

Grotesque Characters

in

Charles Dickens's

A Tale of Two Cities,

Great Expectations,

and *Our Mutual Friend*

by

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Foreword

I will take the opportunity to express my gratitude to Professor Tore Rem for his guidance and great patience during the writing process. I am also much obliged to Magnus Nygaard for his assistance in late night computer-related problems, and my brother Ole Mikkel for always seeing the easy solution to difficult problems.

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Chapter One

Presenting the Dissertation

During a vacation road tripping in England, I stopped in York for a little sightseeing in the city centre. By chance I entered a bookstore to pick up some light reading. The first thing that caught my eyes was a shelf filled with Dickens's novels. I had been curious about his work for some time, but never read a full novel. The paperback edition of *A Tale of Two Cities* was on sale for £ 4.99, and this purchase, as it were, decided the topic for my dissertation. Instant attraction for *A Tale of Two Cities* soon caused the purchase of several others of Dickens's novels. In particular my fascination for his unique grotesque descriptions, hilarious yet horrifying, made me decide to write my thesis on this subject. The main aim of this thesis will be to recognize and analyse grotesque characters in Dickens.

As a way into the Dickensian grotesque I have chosen his description of the guillotine in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The 'sharp female called La Guillotine' is described in the following manner, and clearly shows us the grotesque and twisted parallel to Christianity:

It was the popular theme for jests; it was the best cure for headache, it infallibly prevented hair from turning grey, it imparted a peculiar delicacy to the complexion, it was the razor which shaved close: who kissed La Guillotine, looked through the little window and sneezed into the sack. It was the sign of regeneration of the human race. It superseded the Cross. Models of it were worn on breasts from which the Cross was discarded, and it was bowed down to and believed in where the Cross was denied.¹

The quotation provokes the classic reaction to the grotesque in the reader. Philip

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 283-284.

Thomson argues that the experience of amusement and disgust, laughter and horror simultaneously is a reaction to the abnormal, for the abnormal may be funny and on the other hand it may be fearsome or disgusting.² Treating the deadly device as a joke is perhaps a way for the citizens to hide their fear as well as emphasize the need for revenge and social change. It takes over the role of the Cross, our most fundamental religious ornament, and exchanges it for a model of the guillotine. Clear parallels can be drawn to the dance around the golden calf, which gives a bleak outlook for the revolution. Dickens's description offers delight in amusement at a divergence from the normal, such as ridiculing religion. This is a situation where both reactions are evoked at the same time, and where both the comic aspect of the abnormal and the fearful or disgusting aspect are felt equally. Freud argues that we do not want to know why we are laughing, continuing: 'We laughed in the first place only by keeping our conscious attention at a distance.'³ He continues by arguing that our natural disinclination to examine our own aggressive impulses is fundamental. If we consider the passage discussed before, we notice a high degree of abnormality in what is being presented, and this abnormality is a source both of the comic and of the disgusting or fearful.

My main reason for choosing *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1861) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) was the fact that these are Dickens's three last completed novels. They are darker than his earlier novels, and allow the grotesque to figure more prominently. The exploration of reasons for, and reactions to, the grotesque is a fascinating one, and Dickens's attack on several

² Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque: The Critical Idiom* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 25.

³ James R. Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1971), pp. 3-4.

aspects of his contemporary society may well be as relevant today.

It is particularly the characters that confront us with both grotesque differences and similarities. I will therefore analyse them one by one, and then make a summary in the final chapter.

Chapter One opens with a short introduction to Dickens's authorship, and then moves on to explain the history of the grotesque, as well as giving an overview of the most important theories of the grotesque. Dickens's relation to the grotesque as well as a survey of the themes humour and laughter will conclude the first chapter and present a base on which to build my work. I will mainly base my work on the theories in Michael Hollington's *Dickens and the Grotesque*, James R. Kincaid's *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* and Philip Thomson's *The Grotesque: The Critical Idiom*, as well as *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*. These works have been of great help to me in relation to the historical and theoretical elements on which my dissertation is built. I will analyse the novels separately, starting with *A Tale of Two Cities* and continuing chronologically with *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*, and in so done try to give a concise analysis as well as presenting an understanding of the grotesque in each character.

Chapter Two contains analyses of grotesque characters in the first novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, analysed one by one. Set in the time of the French Revolution, the two cities represent London and Paris – peace and revolution. The bloody revolution gives way to several grotesque narrations, and Dickens masterfully embodies evil in numerous characters, both in the aristocracy as well as in common citizens.

Chapter Three contains the analysis of grotesque characters in *Great Expectations*. As the character Pip gets dragged into the dark world of Miss

Havisham, he also has a prospect of great expectations from his unknown benefactor Magwitch. His belief in Miss Havisham as his benefactor and her power over Estella creates the means for grotesque actions from several of the novel's characters.

Our Mutual Friend is the theme of Chapter Four, and will mainly deal with the description of grotesque characters such as Bradley Headstone and Eugene Lightwood. Their grotesque actions related to Lizzie Hexam will be of great interest in this chapter.

Chapter Five is the last chapter of the dissertation and the conclusion. The chapter will mainly concentrate on showing parallels and differences between the characters from the three different novels. A limited number of characters are analysed in each chapter. It would have been interesting to explore numerous other characters and aspects of the grotesque, but due to the limitations of this dissertation, this was not possible.

Introduction to Dickens's Authorship

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) is generally considered the greatest English novelist of the Victorian period.⁴ Dickens's works are characterized by attacks on social injustice and hypocrisy. Dickens was born in Portsmouth, and was the son of John Dickens, a naval pay clerk, and his wife Elizabeth Dickens.⁵ When he was five years old, the whole family moved to Chatham, Kent. At the age of ten, the family moved again, this time to Camden Town in London. His early years being

⁴ John O. Jordan, 'Preface', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2001), p. xix.

⁵ Jordan, p. 3

an idyllic time, he talked later in life of his memories of childhood and his memory of people and events that helped bring his fiction to life. His family was moderately well-off, and he received some education at a private school. But all of this changed when his father was imprisoned for debt after spending too much money entertaining and retaining his social position. At the age of twelve, Dickens was deemed old enough to work and thus began working for ten hours a day in a blacking factory. For this money he had to support his family and pay for his lodging, the family being incarcerated in the nearby Marshalsea debtors prison.⁵

After a few years, his family's financial situation improved, partly due to money inherited from his father's family. His family was able to leave the Marshalsea, but his mother did not remove him immediately from the boot-blackening factory, which was owned by a relation of hers. Dickens never forgave his mother for this.⁶ The resentment of his situation and the conditions under which working-class people lived became major themes in his novels. And Britain being the major economic and political power of the world, Dickens highlighted the life of the poor and disadvantaged at the heart of empire. Through his journalism he campaigned on specific issues such as sanitation and the workhouses. His fiction was probably powerful in changing public opinion in regard to class differences. He often depicted the exploitation and repression of the poor and condemned the public officials and institutions that allowed such abuses to exist. His writings inspired others, in particular journalists and political figures, to address such problems of class oppression.⁷

⁵ Grahame Smith, 'The life and times of Charles Dickens', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, p. 3.

⁶ Smith, p. 5.

⁷ Smith, p. 14.

Although rarely departing greatly from his typical ‘Dickensian’ method of always attempting to write a great story, he experimented with varied themes, characterisations and genres. Some of these experiments have proved more popular than others and the public's taste and appreciation of his many works have varied over time. He was usually keen on giving his readers what they wanted, and the monthly or weekly publication of his works in episodes meant that the books could change as the story proceeded.

His popularity has waned little since his death and he is still one of the best known and most read of English authors. Several motion pictures and TV series based on Dickens's works help confirm his success. It is likely that *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is his best-known story, with new adaptations almost every year, as well as being one of Dickens's most frequently filmed stories, many versions dating from the early years of cinema. This simple morality tale with both pathos and its theme of redemption, for many sums up the true meaning of Christmas. *A Christmas Carol* was written by Dickens in an attempt to forestall financial disaster as a result of flagging sales of his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844).

His writings inspired others, in particular journalists and political figures, to address such problems of class oppression. For example, the prison scenes in *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) were prime movers in having the Marshalsea and Fleet Prisons shut down. The exceptional popularity of his novels, even those with socially oppositional themes such as *Bleak House* (1853), *Little Dorrit*, and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) insured that the Victorian public confronted issues of social justice that had commonly been ignored.

His fiction, with vivid descriptions of life in nineteenth-century England, has come to symbolise Victorian society (1837–1901) as uniformly ‘Dickensian.’

Dickens stands today as a brilliant, innovative and sometimes flawed novelist, whose stories and characters have become not only literary archetypes but also part of the public imagination.

From the 1840s Dickens spent much time travelling and campaigning against many of the social evils of his time. In addition to this he gave talks and readings, wrote pamphlets, plays, and letters. In the 1850s Dickens was founding editor of *Household Words* and its successor *All the Year Round*. He gave lecturing tours in Britain and the United States in 1858-68. From 1860 Dickens lived at Gad's Hill Place, near Rochester, Kent. He died at Gad's Hill on June 9, 1870.

His popularity has diminished little since his death and he is still one of the best known and most read of English authors. His characters were often so memorable that they took on a life of their own outside his books. 'Gamp' became a slang expression for an umbrella from the character Mrs Gamp, and 'Pickwickian' entered dictionaries due to Dickens's original portraits.

The Grotesque

This chapter will deal with the grotesque, a central feature of Dickens's art. The meaning of the term must first be established. The grotesque can be said to be a vulgar type of comedy. One does not need to search far into the subject to find the major influence of Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, published in 1963, and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, published in 1962. These central works dramatize the tension within the concept of how the grotesque art may be a mixed form, like tragicomedy. In his book *The Grotesque: The Critical Idiom*, Philip Thomson relates to Kayser's analyses of the grotesque

both through critical evaluation as well as through aesthetic analysis. He defines the grotesque nature as a disharmonious conflict, and reaches the conclusion:

The grotesque is the expression of the estranged or alienated world, i.e. the familiar world is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange (and, presumably, this strangeness may be either comic or terrifying, or both).

The grotesque is a game with the absurd, in the sense that the grotesque artist plays, half laughingly, half horrified, with the deep absurdities of existence.

The grotesque is an attempt to control and exorcise the demonic elements in the world.⁸

Kayser's book begins by tracing the origin of the word 'grotesque'. Kayser describes how he first came to think about the grotesque: it happened in Spain in 1942, in the Prado. Both time and place may explain his severity with the neglect of monstrosity and horror he associates with the concept. The word derives from the Italian word 'grotta', which means cave, and was thought to be underground paintings excavated in the 1480s.⁹ The first recorded use of the term is from the Piccolomini library in Siena dated to 1502, where the painter Pinturicchio was commanded by the library to decorate its ceiling 'with such fantastic forms, colours, and arrangements as are now called grotesques.'¹⁰

The notion combines ugliness and ornament, the bizarre and the ridiculous, the excessive and the unreal. Although they are now called grotesque, they have been appreciated for a long time. The problem of the concept immediately appears. Does the historic meaning convey the present term? Leo Spitzer disagrees, arguing that: 'the grotesque must be seen as a psychic constant with a continuous existence

⁸ Thomson, p. 18.

⁹ Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (Kent: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 2

¹⁰ Hollington, p. 2.

stretching back to remotest antiquity.’¹¹ Richelet’s definition in *Dictionnaire Francais* in 1680 states that the grotesque is: ‘that which has something pleasantly that ‘Kayser’s definitions first of all strike us by the gloomy, terrifying tone of the grotesque world that alone the author sees.’¹² In his great study, Bakhtin wanted to construct an alternative tradition to the grotesque. He dissolved the category ‘demonic’ altogether, because he thought it to be a function of the Christian campaign against pre-Christian beliefs in medieval Europe. He argued that the devils themselves were not evil until Christianity declared them so. Devils live on as attractive images of subversive power in popular tradition; the devil is the gay ambivalent figure expressing the unofficial point of view. We can see that Kayser’s interpretation of the grotesque as ‘an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world’ is challenged by Bakhtin in that he constructs an alternative tradition of the grotesque.¹³ In his *Critical Idiom*, Philip Thomson also argues that it is important to see the development of the word ‘grotesque’ in a historical perspective:

But a discussion of the grotesque cannot afford to ignore the historical development of the word ‘grotesque’ and its usage, and the various previous concepts of what is meant by the term, particularly as some of these older notions are still accepted (rightly or wrongly). The application of the term in the eighteenth century is likely to be markedly different from its use in the nineteenth, and both can be expected to be different from our present usage.¹⁴

The use of the word ‘grotesque’ extending to literature in the sixteenth century,

¹¹ Hollington, p. 2.

