distinct from each other. The Dedlock manse, like Dombey's house before it, is no real home at all; in fact, it bears more resemblance to a mausoleum, as I have earlier noted in the second chapter. This is, of course, because it belongs to the "deadened world" (20) of High Society. It is admirably old and regal, but those characteristics do not describe a home. On the other hand, despite its paradoxically gloomy name ("A dreary name. . . . But not a dreary place at present" (45)), Bleak House is every bit a home, and serves as a temporary or permanent place of residence for many characters in the novel. Tellingly, its physical existence mirrors the imaginative and benevolent nature of its host:

> It was one of those delightfully irregular houses where you go up and down steps out of one room into another, and where you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are, and where there is a

> bountiful provision of little halls and passages, and where you find still older cottage-rooms in unexpected places, with lattice windows and green growth pressing through them. (85)

Unlike Chesney Wold, this is a house brimming with life, and though it may be smaller than the aristocrat's home, it has enough rooms to offer to anyone who might need them. Noticeably it is full of mismatched keepsakes, as opposed to expensive "things," which provides strong evidence that a person *has actually lived* within it:

> The furniture, old-fashioned rather than old, like the house, was as pleasantly irregular. . . . Our sitting-room was green; and had, framed and glazed, upon the walls, numbers of surprising and surprised birds, staring out of pictures at a real trout in a case, as brown and shining as if it had been served with gravy. . . . In my room there were oval engravings of the months. . . . Half-length portraits, in crayons, abounded all through the house. . . . All the moveables, from the wardrobes to the chairs and tables, hangings, glasses, even to the pincushions and scent-bottles on the dressing-tables, displayed the same quaint variety. (86-7)

Bleak House is not only a real home, but a home with many interests, a house with an imagination, and it is thereby open to all visitors. Essentially, it is the perfect location for the gathering of community.

At the center of these two houses stand two very different women, positioned at opposite ends of the moral spectrum. Although Lady Dedlock is ultimately forgiven by Dickens and his audience through Sir Leicester's note and the pathos of her death, she still clearly represents the very worst aspect of social existence. She has no real

connections to other human beings, and she has purposely forsaken the one true connection she had, as mother, when she gave up her child so as to pursue a life of pleasure and wealth. Furthermore, she brings nothing of use to the world—she is always "bored to death" (182), yet she never acts in any way—and thus bears witness to the empty existence of one who consumes instead of producing. Her morally questionable behavior is further implied in the fact that her home is dying around her, and she has nothing to do with its upkeep.

Luckily, in Esther's case, the proverbial apple has fallen far from the tree, as she has grown into her mother's polar opposite, most notably in her dedication to others. She is unique from birth, in that her destiny seems to involve service for others, as her aunt tells her: "Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart" (31). Esther instinctively understands Dickens' philosophy of interpersonal connections, as she seeks to create a meaningful and loving relationship by proxy with an imaginary figure, her Dolly, while she bewails the fact that in her young life she has yet to form any real important connections with others:

> I went up to my room, and crept to bed, and laid my doll's cheek against mine wet with tears; and holding that solitary friend upon my bosom, cried myself to sleep. Imperfect as my understanding of my sorrow was, I knew that I had brought no joy, at any time, to anybody's heart, and that I was to no one upon earth what Dolly was to me. (31)

Esther is indeed quite a natural at the creation and preservation of the community, as symbolically represented in her ability to perform all of the household tasks in Bleak House, for she is "generally a methodical, old-maidish sort of foolish little person" (115), and she is dedicated to the hope "to be useful to some one in my small way" (385).

Admittedly, for this exact reason, the character of Esther has been criticized by most critics. Many critics have seen her goodness as mere cloistered virtue, as when Joseph Fradin suggests that:

> . . . Esther can do no more than brighten the corner where she is. Her actions are all individual encounters between her goodness and others' need; perfect in being selfless and self-contained, they carry no larger hope in them, no hope that Esther or anyone else can restore the sun to the blighted landscape or halt the drift toward fragmentation. (108)