¹² Hollington, p. 3.

¹³ Hollington, p. 3.

¹⁴ Thomson, p. 10.

and in particular caricature, made Kayser call this ‘a loss of substance in the word.’¹⁵

Thomas Wright, Dickens’s contemporary, viewed the grotesque as an expression of a fundamental ‘need for laughter which was human and natural’, forever exercising itself in history despite prohibition and repression.¹⁶ This betrays a version of bourgeois radicalism and bears numerous similarities to Dickens. ‘Art originates in caricature,’ says Wright, ‘mocking ones enemies, drawing them on rock. Irreverence is part of the essential nature of the art of antiquity.’¹⁷ Wright himself was astonished with how boldly the Greeks parodied and ridiculed sacred objects:

The best grotesque art is thus political: whereas Greek new comedy, forbidden to express controversy, seems to be in decline, Roman art is distinguished by its irreverent readiness to turn into burlesque the most sacred and popular legends of the Roman mythology.¹⁸

Wright continues, arguing that the grotesque art is fundamentally social because of its irreverence: ‘caricature and burlesque are naturally to be heard and seen publicly.’¹⁹

Democratic institutions like freedom of speech and freedom of press have also had their influence on grotesque art. Wright thought medieval carnivals like the Festival of Fools was political and directed towards ecclesiastical order, and Bakhtin described the grotesque art as ‘ambivalent and contradictory [...] ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics, that is, the

¹⁵ Thomson, p. 13.

¹⁶ Hollington, p. 4.

¹⁷ Hollington, p. 4.

¹⁸ Hollington, p. 4.

¹⁹ Hollington, p. 4.

aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed.²⁰ Bakhtin identifies a tradition of ‘grotesque realism’ as:

The entire field of realistic literature of the last three centuries is strewn with the fragments of grotesque realism, which at times are not merely remnants of the past but manifest a renewed vitality.²¹

Bakhtin sees this tradition as the dominant style of the nineteenth century, and argues further that Dickens was always linked indirectly or directly with the renaissance tradition.²² Hollington argues that the difference between Kayser and Bakhtin is that whereas Bakhtin sees the grotesque as containing all the principles of comic art, and that he placed the grotesque at the heart of the carnivalesque, Kayser is invariably not amused by the grotesque.²³

Philip Thomson argues that the aim and function of the grotesque nature is disharmony. It is a mixture of both the terrifying and comic, and he illustrates his point in his chapter on abnormality, arguing that a classic experience of the grotesque is ‘the experience of amusement and disgust, laughter and horror, mirth and revulsion, simultaneously.’²⁴ He also establishes the fact that there are several variations of the grotesque. It can be terrifying and comic, abnormal, satiric and playful as well as extravagant and exaggerated.²⁵ These are variations within the theme of the grotesque and evoke laughter and disgust at the same time. The reader’s reactions may vary a great deal and some will find delight in the unusual, while others will condemn it as offensive. His definition of the grotesque is ‘the

²⁰ Hollington, p. 5.

²¹ Hollington, p. 6.

²² Hollington, p. 6.

²³ Hollington, p. 6.

²⁴ Thomson, p. 24

²⁵ Thomson, p. 22

unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response.²⁶ He also addresses the problem of subjectivity and how something is understood as grotesque to one person, may be perceived only as bizarre or macabre to another.

The features of the original grotesque paintings interweave human and animal forms, and addresses animism. A human torso, plants for arms and an animal's head gave mind to Bergson's theories of the comic 'which attempt to locate the source of laughter in the perception of living things, especially human beings, as inanimate, and conversely also in the perception of inanimate objects as alive.'²⁷ Kayser considers animism one of the basic grotesque techniques, arguing that human-like objects such as puppets are apt to be simultaneously a source to fear as well as of comedy because of the deep-rooted fear of human-like objects.²⁸ The grotesque can thus be said to be disturbing and comical at the same time.

Dickens's Relation to The Grotesque

Dickens's relation to the grotesque tradition is that of a European, and not as someone limited by national boundaries. Dickens has a reputation of being a very English writer, and tended to obscure his relations with European culture. It is possible to construct an English tradition of the grotesque, but to write a dissertation about Dickens and the grotesque without crossing national boundaries both frequently and freely is impossible.²⁹ Michael Hollington divides Dickens's debt to the grotesque tradition into three areas:

²⁶ Thomson, p. 27

²⁷ Thomson, p. 35.

²⁸ Thomson, p. 35.

²⁹ Hollington, p. 7.

1. His relation to the tradition of popular theatre, both pantomime, such as *commedia dell'arte* and puppet theatre
2. His relation to the tradition of visual satire
3. His relation to literary tradition (in particular Gothic fiction and German romanticism)

Pierre Duchartre writes of the characters that 'their origins are ancient, and they will live for ever,' and then goes on: 'all forms of popular art have, as a general thing, been regarded by men of letters and historians as unimportant and beneath their notice in *commedia dell'arte*.'³⁰ They represent types rather than individuals, and Dickens's characters are profoundly indebted to these types. One may also assume that the very basis of Old Comedy, and of Dickens's, was the animal masquerade and the comparison of animal and human behaviour and appearance.

When the *commedia dell'arte* was brought to England as the pantomime, the story was carried out by action, dancing and motion only, and was performed by grotesque characters. So 'grotesques' became the term for the characters of the *commedia dell'arte* in England. This became gradually absorbed by the native pantomime.

The Punch and Judy show came to England, brought over by Piccini, and so Dickens encountered the puppet theatre. Punch is a figure of mixed appeal, attractive but yet repulsive. This *commedia dell'arte* figure flourished in theatres from the mid-eighteenth century to the latter half of the nineteenth, and Dickens went both to see and celebrate him. Punch was seen as a perpetuation of the pagan

³⁰ Hollington, p. 8.

world, and seen through Christian eyes, the anarchy of paganism appears as grotesque.

The next major influence on Dickens's grotesque art is that of visual satire. Chalk Church, near Gravesend, was one of Dickens's favourite landmarks, and this may be the place in which he begins his relationship with the visual grotesque. Here he spent his holidays, and even his honeymoon. Later in life he had a favourite walk from Gads Hill Place, through the marshes up to Gravesend, then return by Chalk church and a stop to have a greeting with a monk carved in stone.³¹ This monk is a sculpture of medieval grotesque, and is quite possibly the origin of a whole gallery of motifs.

A second aspect of Dickens's relation to grotesque visual art is the significance of human physiognomy as an index of character. This is the science of physiognomy practiced by visual satires. Physiognomy is of ancient origin and rests on the perception of formal similarities between animal and human features, and it also informed early caricature and mime. It was used as a means to unmask hypocrisy and deceit and reveal the truth of someone's moral nature. Characters with particular physiognomies are thought to have the servility of a dog, the slyness of a fox or the ferocity of a tiger etc. For instance in *Oliver Twist*, Monks is like a vampire, Mrs. Sowerberry is of a vixenish countenance, and Fagin is lynx-eyed. Dickens was indeed a great caricaturist and constructed such characterizations to make his characters stand out in a crowd.

The third connection between Dickens and the grotesque is his relation to literary tradition. The works of artists such as Friedrich Schlegel, Diderot and Jean

³¹ Hollington, p. 13.

Paul strived to manifest the imagination's freedom from material reality. Grotesque realism was what German Romantics wished to align themselves with in Bakhtin's tradition. A crucial innovation was the focusing of the idealizing, transcendentalising power of the imagination, and the here and now of everyday reality. The Romantics discovered the aesthetics of ugliness and how one could construct beauty from the most intractable materials. Such grotesque visions of the world led to an ironic consciousness which later came to be known as 'romantic irony.' Schlegel introduced the term 'irony' in modern literature, according to Wellek.³² This had wide consequences for art and criticism, but for Schlegel it meant 'an insight into the [...] nothingness of aesthetic illusion.'³³ The sense of an interplay of illusion and reality depends on such an insight; the interference of the writer, manipulations of the convention of the play or novel, and the deliberate breaking of illusion. Hollington argues that:

To turn to Dickens's relations to Gothic Fiction is to record a similar pattern of influence. The taste for the grotesque and the taste for the Gothic were very much intertwined in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.³⁴

The word 'grotesque' was used as a synonym to 'picturesque' to describe the appropriate landscape setting for a Gothic tale. As the interest in Gothic antiquities, ruins, and literature increased, the word 'grotesque' came to mean pleasing though irregular, an idea of the mixed charm of repulsion and attraction, the conception of a mixed aesthetics.

³² Hollington, p. 19.

³³ Hollington, p. 19.

³⁴ Hollington, p. 23.

Humour and Laughter

While reading Dickens I found that his seriousness was often funny and his fun often serious. In Dickens, our laughter very strongly affects our notion of what the novel is, so I have decided to examine the part 'laughter' plays in our response to Dickens's late novels, in particular his more dark and grotesque side. Dickens uses laughter to strengthen our involvement in the novels, and one of his rhetorical tools is to approach this laughter through humour instead of through theme or structure. In this dissertation I will examine Dickens's techniques as a humorist. I will mainly concentrate on the fact that his humour is often dark to the point of the grotesque, morbid and macabre. Again and again Dickens asks us to laugh at the characters he wishes us to sympathize with: love, hate cruelty, anger and death, and John Middleton Murry argues that Dickens's 'comic vision was the fiercest that has ever been in English literature, so savage as to be sometimes all but unbearable.'³⁵

The way Dickens mixes the pathetic, funny and terrifying in his villains, as well as his heroes, confronts us with contradiction and forces us to intensify our relationship through our alternate responses. A character can change from pathetic or funny to terrifying in an instant, or vice versa. Dickens's ability to catch the idiom of his comic and humorous characters rests in their distinctive language, and through this perspective Dickens evokes laughter by controlling our distance from the characters and situations.

Kincaid suggests that in Dickens's later novels, the humour is sometimes more closely integrated.³⁶ It is not as easily recognizable as in his earlier novels.

³⁵ Kincaid, p. 7.

³⁶ Kincaid, p. 4.

Although laughter is used differently in his later novels, it is always important and it never declines or disappears. Dickens used humour for more serious purposes, persuading and confronting the reader more subtly. That this functions mainly as a comic relief and that the humour is detached from major concerns in his later novels, seems false.

The innumerable categories of humour make it impossible to create a general theory on the subject. Simplification is therefore inevitable. To get a workable theory, it seems to be necessary to distinguish the two thoughts that are often related: one is the genre, the other is the effect. But there is not necessarily any tie between them. Whyllie Sypher points out that: 'Comedy may, in fact, not bring laughter at all; and certain tragedies may make us laugh hysterically.'³⁷

My analyses will primarily depend on the work of James R. Kincaid, although arguments of theorists such as Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, and others will be employed.

Few of Dickens's novels would fit the term comedy, yet they generate laughter. Most theoretical analyses of laughter deals with the question of whether laughter in fact expresses aggression, hostility, the triumph after a murder and other grotesque and unpleasant impulses, or whether laughter is compatible with sympathy, geniality or other pleasant emotions. According to Kincaid, Thomas Hobbes is the dark-laughter theorist, and Jean Paul Richter is the provider of the genial-laughter theory. The reasoning of Arthur Koestler is based on a simple fact which almost all important writers on this subject have noted for centuries.

³⁷ Kincaid, p. 8.

A component of malice, of debasement of other fellows, and of aggressive-defensive self-assertion [...] in laughter – a tendency diametrically opposed to sympathy, helpfulness, and identification of the self with others.³⁸

The evidence and arguments of the above-cited theorists are presented, and Koestler's conclusion is that even if there is genial or harmless laughter in Dickens, it is very rare. Dickens presents both genial and sympathetic characters at whom we laugh. There is not necessarily any contradiction in that. In fact, Kincaid quotes Henri Bergson arguing that:

Laughter has no greater form than emotions. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity.³⁹

In the process of laughing, our sympathy is temporarily withdrawn. This has particular relevance to Dickens. The conflict between rigid and mechanical, and the organic and flexible, is the basis of all laughter, and Bergson continues arguing that laughter is first and foremost a social gesture.⁴⁰ The transposition of the functions of persons and things is the basis of Dickens's animism. We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing. This is one of the keys to Dickens's vision and technique. He uses laughter as a rhetorical tool to make the reader protest against mechanical dominance and isolation, and he continually uses laughter as a rhetorical support through his animism.

Freud's work on laughter is not universally accepted, but it is far more inclusive and flexible than most theories of this phenomenon. It takes into account two factors: the defensive protection of pure pleasure, play or joy, and the

³⁸ Kincaid, p. 10.

³⁹ Kincaid, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Kincaid, p. 10.

offensive release of hostility, aggression and inhibition. These are often separated and treated as mutually exclusive. *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* was published in 1905 and contains the major part of Freud's work on laughter.⁴¹ The analysis of technique forms its first section, mainly with the focus on the details of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary which form the surface matter of jokes. Freud finds that the structure of jokes is similar to those of dreams: displacement, substitution and condensation. The second section of the book is used to explore the similarity between dream-work and wit-work and to establish their connection to the unconscious. Freud shows that wit originates in obscene or aggressive tendencies and that these ideas are activated in the unconscious, but disguised by technique. This allows the psychic energy to be expressed safely. The source of laughter in the listener and the teller is the same in a successful joke, which we can see in the efficient use of energy previously needed for repressing the dangerous idea by removing the apparent danger and releasing the energy in laughter. Freud continues saying that play pleasure is the joy of pure nonsense and of playing with words. Jokes can be analyzed as to technique and tendency, technique being mainly the disguise, and tendency the cause of laughter. When we are permitted to express the energy from hostility or aggression, it is manifested in laughter. In addition to release, the joy of word play accounts for the pleasure in laughter, and Freud argued that both wit and the comic are incompatible with strong emotions and must therefore be presented in a disguised form. He also discusses humour as a way of dealing with pain. A well-known example is the prisoner on his way to the gallows remarking, 'Well, this is a good beginning to the week.'⁴² The listener

⁴¹ Kincaid, p. 12.

⁴² Kincaid, p. 13.

is prepared to respond with pity, but the energy called up for sympathy is found to be superfluous, and can be released in laughter. Freud recognized that wit, the comic and humour are in practice mixed. Laughter moves from restraint to release and from a world of restriction to a world of childhood and play. Laughter is identified through the restoration of order and movement towards freedom. The distinction between technique and tendency, with tendency as a cause of laughter, and the way in which inhibition, aggression, and strong feelings of fear or sympathy can be turned into laughter, are the most important uses of Freud in this dissertation.

In most of Dickens's novels, the grotesque, morbid and macabre are present in one form or another. Freud called the funny grotesque a form of 'humour', and its manifestation in Dickens comes from the sense of estrangement evoked by his animism. Kincaid thus argues that the grotesque has a presence in most of Dickens's novels and that: 'It generally concerns itself with the demonic aspects of existence or, more generally, with a perception of the terrors and absurdities of internal and external traps.'⁴³ In short, our laughter depends on the strength of 'the terrors and absurdities', and is the power given the reader, whether to dismiss or resist the terror. The balance shifts to terror, and our laughter moves towards the hysterical and desperate. Dickens's technique is subtle and involves a sort of immunity-vulnerability. This is seen in the way the reader believes that laughter provides a kind of immunity, while it actually may become a kind of vulnerability.

The cumulative effect is also one of the most important causes of laughter. The snowball technique which suggests that one laugh makes us more ready for

⁴³ Kincaid, p. 15.

another and the chuckle of anticipation when we expect something to happen. We laugh without apparent cause because our memory builds up associations which act reflexively. It is important to be aware of the fact that our laughter is conditioned not only by our memory but by anticipation of the future course of the narrative. The anticipation of a frightening or sad ending makes us hold on to almost any excuse to laugh, while the anticipation of a happy ending can make us indulge in a mood of comfort particularly suited to laughter. And finally one must assume that the text is designed to provoke amusement.

Chapter Two: *A Tale of Two Cities*

Introduction

A Tale of Two Cities ran between April and November 1859 in weekly instalments. It was intended both to boost sales of Dickens's new publishing venture, the two-penny periodical *All the Year Round*, and as an experiment in fiction.¹ Half the length of Dickens's usual novels, *A Tale of Two Cities* depends on a swiftly moving plot. In this novel Dickens avoided using his trademarks such as elaborately drawn characters, eccentric dialogue and massive detail. *A Tale of Two Cities* was the second historical novel Dickens wrote, the other being *Barnaby Rudge* (1840-41). Reading the novel today we notice the suggestive imagery and atmosphere, the tightly constructed plot and the thrilling and horrifying scenes of revolution. Dickens's previous novels had very intricate and entangled plots, but *A Tale of Two Cities* is somewhat less concerned with different subplots. The novel focuses on the relationship between the three main characters, Dr. Manette, his daughter Lucie Manette, and her husband Charles Darnay.

A Tale of Two Cities is a novel that uses small means to get a big effect, and is very dependent on the following ingredients:

- The drastic reduction of the French Revolution to a few well-known events like the taking of the Bastille.
- The use of few characters to perform many functions
- The use of codes, such as 'Recalled to Life' and Madame Defarge's knitting

¹ John O. Jordan, 'Preface', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2001), p.xviii.

- The use of the plot does the work of dialogue and introspection
- A limited time span; the earliest event takes place in December 1757, and the latest takes place at the beginning of 1794.

The novel takes place in both Paris and London before and during the French revolution. It is split up into three books. The first book, 'Recalled to Life', introduces us to the characters and in some degree the plot. Mr. Lorry is on his way to Paris to arrange the reunion of Dr. Manette and his daughter Lucie, who has believed that her father has been dead for the past eighteen years. Dr. Manette has, as a result of his traumatic captivity in France, forgotten his past life, but Mr. Lorry and Lucie slowly recall him to life. The novel's opening statement 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' sets the tone of the story. It is seen as good or bad depending on the point of view. Jerry Cruncher, for instance, considers his nocturnal occupation a both necessary and important source of income to provide for his family, but Mr. Lorry views it as a detestable practice.

In section two, 'The Golden Thread', Lucie and Charles Darnay marry. But just before the marriage, Charles reveals to his father-in-law that the name Darnay is not his real name. His true surname is St. Evrémonde, and he belongs to an aristocratic family. The overarching theme of the novel is the struggle between those who do have power and privilege and those who do not. At the beginning of the story, the French aristocracy exercise complete freedom to persecute and deprive those of the lower classes. Later, when the tables are turned, it is the peasants who use their newly discovered power to harshly persecute the aristocrats through mass executions and imprisonment. Rebellious thoughts are growing in France, and we move to the Paris suburb of Saint Antoine. The centre of the French revolution is set in the wine-shop owned by Monsieur and Madame

Defarge, the same Defarge who housed Dr. Manette after his release from the Bastille.

Charles Darnay arranges a rescue operation to Paris to help a former servant. This opens the third section of the novel, 'The Track of a Storm'. But things do not go as planned, and Charles is arrested and sentenced to death by guillotine. Mr. Lorry and the Manettes hurry to his aid, and manage to free him because of Dr. Manette's authority among the revolutionaries as a former prisoner in the Bastille. But Charles is again arrested and sentenced to the guillotine. The novel's theme of self-sacrifice is best exemplified in the character of Sydney Carton who is willing to give his own life for Lucie's happiness. He also creates the means for Charles Darnay's salvation, by managing, thanks to his likeness to Charles, to enter the prison where Charles is held prisoner and exchange clothes with him. He makes his way to the guillotine while the newly freed Charles, the Manettes and Mr. Lorry flee to safety in London. As in many of Dickens's stories, such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*, prisons figure prominently in this novel. The ill effect of imprisonment upon the health of inmates is shown in Doctor Manette's mental illness, and in the pitiful state he is in. Shoemaking labour was the only pastime he had for decades, and we see his relapses to this profession several times throughout the novel.

Dickens's descriptions of the harsh punishments given for minor offences in both France and England connect the two Kingdoms. They serve as an implicit warning to Dickens's fellow countrymen that a bloody revolution may be the result of wrongs done in the name of the people.

In most of 19th century literature, women are not described as characters of strength or impact. They are presented as the weaker of the two sexes, and are

usually to be found in a vulnerable position where they are waiting to be rescued by a male hero. To find a woman of strength in a book written before the women's rights movements of the late 19th century and early 20th century is rare, but Dickens presents several female characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* who prove this stereotype incorrect. Through the use of Miss Pross, Madame Defarge, and Lucie Manette, Dickens defies conventional trends. He presents his women as pillars of steadiness and strength to promote his views throughout *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Lucie Manette and Miss Pross

The characters of Lucie and Miss Pross, British citizens, stand in grave contrasts to the inhumane French citizens, mainly represented by Madame Defarge and Monsieur de Marquis, and are therefore vital to the story as a mean of comparison. Both Lucie and Miss Pross functions as a mean to measure grotesqueness, and as Lucie and Miss Pross stands on one side of the scale, so does Madame Defarge and Monsieur de Marquis stand on the other. Although Lucie is raised as an orphan, she is quick to assume complete care of her father, and out of both guilt and affection she dedicates herself to his happiness. This affection, in time, also includes Charles Darnay and their daughter. This does not reduce her overall capacity for love, but only increases her affection for all three. She is thus depicted as the ideal daughter, wife and mother. Although she faints several times throughout the novel, she is strong in many ways. She is both confident and happy, characteristics that are viably important both to herself, but also to the other characters. Lucie signifies 'the golden thread', possessing the capability to weave people, events, and places together in order to improve the situation for those

around her. This is confirmed by Hilary Schor who argues that ‘it falls to women to make sense of the social order.’² Dr. Manette, Lucie’s father, becomes her source of strength, despite the fact she does not meet him until his return from prison after eighteen years. She thrives in having been given the opportunity to comfort and console him, and we are left to wonder if she absorbs and transforms his weaknesses into her strengths. While Lucie’s importance to her father is stressed in the early parts of the novel, she fails to fully realize her true potential for greatness until her husband has been taken prisoner upon his return to France.

Miss Pross is the English counterpart to Madame Defarge, and an important character because through her good intentions and actions, the spectre between good and evil is clarified. The reader sees Miss Pross and Madame Defarge on each side of the scale. Miss Pross’ first concern is to care for others and intrude as little as possible into the lives she loves. Being the lifelong servant of Lucie Manette in the absence of her father, Miss Pross is Lucie’s sole confidant before her father returns from prison. She has developed maternal feelings for her, and it comes as no surprise that Miss Pross considers it her life duty to protect Lucie and always look out for her. This is shown in chapter 14, ‘The Knitting Done’, when she tries to stall Madame Defarge in order to buy Lucie time to flee:

² Hilary Schor, ‘Novels of the 1850s’, *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, p. 73.

‘I am a Briton’, said Miss Pross, ‘I am desperate. I don’t care an English Twopence for myself. I know that the longer I keep you here, the greater hope there is for my Ladybird.’³

Miss Pross is the opposite of the grotesque Madame Defarge because Miss Pross is willing to give her life for another. Like Madame Defarge she possesses great strength, but she uses it only twice in the story and on both occasions to protect Lucie.