Of course, as I have hopefully shown, Dickens does not intend to express any hopes for Esther's *immediate* efficacy in the larger world: her effects are gradual, as we see her influence spread back into the community in a reversal of the smallpox infection that nearly claimed her life. Other critics have ridiculed Esther's seemingly endless series of self-abnegations, sacrifices, and denials, suggesting that at best Dickens has created an inherently unrealistic female figure, and at worst, one of the most vulgarly and ignorantly repressed figures in literature. For one example, Timothy Peltason has described her as having an "inability to take things for herself [that] verges on an inability to express any desire, or even to want anything," until she "is fixed as the tireless and compulsively generous attendant to the needs of others," and "Self-exiled to a supporting role in life" (673). Surely, Esther can at times be maddeningly self-deprecating, as she is reluctant to

give her own opinions or take her fair share of enjoyment in the happiness she gives others. However, in response to this particular criticism, I would agree with Judith Wilt, who argues that Esther's "saving quality," is not repression, "but of instinctive discipline in the presence of a world/story larger than, though inclusive of, her own" (302). In Bleak House's world of greedy bottom-feeders crawling over every bit of property, there must be at least one person who can finally come along and say "no."

Of course, many critics have suggested that Esther is indicative of Dickens' gross misogyny, as he seems to suggest that the truly moral woman should remain subservient to her husband and family. This, I think, is an instance of extreme misprision. Admittedly, Dickens *seems* to endorse the traditional Victorian "Evangelical faith in duty and renunciation" as "a woman's ethic" (Young 4). This may be the reason that some critics have tended to look at Dickens' characters and say that, even though Dickens lived through a time when the "typical Englishwoman" gradually evolved "from the meek submissive model of the 1830s to the more self-aware and self-assertive figure of the 1860s," we still do not see "much change or development in his basic attitude towards her" (Slater 301). But, in its essence, Dickens' development of Esther is actually one instance among many in which a female character is given the greatest power and autonomy in the novel. Esther chooses to assist others in whatever means she can; in so doing, she assumes virtually all of the moral authority in the novel. Only Esther can argue at the end that she has lived a truly good life. Although there are other good characters, they are all flawed in some way. Esther has always been there to assist others, and she has never judged others for their misdeeds: for example, she feels sorrow instead of anger or righteousness for her mother and Richard, both of whom have fallen victim to

society's corruption. Esther is also the only individual, male or female, who is capable of holding Bleak House together. By extension, she is the only person who can hold the novel's alternative community together, and, although she was the only individual bereft of interpersonal connections at the novels onset, she is functionally the knot that ties everyone together at the end. Finally, let us not forget that Esther tells half of the story, and thereby has power over everyone else in the novel, or, at the very least, the power to shape or control the novel's ultimate "message."

The conflict over Dickens' presentation of his female characters forms the crux of a common misconception of Dickens' works. Critics have tended to see Dickens' creation of these heroines in the "legless angel" (Orwell 73) mold as a serious flaw in his writing. Many critics have tended to be distracted by the question as to what Dickens' position was on the "woman question," and whether or not he truly held misogynist sentiments. In general, critics have tended to read the typical Dickens' heroine as evincing particular characteristics, all of which are treated with disapproval. As Michael Slater has attempted to summarize her, the Dickensian heroine is capable of "'instinctively' apprehending the emotional truth about other people and their relationships" (303) and serves as "a sort of natural priest, closer to God than man, and a source for him of spiritual strength and encouragement" (307). Critics tend to approach each of these general character traits as inherently negative attributes, as when Gail Turley Houston suggests that "the typical Dickensian heroine is a nourishing mother figure" who "in her self-denial creates for the hero a safe and sacred haven from the rapaciousness of the market" (13), which implies that an unequal power relationship exists between the male and female characters, in which the male characters exploit the