Madame Defarge

Raised as an orphan herself, Madame Defarge is the nemesis of Lucie. Where Lucie’s household conveys security and peace, Madame Defarge’s wine shop is a gathering place for revolutionary and violent conspiracy. Possessing a grotesque and remorseless bloodlust, Madame Defarge is the embodiment of the chaos of the French Revolution:

It was nothing to her, that an innocent man was to die for the sins of his forefathers; she saw, not him, but them. It was nothing to her, that his wife was to be made a widow and his daughter an orphan; that was insufficient punishment, because they were her natural enemies and her prey, and as such had no right to live. (376)

The border between man and beast fades as Madame Defarge assumes the role of a hunting animal lurking for her prey. Like an animal she doesn’t care about the consequences for the rest of the family by taking away the main provider, and Schor supports this notion by calling her ‘tiger-like.’⁴ John Carey goes even

³ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 381. Quotations from *A Tale of Two Cities* are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the text.

⁴ Schor, p. 73.

further in his great work *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination*, calling her 'a monster, fit only to be exterminated like a savage animal.'⁵ Dickens's elaborate narrative describes the scene beautifully in all its horror, but her hunger for revenge is not justified. In fact, Schor argues that 'however sympathetic Dickens is to the cause of the revolution, he is not proposing that the Madame Defarges of the world be allowed to sacrifice women and children on the guillotine at will.'⁶ On the other hand, one can argue that she in fact takes on a role as God. Knowing that Darnay is innocent, she still pursues him for the sins of his forefathers.

Her deadly knitting is grotesque because it is merely a cover for this seemingly domestic activity. By turning it into a method of destruction, conspiracy and death, she has turned something familiar into something abnormal (179). Philip Thomson argues that 'delight in novelty and amusement at divergence from the normal, turns to fear of the unfamiliar and the unknown once a certain degree of abnormality is reached.'⁷ Madame Defarge's apparent passivity is only a cover for her relentless thirst for vengeance, and with her stitches she secretly knits a register of the names of the revolution's intended victims. Madame Defarge is the representative of evil, both male and female, due to her bloodlust and unrelenting search to destroy the Evrèmonde family. She manipulates the revolution in order to have her personal revenge:

⁵ John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 159.

⁶ Schor, p. 73.

⁷ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque: The Critical Idiom* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 24.

‘See you,’ said madame, ‘I care nothing for this Doctor, I. He may wear his head or lose it, for any interest I have in him; it is all one to me. But, the Evrèmonde people are to be exterminated, and the wife and child must follow the husband and father.’ (372 – 373)

The display of inhumanity, in particular towards women and children, illustrates her grotesque mentality. The fact that Dickens uses the word ‘exterminate’, illustrates the extent of Madame Defarge’s hate, but in no way justifies it. The essentially abnormal nature of the grotesque and the direct and often radical manner in which this abnormality is presented are clearly shown in Madame Defarge’s thoughts on the Evrèmonde family. The grotesque as offensive and uncivilized, as an affront to decency and an outrage to normality, is expressed in the exaggeration of their hate. But the reader’s reaction to the abnormal can vary a great deal. Some will find these kinds of examples sickening or horrifying, some find it funny, and some will find it both things at once.⁸ Here Dickens uses a humour so dark that it balances on the edge of the grotesque, and James R. Kincaid agrees in this. In his work *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter*, he discusses the orthodox view of the dark Dickens, and quotes Henri Bergson, arguing that ‘the analysis of laughter is likely to leave a bitter aftertaste.’⁹ As shown earlier, Michael Hollington argues that the ‘attraction of repulsion [...] is the hallmark of the Dickensian grotesque.’¹⁰ Madame Defarge is not portrayed as an admirable character in any way, as she carries her viciousness too far. In Chapter 14, ‘The knitting done’, Madame Defarge discuss the case of the Manettes, whether to

⁸ Thomson, p. 26.

⁹ James R. Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1971), p. 3.

¹⁰ Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 232.

execute them or not, with her fellow Revolutionaries Jacques Three and The Vengeance. Dickens portrays her blood-thirst through her satisfied demeanour when they decide to behead them: ‘There is no doubt of the jury?’ inquired Madame Defarge, letting her eyes turn to him with a gloomy smile’ (373). Dickens notes that Madame Defarge’s hatefulness does not reflect any inherent flaw, but is rather a result of the oppression and personal tragedy that she has suffered from the hands of the Evrémonde family in particular. Darnay is an Evrémonde by blood, and Lucie is thus related by marriage. But this does not justify Madame Defarge’s policy of avenging justice. For just as the aristocracy’s oppression has made an oppressor of Madame Defarge, so will her oppression make oppressors of her victims. This is confirmed by Hollington, who argues that: ‘The irony is that the ‘revolution’ is not revolution – its victims are once again the weak and the poor, [...] those who can be labelled as grotesque and treated as outcasts.’¹¹ History repeats itself, and the fact that Madame Defarge dies from a bullet from her own gun, symbolizes Dickens’s belief that the sort of vengeful attitude embodied by Madame Defarge ultimately proves a self-damning one.

Monsieur the Marquis

The story of the Monsieur de Marquis describes the revolution better than any of the other subplots. The Marquis is the stereotype of an evil person. Through his actions and words, the division of the classes and the cause of the rebellion are clearly seen. The Marquis’s inhumane actions towards the common citizens occur in both ‘Monseigneur in the Country’ and ‘Monseigneur in Town’. Until his death

¹¹ Hollington, p. 110.

in 'The Gorgons Head', these chapters paint the common motives for revolution, by presenting reader with the behaviour of the French aristocracy, and thereby also an understanding of the inevitability of the uproar.

The Monsieur de Marquis has been blessed with the best of times, as indicated in the first lines of the novel. Unfortunately, he does not know how to be thankful for his blessings. In an age where most cannot afford even the barest necessities, the Marquis has four servants assist him in drinking his hot chocolate, a very exclusive and expensive drink reserved for the aristocracy. Dickens describes this in Chapter 7, 'Monsieur the Marquis in Town': 'Monseigneur could swallow a great many things with ease, and was by some few sullen minds supposed to be rather rapidly swallowing France' (108). This cruel satire, humorous in all its grotesqueness, drastically shows the contrasts of the high-class and low-class society during the revolution. Dickens uses the Monseigneur the Marquis to show how desperate the poor really are, and how ungracious the Monseigneur truly is, thus giving the reader an understanding of why this revolution must happen. The Marquis reaffirms his role as the symbol of peasant hatred when his carriage runs over and ends the life of a poor child:

Monsieur the Marquis ran his eyes over them all, as if they had been mere rats come out of their holes. He took out his purse. 'It is extraordinary to me,' said he, 'that you people cannot take care of yourselves and your children. One or the other of you is for ever in the way. How do you know what injury you have done to my horses.' (115)

Even after taking a human life, Monseigneur is unable to feel emotion or sorrow for a human being below his level. His indifference is described by Hollington as 'sadistic cruelty.'¹² The Marquis despises them like vermin and is

¹² Hollington, p. 111.

more concerned with the well being of his horses than the life of a child. Because of the sudden shock which this causes, the grotesque is used as an aggressive weapon. Dickens's dramatization of the Marquis's attitude is solely to produce a feeling of hate and anger in his reader. It also easily justifies the voice of the revolution.

The people at the scene are too terrified to stand up to the Marquis. They sulk at his disrespectful and degrading comments, but do nothing. Dickens masterfully arranges the scene, and makes the reader feel the pain of the people discriminated against, while pointing out that this condition must be changed.

All things come to an end, and this is foreshadowed in the 'Monseigneur in the Country':

The sunset struck so brilliantly into the travelling carriage when it gained the hill-top, that its occupant was steeped in crimson. 'It will die out,' said the Marquis, glancing at his hands, 'directly.' (118)

As a blood-red sky is reflected onto the face of the Marquis, we understand that not only is the Marquis's life about to end, but the revolution will break out in full. The colour gives the reader a hint of the bloody future. The Marquis carries on as if he is a King, when in fact the only thing he holds in common with the King is fate. His indifference to the movements of the public is also noted in Hollington's work. He argues that the Marquis is 'Displaying a fundamental obtuseness about the historical process now at work. [...] The Marquis cannot or will not read the signs.'¹³ The end of his days is drawing near, but he will not stop his evil till the bitter end.

The title of Chapter 9, 'The Gorgon's Head', refers to the Gorgon Medusa,

¹³ Hollington, p. 116.

whose head was crowned with serpents, and is a grotesque analogy to the Marquis. The mere sight of Medusa, according to Greek mythology, turned victims into stone.¹⁴ Dickens's repetition of the word 'stone' (123) when describing the Marquis's estate, helps to reinforce the harsh, cold image of the French aristocracy.

After Monsieur the Marquis sits down to dinner, his guest and nephew Charles Darnay arrives. 'We have done wrong, and are reaping the fruits of wrong,' Darnay states in a hopeless attempt at helping the Marquis understand and save his former family's life and dignity (128). But the Marquis only laughs at this, and in fact finds it humorous. The two get into a friendly discussion with heated undertones about the state of France and their place in it. Mr. Darnay points out the fact that his family lives in riches while the masses are starving, but Monsieur argues that he will die trying to continue the system that keeps the masses in poverty and repression, so long as it is in his own interest:

'Repression is the only lasting philosophy. The dark deference of fear and slavery, my friend, will keep the dogs obedient to the whip, as long as this roof shuts out the sky.' (128)

All the negative connotations in this quotation illustrate once again the grotesqueness of Monsieur the Marquis mind. For him, the people are no more than animals which are threatened into doing his bidding. He believes that the sole existence and purpose of the people is for him to have someone to control, and by controlling them with an iron fist and a whip, like one would control an obedient dog, the Marquis has wiped out the borders between humans and animals. He has

¹⁴ Wikipedia, *Medusa*, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medusa>> [accessed 8 February, 2007]

been given great power, but with great power comes great responsibility. By betraying this trust, he has brought the revolution on himself.

The murder of the Marquis is portrayed to its fullest and finest detail. ‘Drive him fast to his tomb. This, from JACQUES’ (134). The final touch of the Marquis’s life echoes the incident earlier when the Marquis drove hazardously fast through town and killed a boy. The murder is an act of revenge, and as horrifying it may be, the reader also recognizes the comic aspect. The conflict is that of horror for a hideous act such as murder, but relief and laughter from the way it has been written. It is the irony in the note from Jacques that produces the comic feeling in the reader, and a feeling of justice.

The death of the Monsieur de Marquis is necessary so that Dickens can place the Monsieur character to provoke a reaction from his reader. Without the three chapters with the Marquis, *A Tale of Two Cities* would not achieve the emotional and satirical effect that Dickens aimed for. Monseigneur’s cruel philosophy illustrates the attitude that has crept into the privileged class, and demonstrates the corruption of power. The contrast between the Marquis and his nephew’s philosophy further illustrates the suffering of the masses. The murder of Monseigneur is the turning point in the book where the oppressed seize the power and in turn become the oppressors.

Sydney Carton

The theme of self-sacrifice, portrayed through Sydney Carton when he does a ‘far better thing’ at the end of the novel than he has ever done before, is a satire of the life of a man who has thrown away his life to idleness and alcohol (390). The parallel to religion occurs several times throughout the story, and Carton, hardly a

Christ-like figure in life, dies a Christ-like death for the sake of others. Hilary Schor calls the self-sacrificing Carton's death the 'novel's clearly prophetic ending.'¹⁵ Carton's life up to his decision to die is in many ways as suicidal as his actual death. This is seen in the fact that he drinks heavily and pities himself. 'I am a disappointed drudge. I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me,' he tells Charles Darnay, his look-alike and rival for the heart of Lucie Manette (89). He also sees himself as constantly depressed, a stand-in in life, and actually as good as dead: 'I am like one who died young. All my life might have been' (156). He is a man '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). But Carton is not the only one willing to make sacrifices. Charles Darnay is willing to sacrifice his own happiness when he returns to France in an attempt to save the life of his former servant. Furthermore, Dr. Manette is shown to sacrifice his own mental health when he suffers a relapse of his prison-born derangement by allowing the nephew of his nemesis, Monsieur de Marquis, to marry his daughter. But in this novel, filled with resurrection men and resurrection imagery, there is hope even for Carton. At first Lucie offers that hope. Carton makes a turn-around and sees that the prospect of a personal sacrifice for Lucie lights his way. He begins to value life, to leave off drink, and to walk with a more 'settled step' (350). He is, of course, on his way to the guillotine, and his behaviour is characteristic of a man of a determined will.