female characters for eventual success in society. However, when critics tend to focus on the novels through the lens of late twentieth-century feminist criticism, they fail to see what is really at stake here, for they all clearly miss the power that Dickens' female characters derive from their particular abilities "on the home front." Essentially, Dickens' heroines are capable of the vision necessary to understand themselves and the changes needed in the world around them well *before* their male counterparts. Critics' general distaste for Dickens' heroines' domestic ability and efforts likewise evinces a significant misreading of Dickens' true intentions. Slater has noted that, "The true source of heroism in woman is always domestic or, if not strictly domestic, then it is a concern personally to save or help individuals" (309). This is understood to be a limited characteristic, as implied by his subsequent observation that, "Dickens's presentation of admirable wives does not rise much above the level of efficient housewifery. . . ." (Slater 312). The reason that it does not "rise above" is that, for Dickens, there is no "above." As we have seen, the ability to maintain a household and everyone in it is the highest moral obligation that one can hold. This is because the individual who is capable of doing this is essentially responsible for the continued existence of the alternative community. On the other hand, Slater is right when he observes that, "Once woman ventures outside the family and seeks to do good on a large and public scale the result, Dickens felt, was bound to be unsatisfactory" (315). However, the reason for this is quite different from what Slater implies. More aptly, a woman who seeks to realize some massive public works project—like Mrs. Jellyby—is doomed to failure because *everyone* is destined to be unsuccessful at such an undertaking. As Dickens seems to suggest, great unwieldy social programs do not work; that is not the means by which change must happen. The only means by which

change can be seen in the world is through one individual at a time, as the influence of the alternative community slowly dribbles out to inspire particular individuals and eventually inspire the wider world. Large-scale efforts? Those only result in more poorhouses, more workhouses, and more inequality. In essence, the heroines are successful at realizing social change, but only over time and in their immediate vicinities through their "domestic" efforts.

Other critics have fixed on Dickens' heroines' seeming lack of an interior sexual life, like Agnes and Esther who serve as "the signature mark of his inability to confront the complexity of adult (and particularly sexual) relations" (Schor, Dickens 1). This point is generally taken further in the common criticism that focuses on these characters—the so-called union of sister and wife—as evidence of some incestuous impulse on Dickens' part, derived from the suppression of all sexual feeling. At any rate, in lieu of a thorough analysis of the importance of Dickens' heroines, critics have tended to indulge in a bit of amateur psychological analysis of his characters, and have come to various conclusions about Dickens' possible sexual neuroses. For example, Michael Slater has suggested that, "Dickens's apparent nervousness about any manifestation of aggressive female passion (as opposed to passive female devotion) may be linked to an equally detectable nervousness about his own strong sexual responsiveness to women" (356). As a result, Slater insists that, "Given Dickens's nervousness about seeing women as possessed of a sexual responsiveness equivalent to men's, it is not surprising that he should be so fond . . . of presenting wives as though they were children so that we seem to be reading about fathers and daughters rather than husbands and wives" (363). I think focusing on these matters misses Dickens' point entirely. Dickens does not merely suggest that women

should be sexless wives and housekeepers; in fact, I don't think he takes a stand on that notion one way or another. Moreover, I would not suggest that he is any more prudish than any other Victorian novelist. Regarding the suggestion of incest, I would cite Alexander Welsh's response to that critical reading: "The main error of reducing all the varieties of incestuous sentiment in Victorian fiction to repression, of seeing the triangular parlours of Victorian culture as evasions of sexuality, is that this negative explanation conceals from view the positive aim of such arrangements" (155). Or, rather, one might say more concisely that there are more important issues at stake. I think it is more accurate instead to suggest that the wives that his heroines ultimately become serve as metaphors of moral action for *all* human beings. In this regard, the ideal Victorian housewife, characterized by loving service to others and the maintenance of the community's relations, becomes the ideal human individual, regardless of sex or sexuality. Dickens does not suggest that women should all be sexless and submissive—he suggests that all men and women should behave as the "loyal wife" might behave. In this regard, the gatherers of the community, the women—the Florences, Esthers, Sissys, Amys, and Biddys—are the real heroes of Dickens' work, as they embody the cardinal virtues of Dickens' vision of the enlightened individual.

Before I conclude, I must address the concept of guilt in Dickens' work, for any discussion of morality would be incomplete without mention of the important place of guilt—and anxiety in the face of guilt—in human existence. Dickens' later novels are rife with guilty characters, but it can be quite arguably said that Dickens' characters do not experience the traditional sense of guilt: namely, the regret of having committed or the fear of being caught for an act that one knows to be wrong. Comparably few characters

actually experience this sense of guilt, as we find that the villains, murderers, embezzlers, and con artists—such as, Carker, Steerforth, Uriah Heep, Madame Defarge, Rogue Riderhood, and Fascination Fledgeby, to name but a few—rarely seem to feel remorse for what they have done. Rather, it is the protagonists who experience guilt—in a peculiar fit of uncertain and directionless anxiety—and for a very different reason. As we find in the cases of numerous Dickensian heroes, they seem to quite naturally fall into a conscious awareness of themselves as guilty, such as the clear examples of David Copperfield, Arthur Clennam, and Pip. However, none of these characters commits any *egregious* sins, so what is the reason for their shared sense of guilt? J. Hillis Miller has suggested that this is because Dickens' characters are born into an unfriendly world wherein the characters cannot find any connection to other human beings or their own places in the world, and, as a result, they come to think of themselves "as guilty," and that their "very existence is a matter of reproach and a shameful thing" (251). For Miller, this sense of guilt is derived from the fact that:

> The typical Dickens hero, like Pip, feels guilty because he has no given status or relation to nature, to family, or to the community. He is in everyone's eyes, in the way, superfluous. . . . He will be totally responsible, himself, for any identity he achieves, and thus "guilty" in the sense of being the source of his own values. He has no hope of ever being justified by any external approval. He will be, whatever he does, a "self-made man," a man who has made himself his own goal and end. . . . The world has simply refused to give him any assigned place, and any place he gets will have to be seized. (252)

I think this is, at best, partially true. It is true that Dickens' heroes seem to be thrown into a cold and unfriendly world, but this relation to the world cannot be characterized as simply as Miller leaves it. Rather, as I have shown, the narrative begins with the characters already existing in the matrix of society's false "They," and, because these characters are not fully corrupted by society, "good-at-heart," and ultimately capable of redemption through the rejection of society's values, they are aware of the uncomfortable inadequacy of their existence in the "They." They are not guilty because they have the responsibility for making themselves; they feel this guilty anxiety because they are conscious of the inauthenticity of their existence—they know that they are pretending to be something that they are not, and that this act may lead them to do far worse things. Dickens' characters experience this anxiety because they know on some level that they are not what they can be. They are guilty because they have not done what they should have; they are guilty for what they have not yet done, but ought to do. Essentially, Dickens' characters remain guilty, and weighed down by their uncertain anxiety, until they reject their previous beliefs, begin to live Dickens' vision of the moral life, and gather the community of other like-minded individuals around them.

Thus, for example, we see how David is racked with guilt over the inadequacy of his marriage to Dora or his sycophantic relationship with Steerforth, for in both cases David eschews his individual conscience for society's empty values, while he ignores the figure of Agnes and his true responsibilities. Little Dorrit's Arthur Clennam experiences guilt not for what he does, but for the fact that he knows he must make amends to someone for his father's greed; he also experiences guilt in relation to his feelings for Pet Meagles, because he has yet to realize that he is an individual, that that individual is

capable of having feelings for others, and that he has a right to love. Our Mutual Friend's Eugene Wrayburn often experiences a consciousness that his behavior is wrong, for he has spent most of his life masquerading as an idiotic and purposeless dandy.

Pip, of course, offers the best illustration of this. As G. Robert Stange observes, in Great Expectations, Dickens *seems* to operate from the position that "criminality is the condition of life" and that human existence is characterized by a "native, inherent sinfulness" (Stange 307). Indeed, Pip seems to have been racked with guilt for virtually his entire life. His sister regularly makes him feel guilty for being alive in the first place, and blames him for the fact that "I've never had this apron of mine off, since born you were" (9). After Pip commits his so-called crime (it cannot be a real crime seeing as how he was compelled to do it out of fear for his life), he feels an overwhelming sense of guilt as manifested in the various objects associated with his sin, such as the ubiquitous files and manacles he discovers in the novel. When he encounters the world of the bourgeoisie through Miss Havisham, Pip feels guilt and shame about his appearance and background, and he feels even more guilt for feeling this shame in the first place. When Pip embraces the values of society and travels to London he again feels a sense of guilt about his past, as he is continuously reminded by the presence of "The Avenger," the "boy in boots" and "monster" (218), who recalls Pip to his lowly origins. Indeed, it is no surprise that, even while Pip is supposedly enjoying himself with gentlemanly pursuits, he is consistently aware that he is "always more or less miserable, and most of our acquaintance were in the same condition" (274). All of these feelings are directly connected to Pip's growing understanding of society's influence on him, and the means by which he had originally

started to question himself and his identity, before he had fallen completely under the thrall of worldly delights.