Ironically, Sydney Carton's willingness to give his own life for Lucie's happiness also creates the means for Charles Darnay's salvation. Hollington

¹⁵ Schor, p. 73.

supports this notion and argues that ‘people appear to die wilfully and willingly under the guillotine’ and states that Carton is an example of the ‘attraction of repulsion.’¹⁶ Carton is attracted to the fact that he can redeem himself in doing this good deed. The repulsion is of course the fact that the only way to accomplish this mission is that he has to sacrifice his own life. The thought of going back to his old meaningless life is so unattractive that he much rather choose death.

Carton has the opportunity to save Darnay purely because of their physical resemblance. Schor states that ‘the fact that will save Darnay [is] his uncanny resemblance to his otherwise unlike double, Carton,’ indicating that there is no resemblance other than the physical.¹⁷ When he confronts Darnay in the prison cell and begins to exchange clothes and ultimately replaces him, Darnay finds the plan to be madness, but now the narrator draws a picture of Carton in a new light, a ‘wonderful quickness [...] a strength both of will and action, that appeared quite supernatural’ (364). Carton has undergone great changes and appears as a new, determined man. This will ultimately lead him to his death, but the heroic act redeems him from his past and creates the means of his salvation. Carton thus ironically discovers life through death.

Carton actually regains his honour and self respect, and his death is not seen as a savage, suicidal waste. The religious message of this self-sacrifice is that Carton dies so that the Darnays might live. The grotesqueness lies in the fact that Carton’s self-sacrifice is self-healing because he has to die to redeem his honour. This creates a sense of abnormality. The reader experiences grotesque humour in the description of Carton as well as fear and horror at his final actions. Thomson more

¹⁶ Hollington, p. 114.

¹⁷ Schor, p. 72.

generally argues that ‘the experience of amusement and disgust [...] is partly at least a reaction to the highly abnormal [and is] the classic reaction to the grotesque.’¹⁸

After Dr. Manette is ‘recalled to life’, he lapses in and out of his illness, which demonstrates how deeply he has been traumatized by his confinement. In her conversation with Mr. Lorry about Dr. Manette’s fear of the whole subject of his illness, Miss Pross states that:

It is plain enough, I should think, why he may be. It’s a dreadful remembrance. Besides that, his loss of himself grew out of it. Not knowing how he lost himself, or how he recovered himself, he may never feel certain of not losing himself again. That alone wouldn’t make the subject pleasant, I should think. (101-102)

She is proven right. When Mr. Lorry tries to get Dr. Manette to talk about his disease, he gets him to diagnose his own illness by thinking of it as a disease affecting someone else, a fictitious person. Manette senses the insecurity at the very essence of his relapses, which results in shoemaking and silence like in his prison days, but only by exploring this can he hope to prevent further relapses. It has been impossible for him until this point to realize that this has been a case of self-preservation, a way, and maybe the only way, to survive. On the other hand, Carton’s diseases, his depression and tiredness of life, appear to be more incurable than Manette’s illness. Even Lucie fears that ‘he is not to be reclaimed; there is scarcely a hope that anything in his character or fortunes is reparable now’ (217). Still Carton ironically heals himself by dying.

¹⁸ Thomson, p. 24.

The Wood-Sawyer, Jacques Three and Jerry Cruncher

The wood-sawyer reflects the cruel intention of the grotesque Revolutionaries. He encounters Lucie and her daughter outside his shop, and his grotesque and distasteful remark echoes throughout the rest of the novel:

‘My work is my business. See my saw! I call it my little guillotine. La, la, la; La, la, la! And off his head comes!’ The billet fell as he spoke, and he threw it into a basket. ‘I call myself the Samson of the firewood guillotine. See here again! Loo, loo, loo; Loo, loo, loo! And off her head comes! Now, a child. Tickle, tickle; Pickle pickle! And off its head comes. All the family.’ (287)

The horrifying insinuation that he likes sawing children’s heads off (as well as those of adults) is so grotesque that the reader presumably will experience chills down the spine. The Wood-Sawyer pictures the billets as human heads as he saws through the firewood. His bizarre singing, as if he was doing something totally different, only strengthens the notion of his extremely distasteful behaviour. Dickens’s slow narrative enhances the feeling of horror, but also provokes laughter. The undoubtedly comic aspect of this character’s grotesque behaviour causes the reader to experience delight in novelty. Thomson argues in general that the comic reaction to the grotesque is a natural reaction:

In seeking to explain this peculiar mixture in our response, we might point to a similar clash in the text itself, between the most obvious level, the gruesome or horrifying content, and the comic manner in which it is presented. In searching for words to convey this clash we should probably come up with the word ‘grotesque’, if only on the vague basis by which the same word in phrases such as ‘a grotesque scene’ conveys the notion of simultaneously laughable and horrifying or disgusting. The term Grotesque covers the co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable.¹⁹

¹⁹ Thomson, p. 27.

Thomson here argues that the reader will experience laughter as well as horror because of the extreme nature of the scene. Dickens is a master in describing such horrific scenes in a laughable way. This is a grotesque scene, where the reader experiences laughter only because of its extreme distastefulness.

Jacques Three is grotesquely characterized by Dickens in the chapter 'Echoing Footsteps': '[...] with his usual craving on him, and evidently disappointed by the dialogue taking a turn that did not seem to promise bloodshed' (225). Jacques is not in any way less grotesque when he follows up: 'She has a fine head for it,' (373) referring to both Lucie and the guillotine, and then continuing: 'The child also [...] has golden hair and blue eyes. And we seldom have a child there. It is a pretty sight!' (373). One can see a clear parallel to the Wood-Sawyer because of his grotesque eagerness to kill a child. Stating that this is in fact a 'pretty sight' is so grotesque that again the horror of the scene evokes laughter due to Dickens's savage wit.

In order to describe Jerry Cruncher, also known as the Honest Tradesman, we must familiarise ourselves with his life and work. Depicted as the business of death, Tellson's Bank is described as:

Very small, very dark, very ugly, very incommodious. It was an old-fashioned place moreover, in the moral attribute that the partners in the house were proud of its smallness, proud of its darkness, proud of its ugliness, proud of its incommodiousness. (55)

The atmosphere smells of deliberate grimness and decay. Money, documents, and valuables that go into Tellson's for safekeeping are buried in 'wormy old wooden drawers', and acquire 'a musty odour, as if they were fast decomposing' (56). Just as material goods are buried and decayed in Tellson's, so the bank transforms the people who deal with it. The bank hides clerks who go to work at Tellson's 'in a

dark place, like cheese, until they become old' (57). Tellson's also more literally sends people to their deaths. The bank identifies forgers, debtors, counterfeiters, and petty thieves who eventually go to their graves under the harsh death penalty. We can see the grotesque duality knowing Mr Cruncher makes a livelihood selling these dead bodies. Not by accident, Dickens locates Tellson's next to the Temple Bar, an arched gateway to the city where the government displayed the heads of the executed. Hollington argues that 'Jerry Cruncher suggests a comically grotesque kind of violence, savage, and cannibalistic, conveyed in the 'bone-crunching' associations of his name.'²⁰ The violent connotation of his name is fitting because of his nocturnal occupation as a grave robber, and gives the reader a hint of this dishonest livelihood.

Jerry Cruncher, the messenger, serves as the live sign of the house. He functions as comic relief, much as the wood-sawyer and the reader are shown that he may have something to do with death as well. Like most of the other characters in this novel, Jerry appears to have a secret. His physical characteristics and personal features create an air of mystery, such as his muddy boots and his rusty fingers. Dickens is a master in presenting and describing characters, and Hollington argues that:

The role of the grotesque is perhaps to be found – first of all in representation. The caricature method of presenting characters by 'charging' a very limited number of characteristics with special significance – the hoarse voice and spiky hair of Jerry Cruncher, for instance.²¹

Dickens uses the adjectives 'hoarse' and 'spiky' to describe Jerry Cruncher. By giving this description rather than presenting him in a more normal way,

²⁰ Hollington, p. 113.

²¹ Hollington, p. 111.

Dickens creates a mystique around Jerry.

As he sits outside Tellson's Bank, he notices a funeral procession approaching. People yelling 'Spies!' surround the mourning coach, and Cruncher discovers that the funeral belongs to Roger Cly. When the crowd tries to pull the sole mourner out of his coach, the mourner flees the scene. The crowd then begins to pull the coffin out of the hearse, but decides to accompany it to the graveyard instead. Cruncher joins the unruly procession, which grows larger as it moves along. But he has a private agenda. He is a resurrection man, a grave robber, and any funeral is a business opportunity. He is a body snatcher, a man who digs up graves and steals the corpses. He sells them to doctors who need them to study human anatomy. He calls himself 'The Honest Tradesman,' in an attempt to make a shady business appear respectable. His alias is also exceptionally grotesque because his trade is in no way honest. The action of unearthing dead bodies for money and treating them as commodities is grotesque, and places him in a category alongside Gaffer Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend*. Jerry Cruncher's nocturnal ways are thus revealed. When confronted with his occupation by Mr. Lorry, he answers dubiously:

'What have you been besides a messenger?' After some cogitation, accompanied with an intent look at his patron, Mr Cruncher conceived the luminous idea of replying, 'Agricultooral character.' (318)

Cruncher's grotesque work as a resurrection man mimics the resurrection theme that runs through *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Hollington argues that Cruncher is in fact 'the novel's central grotesque character.'²²

Dickens uses the funeral procession to demonstrate how easily a wild crowd

²² Hollington, p. 112.

can become a destructive mob, as seen in larger scale later in the novel when the Revolution breaks out in France. The actions of the crowd turn a solemn occasion, a funeral, into a sinister carnival, with many of the crowd members not even aware of the cause of the uproar. The momentum of the mob has swept them up, and they follow whatever spontaneous commands they hear. In this way, rational, thinking individuals become mindless members of a violent entity. Dickens describes mobs as unstoppable forces, frightening in their inhumanity.

Concluding Remarks

There are without doubt numerous grotesque characters and situations in *A Tale of Two Cities*, and as I have argued in this part of my dissertation, the grotesque is vital to the story in the way that it helps creating an emotional link between the characters and the reader. I have also outlined the use of different techniques and Dickens's ability to use the grotesque to create mixed feelings of horror and laughter.

Chapter Three: *Great Expectations*

Introduction

Great Expectations was first serialized in *All the Year Round* from December 1860 to August 1861.¹ The action of the story takes place from Christmas Eve, 1812, when the protagonist Pip is about seven years old, to the winter of 1840. This novel is the story of the orphan Pip, told by the protagonist in (semi-) autobiographical style as a remembrance of his life, from the early days of his childhood until years after the main conflicts of the story have been resolved in adulthood.

The story is divided into three phases of Pip's life expectations. Volume 1, or the first 'expectation', contains 19 chapters. Both volumes 2 and 3 contain 20 chapters each, ending with a grand total of 59 chapters. At the end of chapters 19 and 39, readers are formally notified that they have reached the conclusion of a phase of Pip's expectations. Pip the narrator 'knows' how all the events in the story will turn out, he uses only very subtle foreshadowing so that we learn of events only when the Pip in the story does.