In each successive novel, we see how Dickens' protagonists gradually become aware of the inadequacy of their understanding of themselves and their places in the world, and by the end of their respective stories, they have managed to transcend the limitations of social existence and realize the selves for which they have been searching throughout the narrative. For Dickens, coming to self-awareness inevitably leads to moral action, as it becomes the responsibility of each individual to make the changes in his or her private spheres of existence. This long reflective journey that Dickens' characters must undertake is what I have called the "anxiety of presence." I think it is quite clear that Dickens' protagonists experience anxiety in the existential meaning of the word, as they gradually grow to realize the empty and inadequate quality of their existence, for they are bound up in the static charade of society and its self-serving and barbaric values. These characters feel an aimless sensation of guilt and anxiety, yet they cannot place it, until they realize that it is derived from their reliance on false interpersonal connections and a meaningless value system. What can one do when one lives in a society such as this, with no alternative to the mass hysteria? For Dickens, the only way that they can ultimately free themselves is to pull out of society and reflect on who they are. They must come to terms with their past experiences, and understand how those experiences have informed their being in the present and future. More importantly, they must turn towards the future and face the inevitability of their deaths and non-existence. In short, they must learn to embrace their temporality and learn its lessons regarding the purpose for their existence. Only then do Dickens' characters begin to see the error of their ways. Also, for

many of them, this is the only means by which they can glimpse the true meaning of having existence, having a presence in the world, such as the inherent connections between individuals across time, and the responsibility of each individual to others. Moreover, only once they have come to terms with their temporality do Dickens' characters find their own identities—their selves—and by extension their fitting places and purposes in the world. According to Dickens, only by changing ourselves, and by making related changes in our private spheres of existence, can we begin to improve the world for the future. This, for Dickens, is what it means to be alive, what it means to be human, what it means to exist—in any present time.

This point also serves as the chief distinction between Dickens' philosophy and that of the existentialists of whom I have written. Although I have sought to draw several parallels between Dickens' work and the philosophies of existentialism, when it comes to the notions of morality and action, a noticeable divergence between the two is evident. For the existentialists I have covered, action is an important concept, but there is no clear distinction between right and wrong action. As John Macquarrie explains, the existentialists believed that, "The first thing to do is simply to choose choice, to exercise the power of decision that has been so seriously eroded. Not so much the content of the decision as simply its quality as a personal act, fully and intensely appropriated by the agent, is what matters" (187). This is mainly because the existentialists operate from the point of view—derived from Nietzsche—that values are relative and ultimately are only given meaning by the agent, as when Sartre describes how great leaders "envisage a number of possibilities, and when they choose one, they realize that it has value only because it is chosen" ("Existentialism" 40). In short, it would be impossible for them to

establish an ethical prerogative, because that would have to be built on the foundation of already recognized values, which the existentialists have consistently attempted to dismiss.

Therefore, we find that a crucial difference between Dickens and Heidegger's treatment of existence in time is that Dickens relates understanding of the self's existence to morality *in the first place*. This distinction is quite palpable in Heidegger's treatment of the concept of the human conscience. According to Heidegger's scheme, the idea of the conscience is simply the part of the self that "calls" Dasein to realize "its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self" (Being 314). In essence, the purpose of Dasein's moral center is not the determination of right or wrong, for as he states, his project of "Interpretation is purely ontological in its aims, and is far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Dasein, and from the aspirations of a 'philosophy of culture'" (Being 211). Rather, Heidegger reassigns new values to the ideas of "guilt" and "conscience," removing them from their traditional places in ethical discourse. He reinterprets "guilt" according to the importance of understanding Being; "guilt" is no longer associated with regret or misgivings in reference to ethically wrong acts, but is recast as the experience of "that which one can concern oneself" or "being responsible for" something (Being 327). Quite literally, since Dasein's concern is ultimately itself, it is a lack that must be filled, and that lack is complete insight into Dasein's Being. "Conscience" is likewise reinterpreted as Dasein's "call" to itself "to bring itself back to itself from its lostness in the 'they'" (Being 333). Thus, by hearing this call and understanding it, Dasein "is *in thrall to its ownmost possibility of existence*" (Heidegger 334). In short, the aims of Heidegger's philosophy are to discover its "authenticity," as Tina Chanter elaborates:

> To be authentic, the self cannot remain mired in the they-self, but must elevate itself from the average everydayness of the they, and become free for itself. Dasein must stand alone, but it must do so not out of a naïve and misguided understanding of its own isolation from others, as if that were a given, but rather in the knowledge that it has had the strength to tear itself away from the opinions of the they. Heidegger will interpret this standing alone in terms of authentic resoluteness. (102)

Heidegger's moral ideal has nothing to do with action; its sole purpose is to discover "authentic" being, which is tantamount to Dasein having "the courage to base itself on itself and not to rely on Hegel's so-called substantial morality of state, society, or public morals; when it can dispense with the unburdening offers on the part of the world of They; when it finds the strength to bring itself back from 'being lost'" (Safranski 165). Clearly, Heidegger stipulated that existential revelation is not simply the means by which to reach a moral end: it was its own moral end. Thus, for Heidegger, the only ostensibly moral act is the act by which one comes to an understanding of Dasein's Being and Being itself.

Sartre is likewise cagey when it comes to the question of morality. Sartre explains that the project of "Ontology itself can not formulate ethical precepts," although he does acknowledge that, "It does, however, allow us to catch a glimpse of what sort of ethics will assume its responsibilities when confronted with a *human reality in situation*" (Being 795). In short, Sartre's ontology—and, by extension, the entire existentialist project—does not disclose moral truth or viable ethical systems; it simply promises to forecast the ethics a human being might take up in a particular situation. Although the final section of

L'Être et néant is titled "Ethical Implications," the section actually provides very little of the kind. Sartre allows that his ontology may disclose ethical responsibilities in *certain* cases, but he insists that his work's chief goal is only to "repudiate the *spirit of seriousness*" (Being 796), a corollary of Bad Faith. However, these intimations do not provide any concrete moral concepts, and all Sartre can ultimately say is that he will dedicate a future work to the examination of ethical principles.

In "L'Existentialisme est un humanisme," Sartre insists that all value systems, or all present value systems, are inadequate: ". . . I can neither seek within myself the true condition which will impel me to act, nor apply to a system of ethics for concepts which will permit me to act" ("Existentialism" 44). As a result, Sartre insists that the action is the foundation of the action's justification: all that matters is the choice. As Peter Caws has noted, Sartre's vision of ethics "rests on his concept of freedom" (114). This is, in part, because the individual "is the sum of his actions" (Caws 112); as Sartre notes, "What we mean is that a man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these undertakings" ("Existentialism" 49). For Sartre, action and freedom are inseparably bound together; this is because "the act is the expression of freedom" (Being 565). In turn, freedom is the very essence of man, his "authenticity," although man continues to deny it: "Human reality may be defined as a being such that in its being its freedom is at stake because human reality perpetually tries to refuse to recognize its freedom" (Being 568). Human beings may try to flee from their freedom, but it still lies at the heart of their existence: ". . . freedom is not *a* being; it is *the being* of man" (Being 569). As a result, a human being must act and take advantage of his or her freedom.

From this point, Sartre derives his only attempt at codifying an ethical principle. Contrary to the general thrust of the rest of his argument, which has previously emphasized the threat that traditional morality has for individual freedom (Caws 118), Sartre falls back on what is known in ethical theory as the "generalization argument," in the vein of Kant's imperative (Caws 119), in which he posits that the lone ethical requirement for the individual is to act as if he were acting for the rest of mankind. As we have already seen, Sartre establishes that an individual always exists in the world with other individuals; because of the mutually determining relationship that one has with the other, "The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself" (Sartre, "Existentialism" 52). Regardless of the circumstance, whether historical or social, "What does not vary is the necessity for him to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there" ("Existentialism" 52). Accordingly, Sartre insists that every "configuration"—meaning an individual in a particular situation—"has universality in the sense that every configuration can be understood by every man" ("Existentialism" 53). Thus, with every individual's specific action, "a universality of man . . . is perpetually being made" ("Existentialism" 53). As a result, Sartre suggests that, "At heart, what existentialism shows is the connection between the absolute character of free involvement, by virtue of which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of mankind" ("Existentialism" 53). Essentially, because every individual is connected with every other individual in the world, one individual's action in some way serves to define not just that individual, but all of humanity; so, if one is to act ethically, then one should act in such a way that one is conscious of the relationship between individuals in the world—namely, one must