In the first expectation, Pip lives a humble existence with his ill-tempered older sister and her strong, but gentle husband, Joe. Pip is then hired by a bitter, but wealthy woman, Miss Havisham, as an occasional companion to her and her beautiful but arrogant adopted daughter, Estella. From that time on, Pip aspires to rise above his simple life and be a gentleman. After years as companion to Miss

¹ John O. Jordan, 'Preface', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2001), p. xviii.

Havisham and Estella, he spends more years as an apprentice to Joe, so that he may grow up to have a livelihood working as a blacksmith. This life is suddenly turned upside down when he is visited by a London attorney, Mr. Jaggers, who informs Pip that he is to come into the 'Great Expectation' of a handsome property, and be trained to be a gentleman at the cost of an anonymous benefactor.

The second stage of Pip's expectations has Pip in London, learning the details of being a gentleman, having tutors, fine clothing, and joining cultured society. He is now supported by a generous allowance, which he frequently lives beyond. He learns to feel at home in this new milieu, and experiences not only friendship but rivalry as he finds himself in the same circles as Estella, who is also pursued by many other men, especially Bentley Drummle, whom she favours. As he adopts the mental and cultural norms of his new status, he also adopts the class attitudes that go with it. When Joe comes to visit Pip and his friend and room mate Herbert to deliver an important message, Pip is embarrassed to the point of hostility by Joe's unlearned ways, despite his protestations of love and friendship for Joe. At the end of this stage, Pip is introduced to his benefactor, something which again changes his world.

The third and last stage of Pip's expectations changes Pip's life from his upper-class strivings to realities he realises he must deal with, facing moral and financial challenges. He learns startling truths that makes him doubt the values that he once embraced so eagerly, and finds that he cannot regain many of the important things that he had cast aside. The current ending of the story is different from Dickens's original intent. The two endings of this novel are much discussed, but in this dissertation I will stick to the second ending.

Miss Havisham

After Miss Havisham's betrayal in love, she hardened her heart. By doing that and suppressing her natural affectionate nature, she committed a crime against herself. Miss Havisham's love for Compeyson blinded her to his true nature. At Compeyson's desertion, her anger and sorrow became extreme and she threw herself and Satis House into perpetual mourning and, as a monument to her broken heart, she shut herself out from the world.

Dickens's humour is dark to the point of grotesque, and James R. Kincaid argues in his book *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* that Dickens often asks us to laugh at the subjects he is asking us to sympathize or be angry with.² This is a common tool Dickens use to create relations between the characters of the novel and the reader.

Miss Havisham leaves all the accessories of her bridal day about her chamber. After being abandoned at the altar, she decides to stop all the clocks in her home in an effort to stop time. She removes all natural light from her surroundings and becomes a recluse, and stops the clocks at twenty minutes to nine, the time of her abandonment. She still wears her white dress, veil, and bridal flowers, and the same jewellery. Pip describes her as the strangest lady he has ever seen:

² Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1971), p. 7.

She was dressed in rich materials – satins, and lace, and silks – all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. She had not quite finished dressing, for she had but one shoe on – the other was on the table near her hand [...].³

Just as her marriage, so is her dressing unfinished business. She was left at the altar only hours away from happiness. She was so close, and this is reflected in her almost complete dressing. One shoe missing. She allows this one moment of her betrayal to direct every aspect of her world down to her hair, makeup, and clothing. But then Pip's narration changes into a description not only of her clothes, but of the person within the dress:

I saw the bride within the bridal dress that had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. Once, I had been taken to see a ghastly wax-work at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, wax-work and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. (57)

The description of Miss Havisham as a ghastly wax-work and a skeleton portrays her as a grotesque. Michael Hollington compares this description of Miss Havisham to another grotesque, Mr. Murdstone in *David Copperfield*.⁴ He is described as having a:

³ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (New York: Oxford U. P., 1998), p. 56. Quotations from *Great Expectations* are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the text.

⁴ Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 220-221.

squareness about the lower part of his face, and the dotted indication of the strong black beard he shaved close every day, reminded me of the waxwork that had travelled into our neighbourhood some half-a-year before.⁵

In both descriptions the wax plays a central role in the tragi-comic features of *Great Expectations*. Pip, although he perceives Miss Havisham's grotesqueness, accepts her as a suitable benefactress. The connection David makes between Mr. Murdstone and waxwork in *David Copperfield* is the sign of a quick perception of Murdstone as a monstrosity. John Carey argues that 'Waxworks staring at people who appear to be waxworks are regular inhabitants of the novel.'⁶

Miss Havisham's entire existence revolves around the moment of her humiliation and the ruining of her life, but she does not care how society feels about any aspect of her life, much less her appearance. She makes no effort to dispose of the reminders from her life or change any part of her appearance. Miss Havisham has chosen to make herself an outcast. By creating this world for herself, Miss Havisham creates her own prison, one she cannot escape until she comes to terms with her life. Her entire life is a tribute to one single bad experience. As noted earlier, Kayser's definition of the grotesque concludes that the grotesque is the expression of the alienated or estranged world, and that the grotesque is a game with the absurd.⁷ The grotesque artist, in this case Dickens, plays with the deep absurdities of existence. Kayser goes on arguing that the absurd, like the grotesque, is often applied to something which is merely

⁵ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 34.

⁶ John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 84.

⁷ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque: The Critical Idiom* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 18.

ridiculous, highly eccentric or stupid.⁸ Miss Havisham's behaviour is no doubt both highly eccentric as well as stupid.

Miss Havisham's adoption of Estella is not that of a kind benefactor wanting to improve the life of a less fortunate. Miss Havisham has ulterior motives. It is not a loving action on her part, but a calculated manoeuvre to turn the child into a heartless instrument of revenge against men. Adopted by Miss Havisham at a young age, Estella never gets an opportunity to forge her own identity. Raising Estella as a tool to avenge her broken heart, Miss Havisham objectifies her into a beautiful doll she can mould. Pip tells the reader that she is beautiful, but he does not describe her. With this unusual lack of a physical description, the text constructs Estella as if she has no individual essence. This portrayal of Estella constructs her as a valuable commodity because of her beauty; she is an object rather than a person. Describing an encounter between Miss Havisham and Estella, Pip observes that:

She was even more dreadfully fond of Estella than she had been when I last saw them together; I repeated the word advisedly, for there was something positively dreadful in the energy of her looks and embraces. She hung upon Estella's beauty, hung upon her words, hung upon her gestures, and sat mumbling her own trembling fingers while she looked at her, as though she were devouring the beautiful creature she had reared. (298)

The grotesque nature of Miss Havisham is revealed. Rather than seeing Estella as a whole person, Miss Havisham uses her as a mean of revenge. Referring to Estella as a 'beautiful creature,' Pip shows how Miss Havisham has transformed Estella from a person into an object whose value comes from its beauty, but the

⁸ Thomson, p. 18.

cannibalistic undertones draw parallels to Magwitch and Pip. Carey describes Estella as an ‘edible heroine [...] – or so it seems to Miss Havisham, who eyed the girl with a ravenous intensity.’⁹ Pip’s impression that Miss Havisham appears to want to devour Estella, illustrates the damage her influence causes her adoptive daughter. The macabre element in the previous scene clearly outweighs the comic. Thomson argues that the comic element represents a heightening of the horrible and gruesome, and that it is used to increase the sensitivity to gruesomeness.¹⁰

Miss Havisham’s desire to avenge her broken heart makes her use Estella as a tool to torture men. In making Estella take revenge on men, Miss Havisham only succeeds in duplicating her own experience for her own adoptive daughter. Explaining to Pip that they are not free to ‘follow their own devices’ (261), Estella defines herself as Miss Havisham’s creation as she forms her identity according to Miss Havisham requests. Remarking on the jewellery Miss Havisham puts on Estella whenever he visits, Pip says: ‘Miss Havisham watched us all the time, directed my attention to Estella’s beauty, and made me notice it the more by trying her jewels on Estella’s breast and hair’ (88).

Miss Havisham wants Pip to desire Estella as Estella is encouraged to practice her disdain on Pip and to break his heart, because she knows that when he realises that he can’t have Estella, it will break his heart. Miss Havisham’s grotesque and evil mentality is again displayed in this desperate search for revenge in the belief that it will benefit herself to destroy a child.

Paradoxically, Miss Havisham’s greatest sin is against herself. By hardening her heart she loses her generous, affectionate nature and becomes withered inside

⁹ Carey, p. 23.

¹⁰ Thomson, p. 37.

emotionally. Miss Havisham's punishment is that the heartless young woman she has made in the end uses her lack of feelings against her.

Mrs. Joe Gargery

Mrs. Joe apparently suffers from some need to display masculinity, which is evident in her aggressive behaviour towards the men in her home. She is not very feminine, and Pip describes her as 'not a good-looking woman', with 'black hair and eyes,' and 'such a prevailing redness of skin that I sometimes used to wonder whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg-grater instead of soap' (8). In fact she is a domestic tyrant, and her need to maintain power is explained by Joe when Pip shares his desire to learn. Joe tells Pip that:

'she ain't over partial to having scholars on the premises,' Joe continued, 'and in particular would not be over partial to my being a scholar, for fear as I might rise. Like a sort of rebel, don't you see?' (48)

Because Mrs. Gargery never received education, she will not allow the rest of the household to be educated either. This sort of mentality holds Joe and Pip back and denies them to rise above their station. The reference to Joe's lack of schooling, and the reasons for it, has striking similarities:

'Joe,' she'd [Joe's mother] say, 'now, please God, you shall have some schooling, child,' and she'd put me to school. But my father were that good in his hart that he couldn't abear to be without us. So, he'd come with a most tremenjous crowd and make such a row at the doors of the houses where we was, that they used to be obliged to have no more to do with us and to give us up to him. And then he took us home and hammered us. Which, you see, Pip,' said Joe, pausing in his meditative raking of the fire, and looking at me, 'were a drawback on my learning.' (45-46)

Joe's story is as grotesque as it is funny. Dickens's elaborate description makes this horrific scene humorous. Joe excuses his father for his treatment of Joe and his mother, arguing that it was his love for them that made him do it. Domestic

violence is a not a subject to be taken lightly, but Thomson argues that ‘laughter at some kinds of the grotesque and the opposite response – disgust, horror etc. – mixed with it, are both reactions to the physically cruel, abnormal or obscene.’ He then goes on explaining that ‘some hidden but very much alive sadistic impulse makes us react to such things with unholy glee and barbaric delight.’¹¹

One may infer that Mrs. Joe do not blame herself for the mistreatment of her brother and husband, but feels that they have brought it on themselves. Mrs. Joe expresses no regret or guilt after being abusive to Joe and Pip. Although Mrs. Joe runs her household, which consists of her husband and Pip, she is not much of a motherly type. When Pip asks her questions, she answers:

‘I didn’t bring you up by hand to badger peoples lives out. It would be blame to me, and not praise, if I had. People are put in the Hulks because they murder, and because they rob, and forge, and do all sorts of bad; and they always begin by asking questions.’ (14)

She resents having to raise her brother ‘by hand’, as well as being the wife of a blacksmith. The term ‘by hand’ refers to the fact that Pip was bottle-fed and not nursed (491), but it also goes beyond Pip himself and includes Joe:

Having at that time to find out for myself what the expression meant, and knowing her to have a hard and heavy hand, and to be much in the habit of laying it upon her husband as well as upon me, I suppose that Joe Gargery and I were both brought up by hand. (8)

This is also, then, a metaphor for domestic violence. Mrs. Gargery beats both Pip and Joe. Raising a child by beating him is a grotesque act. A certain degree of abnormality is reached, and the delight in novelty turns to fear and anger. This occurs because accepted social standards and norms are seriously attacked. Both

¹¹ Thomson, pp. 8-9.

the comic and disgusting aspect are felt equally, and Thomson argues that the abnormality is an essential ingredient to the grotesque. The abnormal nature of the grotesque is responsible for the condemnation of the grotesque as offensive and uncivilized, but the reader's reaction may vary from delight in the unusual to dismissal of the meaningless exaggeration.¹²

Mrs. Joe has cared for her little brother since he was a baby, but she is definitely not the ideal motherly figure. It is not until Mrs. Joe is violently attacked by Orlick and permanently mentally damaged, that her temper improves. The horrible extremity of this 'cure' can be seen as what Thomson argues is almost bizarre; a character who is problematic, but suddenly becomes laughably eccentric. Our reaction to it is mixed through the appearance of something at odds with the comic.¹³ The reader experiences a sensation of justice in this grotesque change.

Estella

Estella is a supremely ironic creation, one who darkly undermines the notion of romantic love and who serves as a bitter criticism of the class system in which she functions. Raised from the age of three by Miss Havisham with the sole purpose of tormenting men and break their hearts, Estella wins Pip's deepest love by practicing deliberate cruelty. John Carey argues that Estella is 'pure and unapproachable in her ramshackle palace as the star which her name invokes.'¹⁴

Unlike the warm, kind heroine of a traditional love story, Estella is cynical, cold, and manipulative. This becomes very clear when she confronts Pip:

¹² Thomson, p. 26.

¹³ Thomson, p. 33.

¹⁴ Carey, p. 152.

‘Am I pretty?’

‘Yes; I think you are pretty.’

‘Am I insulting?’

‘Not so much as you were last time,’ said I.

‘Not so much?’

‘No.’

She fired when she asked the last question, and she slapped my face with such force as she had, when I answered it.

‘Now?’ said she. ‘You little coarse monster, what do you think of me now?’

(80 –81)

Estella takes pride in being insulting towards Pip. Her upbringing has led her to believe that the worse she behaves towards Pip, the more she pleases Miss Havisham. The grotesque mentalities displayed in both Estella and Miss Havisham are revealed. Carey argues that ‘A star that slaps its admirer’s face is doubly provocative.’¹⁵ Though she represents Pip’s first ideal of life among the upper classes, Estella is actually even lower-born than Pip, as he learns near the end of the novel. She is the daughter of Magwitch, and thus originates from the lowest level of society.

Ironically, life among the upper classes does not represent salvation for Estella. Instead, she is grotesquely victimized twice by her adopted class. Rather than being raised by Magwitch, she is raised by Miss Havisham, who destroys Estella’s ability to express emotion and interact normally with the world. And rather than marrying the kind-hearted commoner Pip, Estella marries the cruel nobleman Drummle, who treats her harshly and makes her life miserable for many years. In this way, Dickens uses Estella’s life to explore the idea that one’s happiness is not necessarily connected to one’s social position. If she had been poor, she might have been better off.

¹⁵ Carey, p. 169.

Despite her cold behaviour and the damaging influences in her life, Dickens nevertheless ensures that Estella is still somehow a sympathetic character. By giving the reader a sense of her inner struggle to discover and act on her own feelings, Dickens gives the reader a glimpse of Estella's life, which helps to explain what Pip might love about her. Estella does not seem able to stop herself from hurting Pip, but she also seems not to want to hurt him. She repeatedly warns him that she has 'no heart' and seems to urge him as strongly as she can to find happiness by leaving her behind.

Finally, Estella's long, painful marriage to Drummle causes her to develop along the same lines as Pip. That is, she learns to rely on and trust her feelings. In the final scene of the novel, she has become her own woman for the first time in the book. She tells Pip that he has forgiven her once, and asks him to forgive her again:

‘And if you could say that to me then, you will not hesitate to say that to me now – now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your hart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends.’ (478)

Estella has reflected over her life and realised that she has been wicked towards the one person who always loved her. Her plea for forgiveness shows the reader that this is a new and changed Estella. A grotesque text often aims at provoking in order to produce a maximum reaction of laughter and disgust. The grotesque nature is aggressive, and aims to discomfit in some way. As Thomson argues, there is normally an alteration between the evil that arouses anger and the ludicrous smallness that excites laughter.¹⁶

¹⁶ Thomson, p. 42.

Pip

The character that undergoes most major changes throughout the novel is Pip. The significant changes in Pip's character are very important to the novel's theme. Pip's deterioration from an innocent boy into an arrogant gentleman, and his redemption as a good-natured person, illustrates the idea that unrealistic hopes and expectations can lead to undesirable traits.

In the beginning of the novel, Pip is characterized as a harmless, caring boy, who draws much sympathy from the reader even though he is at that point content with his common life. The reader develops warm and sympathetic feelings toward Pip after learning that his parents are dead, and that he is an orphan:

As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likenesses of either of them [...], my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. (3)

He has never seen his parents and in his childish way he believes that they looked like the letters the tombstones. The grotesque idea of comparing tombstones with human features also sets the tone for the novel. The grotesque relationship between Magwitch and Pip is vital and will be examined closely in this sub-chapter. As the story moves on, Pip is soon confronted with the convict Magwitch:

A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled: and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin. 'Oh! Don't cut my throat, sir,' I pleaded in terror. 'Pray don't do it, sir.' (4)

The scary first meeting between Magwitch and Pip is as grotesque as it is comic. A small boy alone in the marshes suddenly being attacked by a man of Dickens's description makes the readers understand that Pip is completely at Magwitch's power. Pip's awareness that at this point Magwitch can do whatever he wants to

him, makes Pip immediately plead for his life. Magwitch's unusual and shabby presence makes Pip believe that Magwitch is a wicked person, but, as Michael Hollington states, Magwitch is a 'a comic ogre who is sadistic and bullying, but to an adult reader he is transparently fictitious.'¹⁷ Pip's fear increases as Magwitch goes on:

'You young dog', said the man, licking his lips, 'what fat cheeks you ha' got.' I believe they were fat, though I was at that time undersized for my years, and not strong. 'Darn me if I couldn't eat'em,' said the man, with a threatening shake of his head, 'and if I han't half a mind to't!' (4-5)

From the reader's point of view, this passage is humorous, and the grotesque prospect of being eaten triggers a primal fear in Pip. Eating a specimen of the same species is not natural, and is a main difference between humans and animal. Magwitch's threat of cannibalism erases the borders between beast and man. Magwitch leads Pip to believe he will eat him, although the reader understands this is only a threat. Thomson explains that the reasons for laughter in such a horrific scene is that something so very strange, such as cannibalism, is so abnormal that our laughter is introduced on by feelings of horror or disgust. A scene or character which is laughably eccentric, such as Magwitch, suddenly becomes problematic. Our reaction is mixed through the appearance of something quite at odds with the comic.¹⁸ Thomson goes on explaining that the relationship between the grotesque and the comic is that of a controversy, but that there is always a presence of the comic in the grotesque. He argues that 'grotesque' in everyday speech refers to something simultaneously funny and repulsive. It creates a conflict in the reader,

¹⁷ Hollington, p. 216.

¹⁸ Thomson, p. 33.

and is a paradox of attraction/repulsion.¹⁹ The reader experiences horror at Magwitch's suggestion, but also humour because of the absurd situation.

Magwitch demands Pip to act as his henchman and he is forced into submitting to the convict's demands, partly due to his naive fear of Magwitch's fictitious companion who 'has a secret way pecooliar to himself, of getting at a boy, and at his heart, and at his liver' (6). The threat made to Pip is just as grotesque and hilarious as the previous ones, and the theory of attraction of repulsion is confirmed.

It is also necessary to examine the relationship between Pip and Magwitch and their relation to Estella and Miss Havisham closer. Just as Miss Havisham is 'creating' a 'monster' of Estella, so is Magwitch 'creating' his own 'monster' out of Pip. Taking Pip out of his social station in an attempt to raise him on the social ladder is exactly what Miss Havisham has done to Estella. The parallel to Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) is obvious. She addresses the theme of a man wanting to be divine. As man takes over the role of God and creates creatures of his own, the creatures become hideous and monstrous. In fact, the creature which Viktor Frankenstein, the protagonist of *Frankenstein*, creates is only called 'the Monster.' Hollington argues that 'Pip is both Frankenstein and monster, made into a grotesque by his master, and experiencing him likewise.'²⁰ Just as Magwitch sees Pip as 'his' gentleman, so Miss Havisham perceives Estella. Brian Cheadle supports the fact that Magwitch considers Pip as his invention, arguing that 'the

¹⁹ Thomson, pp. 50-51.

²⁰ Hollington, p. 222.

returned Magwitch himself renounces his desire to 'exhibit' his gentleman.'²¹

Great Expectations also generates grotesque connections between people and animals, such as Mr. Pumblechook comparison of Pip with a pig. He portrays Pip as a piece of meat, not worth more than the market price of such an article, and in vivid details tells him how the butcher would have shed his blood and killed him so that he would become a tasty supper.

You would have been disposed of for so many shillings according to the market price of the article, and Dunstable the butcher would have come up to you as you lay in you straw, and he would have whipped you under his left arm, and with his right he would have tucked up his frock to get a penknife from his waistcoat-pocket, and he would have shed your blood and had your life. (27)

The parallel to Magwitch's cannibalism is obvious and explained by Hollington: 'as the Gargery's and Pumblechook's sit down to supper, they torture him by comparing him to the pig they eat, elaborating the sadism with their slow narrative elaboration of the slaughter.'²² The cannibalistic behaviour Magwitch displayed is far less horrifying in comparison with this sadistic torture.

The expectations that cause Pip's character to become less likable are those that he develops after being introduced to Miss Havisham and Estella. During his first visit to Satis House, Estella, who considers herself much too refined and well-bred to associate herself with a common boy, scorns Pip. Still Pip falls in love with her during that first meeting, but when asked by Miss Havisham what he thinks about her adopted daughter, he answers:

²¹ Brian Cheadle, 'The late novels', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, p. 82.

²² Hollington, p. 224.

‘I think she is very proud,’ I replied, in a whisper.
 ‘Anything else?’
 ‘I think she is very pretty.’
 ‘Anything else?’
 ‘I think she is very insulting.’ (She was looking at me then, with a look of
 supreme aversion.)
 ‘Anything else?’
 ‘I think I should like to go home.’ (60)

After just one afternoon at Satis House, Pip develops a desire to become more acceptable to Estella, in the hope that her insensitive attitude towards him will change. He is both a little scared and attracted to her. As a result, while walking back to the forge, Pip begins to feel ashamed of his life. Wolfgang Kayser’s definition of the nature of the grotesque ends up in the conclusion that the grotesque is a game with the absurd, and that the grotesque artist plays with the deep absurdities of existence.²³ The absurdity here is the fact that after being content with his social class his whole life, he is now aware and ashamed of his low class all because of one afternoon. In many ways it is absurd to lose all one’s self-esteem because of someone, but love is not rational, love is absurd. Whether it is absurd to crave for the good life after a short taste of it, is of course debatable, but it is certain that Pip’s love for Estella causes him much grief, and Hollington describes her as ‘a false star.’²⁴ This is the primary factor that makes Pip want to change, because he now sees his flaws that he was not aware of and considers himself ignorant and bad:

[...] that I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse, that my boots were thick; that I had fallen into a despicable habit of calling knaves Jacks; that I was much more ignorant than I had considered myself last night, and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way. (64)

²³ Thomson, p. 18.

²⁴ Hollington, p. 223.

Hollington argues that the tragicomic point is that Pip learns to accept the Victorian class division through his contact with Estella, instead of rebelling against it like David Copperfield or Oliver Twist.²⁵ Estella is Pip's main reference to the social hierarchy, and unlike Oliver Twist and David Copperfield he does not run away. He accepts them, but still desires to change and become a gentleman of considerable means. He wants to rise from his class in the way of so many of Dickens's characters.