shoulder the responsibility of the knowledge that each of one's actions serves to define the entire human race. Essentially, Sartre reiterates the Kantian categorical imperative. Thus, in many ways, existential ontology is more of an academic exercise or game than a real, efficacious pursuit of truth despite the ostensibly overblown rhetoric and original aim to explain human reality in its totality. Ultimately, there is no evident practical application for the concepts of existentialism.

Dickens clearly did not share these sentiments. While it is clear that Dickens suggests that there is a moral obligation to understand one's existence, this is only because it serves as the first step toward understanding one's purpose in the world. As every novel indicates, Dickens understood morality according to what one can do for others. Thus, all of his "good" characters share the trait of selfless benevolence, such as the reformed Scrooge, Sol Gills, Betsey Trotwood, Mr. Jarndyce, Sidney Carton, Matthew Pocket, and Mr. Boffin. Importantly, these characters are only able to act morally because they have—or eventually come to—existential understanding of themselves; in other words, their sense of duty to their fellow human beings arises from their full conception of who they are, who they have been, and how they relate to the world.

Although there is clearly much in common between the philosophy of existentialism and Dickens' work, existentialism's disengagement from any sense of, or attempt at, real ethical praxis represents a clear distinction between existentialism and Dickens' ultimate aims. That Dickens is able to establish what the existentialists cannot—a working ethical theory derived from observations about the nature of human existence—indicates that he manages to surpass their accomplishments, from a certain

perspective. He may not have been equipped with the knowledge of the history of human thought, and he may not have had access to the philosophical language and schemes available to Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus, but he obviously possessed the ability to see into the heart of human existence, to comprehend the speciousness of social conventions and rules, to recognize the connections that exist between human beings, and to establish a theory on how one might live in such a way as to fulfill one's obligations to oneself and the world.

In fact, I think that Dickens' anticipation of existentialism is even more of an achievement than it might seem. Admittedly, in the academy, existentialism no longer has a reputation for being a sound and workable set of ideas; whereas thirty years ago the names of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus were frequently invoked in academic conversations, their importance and relevance have since been called seriously into question. However, the significance of existentialism in the history of human thought cannot be ignored, particularly in the present day, for much of today's critical theory—as well as the ubiquitous elements of postmodernity in the contemporary arts—has been partly established on the foundation of existentialist thought. In this regard, we can see how Dickens' work, particularly in his treatment of the themes in question, has much in common with the fiction of today. Dickens is not a relic of a dead age: his concerns are no different than the concerns of modern, late twentieth-century/early twenty-first century artists. Dickens is not the typical Victorian, or realist, author: in fact, I think we have shown that Dickens has more in common with later authors, like Kafka or Dostoevsky, than he does with those authors with whom he is so often grouped and compared, like Thackeray or Trollope. As some readers, such as George Bernard Shaw,

have noticed, Dickens writes about the human condition, in any time; thus, like Shakespeare, Dickens has pertinent opinions that can be applied to most aspects of modern life. After all, can we not see the Circumlocution Office as a Washington bureaucracy? Do we not in our everyday lives encounter a Podsnap or a Dombey or a Uriah Heep? For those of us who have felt the stirrings of social ambition, have we not at some point felt Pip's guilt? Ultimately, can we not find some use for Dickens' moral philosophy?

Obviously, as we saw earlier, the quality of Dickens' thought has been drastically underestimated over the years, despite the fact that he not only had developed a complex philosophy of life, but that in so doing he was far ahead of his contemporaries. Critics have long acknowledged that Dickens saw the world in a different way than most other individuals, yet I do not think most of them have fully grasped the depth of Dickens' vision. If anything, I think that Dickens' work and philosophy of life are so profound that there may still be more to examine about its uses and significance.

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