When his visits to Satis House cease and he is apprenticed to Joe, Pip becomes even more ashamed of his position in society, because he believes that it will ruin his hopes of ever making Estella love him. Then Mr. Jaggers informs Pip of the 'great expectations' that have been placed before him, and Pip believes this to be the work of Miss Havisham. He also begins to believe that Miss Havisham has destined him to be married to Estella. This causes Pip's ego to grow tremendously, and he becomes arrogant as he looks down on his 'common', yet caring and loyal friends. This is shown in the farewell scene between Joe and Pip that happens in Mr. Jaggers's presence:

I begged Joe to be comforted, for (as he said) we had ever been the best of friends, and (as I said) we ever would be. Joe scooped his eyes with his disengaged wrist, as if he were bent on gouging himself, but said not another word. Mr. Jaggers had looked on at this, as one who recognised in Joe the village idiot, and in me his keeper. (139)

Pip is afraid of being associated with Joe and his likes. Because of Mr. Jaggers's presence, Pip is embarrassed. He is afraid Mr Jaggers will think of him as belonging to this low social class. This consciousness of class and money is also

²⁵ Hollington, p. 223.

described in Chapter 28. Pip receives word that Joe will be visiting London and would like to see him. However, Pip is not at all overjoyed to receive this news:

Let me confess exactly, with what feelings I looked 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. (215-216)

His aversion towards his old friend, and the fact that he would actually buy Joe off not to visit him, is a grotesque act. The obsessive search for money has made him blind for his feelings, and now that money is not a problem anymore he is actually willing to pay to get rid of Joe. The negative attitudes and traits that Pip develops is a result of his unrealistic expectations. Hollington argues that 'Paradox engulfs Pip's relationship to Joe, as soon as the consciousness of money, class and status set a barrier between them.'²⁶

Concluding Remarks

Great Expectations is filled with grotesque characters and imagery. From the innocent Pip, to the grotesque Miss Havisham, Dickens plays out his entire register regarding characters and situations. As in the previous chapter, I have analyzed Dickens's techniques in an attempt to explain the role of these grotesque characters. The grotesque plays a more internal role in the characters in this novel than in *A Tale of Two Cities*, because it on the whole deals with violent mentalities rather than physical violence.

²⁶Hollington, p. 222.

Chapter Four: *Our Mutual Friend*

Introduction

Dickens' last complete novel was published serially between May 1864 and November 1865, and was Dickens's last attempt at a twenty-monthly-number novel.¹ The novel is split up into four books. The first book, 'The Cup and the Lip' introduces us to the characters and the plot. The story begins with a mysterious fortune offered to John Harmon by his late father, a rich dust contractor, in his will. To receive the money, John must marry the woman Bella Wilfer whom he does not know. He has returned from the exile enforced by his father and confides in a shipmate who attempts to murder him. The mate gets killed instead, leaving one inconvenient corpse. Because the body is considered to be the remains of John (the body is found with his papers), the money passes to Mr. Boffin, old Harmon's foreman. Harmon adopts Bella, and John becomes his employee disguised as John Rokesmith. . The second book, 'Birds of Feather', and the third book, 'A Long Lane', continue the story. Bella does not fall for John, but through kindly Boffin's contrivances she undergoes great changes. She goes from being obsessed with money to learning to appreciate other aspects in life than economic wealth, and she falls for her suitor under his false name. The fourth book, 'A Turning' is also the final book. Eventually Bella learns of John's true identity, and the villainous one-legged Silas Wegg's plot to blackmail Mr. Boffin is brought to light. There is also

¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (New York: Oxford U. P., 1998), p. ix. Quotations from *Our Mutual Friend* are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the text.

a sub-plot involving Eugene Wrayburn and his love for Lizzie Hexam, and his rival Bradley Headstone's attempt to murder him. The two plots are only really connected through the waterside murders, but they allow Dickens to indulge in an extremely socially diverse cast of characters. The River Thames and the dust-heaps from which old Harmon made his fortune are emblems of time and money. This symbolism runs through the novel and also colours the humour and violence in Dickens.

Miss Jenny Wren

Neatly woven in between the intrigues at Boffin's Bower and the social events at the Veneerings, is the story of the doll's dressmaker Jenny Wren and her father. Jenny Wren is first introduced through the eyes of Lizzie Hexam's brother Charley:

A parlour door within a small entry stood open, and disclosed a child – a dwarf – a girl – a something – sitting on a little low old-fashioned arm-chair, which had a kind of little working bench before it. [...] The queer little figure, and the queer but not ugly face, with its bright grey eyes, were so sharp, that the sharpness of the manner seemed unavoidable. (222)

Miss Wren is a child, in the narrator's guess she is about the age of twelve. But she is not a child in the normal sense of the word, and just how far Jenny is removed from her childhood is demonstrated in a number of ways. She has assumed the role of an adult. She repeatedly complains about her physical health, in particular her 'bad back and her queer legs' (222). This condition segregates her from the other children in the neighbourhood who are in the habit of teasing and tormenting her, and is also the reason why she reacts with anger when Bradley Headstone asks her about the neighbouring children:

‘Don’t talk of children. I can’t bear children. I know their tricks and their manners.’ She said this with an angry little shake of her right fist close before her eyes. [...] ‘Always running about and screeching, always playing and fighting, always skip-skip-skiping on the pavement and chalking it for their games! Oh! I know their tricks and their manners!’ (224)

These first descriptions of Jenny Wren are likely to cause some confusion in the reader. One responds to the tragic nature of Miss Wren’s unfortunate life with pity and horror, but also with amusement created through the comic aspects of this character. The tragic content presented in a comic manner results in a clash between seemingly incompatible reactions such as horror and laughter. The reader will be divided in his response to these passages. It can be regarded as an outrage to the moral sense, or one can treat it as a joke and decide that the passage is more funny than horrifying. In both cases, this is a defence mechanism which suggests that we are trying to escape the discomforts of the grotesque.

In order to understand Jenny Wren, one must also take her father into consideration. Dickens recognizes the harshness of Jenny’s behaviour towards her father, yet he wants the reader to sympathize with her in spite of it. Jenny’s scolding of her father as he comes home illustrates the point:

To which the person of the house, stretching out her arm in an attitude of command, replied with irresponsive asperity: ‘Go along with you! Go along into your corner! Get into your corner directly!’ The wretched spectacle made as if he would have offered some remonstrance; but not venturing to resist the person of the house, thought better of it, and went and sat down on a particular chair of disgrace. (240)

Jenny Wren is ‘the person of the house’ (222), as Dickens keeps on repeating throughout the novel. But if she is the person of the house, her father by definition is not ‘the person of the house.’ In fact it seems he has long since ceased to be remotely human. Dickens’s description of Mr. Dolls is more that of a whipped dog

than anything human. Like an angry parent, she makes him empty his pockets and turn over what money he has left, and then sends him to bed without supper (242). The border between beast and man fades out, and Mr. Dolls is reduced more or less to just a physical presence without a mind or will of his own, almost assuming the role of an animal.

The reversal of roles is in many ways a classic feature of the grotesque. The abnormal nature of the grotesque is responsible for the condemnation of the grotesque as uncivilized and offensive.

Jenny's treatment of her 'child' seems excessive and abusive, but it is a learned behaviour. She imaginatively transforms her father into her child in order to provide the moral authority she needs to scold him. She has been brought up by alcoholics, and tries her best the only way she knows. She has had to learn her parenting skills somewhere, and Dickens offers an indirect look into another aspect of Jenny's earlier years by reflecting them in Jenny's treatment of her father. James R. Kincaid argues that 'Jenny's pathetic perversion of sexes and ages, of life and death, indicates how terribly difficult it is to find affection in this world.'² Her bizarre behaviour makes Charley Hexam ask his sister: 'How came you to get into such company as that little witch's?' (227). His choice of words reveals his feelings towards Jenny, but Lizze Hexam explains to Charley that:

'The child's father is employed by the same house that employs me; that's how I came to know it, Charley. The father is like his own father, a weak, wretched, trembling creature, falling to pieces, never sober. The mother is dead. This poor ailing little creature has come to be what she is, surrounded by drunken people from her cradle – if she ever had one, Charley.' (227)

² Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1971), p. 223.

In light of this new information, Jenny's behaviour appears a little less monstrous. A cradle is not the only thing Jenny has never had. Surrounded by alcoholic adults for the first twelve years of her life, she has never had a childhood. The tragic circumstances concerning Miss Jenny Wren's upbringing and current life are as bizarre as they are abnormal. The character we just laughed at is now described in another light, and the feeling which was laughter at the ludicrous and eccentric has now suddenly changed into horror, disgust and sadness. Even more striking than this technique of repetition with a difference is the negative tendency of much of the humour. The humour is deeply aggressive, seeking primarily not so much to protect our natural goodness as to mend our darker and more hidden sides. It is a violent humour of rejection. The laughter evoked by *Our Mutual Friend* is not pushed towards compassion or terror so much as towards disgust. Dickens's description of Mr. Dolls's death as he wanders, like other drunks, to Covent Garden Market, is a good example. He is seized with a fit, dies, and is carried to Jenny's home where 'in the midst of the dolls with no speculation in their eyes, lay Mr. Dolls with no speculation in his' (731). Jenny's physical condition is also a metaphor for her life with an alcoholic father. She is a cripple with a crippled past.

Bradley Headstone

This analysis of Bradley Headstone will deal with the moral descent from man to beast. I will show how Headstone through grotesque actions deteriorates, and how Dickens masterfully describes his decline.

From being master of the boy's department of a school on the borders of Kent and Surrey, Bradley Headstone stoops to the lowest level of humanity by attempting murder, thus metaphorically becoming a beast. The tormented

schoolmaster plays a most important in the grotesque machinery of the novel as his last name indicates he belongs in a graveyard. He is the master of a school where Charlie Hexam becomes his pupil. Bradley Headstone rises from humble origins, and Dickens calls him a ‘highly certificated stipendiary schoolmaster’ (216). Like Charley Hexam he wants to cast off his past and rise in society. Headstone has moved upward from the working to the middle class by attending elementary schools, and has become a teacher within the system. Headstone ‘had acquired mechanically a great store of teacher’s knowledge’ (217). He sees school as an institution where education is a mechanical process. This is one of Dickens’s major concerns, and Grahame Smith argues that the government’s non-interference in education was ‘perhaps the most passionately held of all Dickens’s causes.’³

Headstone’s strong class consciousness enables him to look down on the lower class from which he has parted, but he also feels jealousy towards the upper class in which he will never be accepted. This becomes most apparent in the love triangle involving himself, Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam. Bradley Headstone finds himself in a dilemma where he on the one side is attracted to Lizzie, but on the other holds her in contempt because of her lower-class status. His marriage proposal is in many ways patronizing because of his one-sided confession, and Lizzie’s decline to accept his proposal unleashes in him a fierce jealousy towards Eugene (397). This jealousy also comes from Bradley Headstone’s sense of inferiority. Headstone knows Eugene’s advantageous

³ Grahame Smith, ‘The life and times of Charles Dickens’, *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2001), p. 14.

position both in love and in society. His downfall springs from his moral corruption because of his almost paranoid concern with class and respectability.

The night of Headstone's proposal is described as:

On such an evening, when the City grit gets into the hair and eyes and skin, and when the fallen leaves of the few unhappy city trees grind down in corners under wheels of wind, the schoolmaster and the pupil emerged upon the Leadenhall Street region, spying eastward for Lizzie. Being something too soon in their arrival, they lurked at a corner, waiting for her to appear. The best-looking among us will not look very well, lurking at a corner, and Bradley came out of that disadvantage very poorly indeed. (393)

Dickens's description of the scene contains several negative connotations, and the reader senses that this does not bode well for Headstone's marriage proposal. The lurking of Bradley like a predator on a prey is frightening and displays him more as a beast than man. Dickens then disarms the situation by introducing the element of amusement in Bradley's lurking and displaying him in a humorous way.

Headstone's jealousy and obsession with Wrayburn now leads to the stalking of him every night. Wrayburn, who has become aware of Headstone's activity, tells his friend Mortimer Lightwood that:

'Then soberly and plainly, Mortimer, I goad the schoolmaster to madness. I make the schoolmaster so ridiculous, and so aware of being made ridiculous, that I see him chafe and fret at every pore when we cross one another.' (542)

The situation has been reversed, and the hunter has now become the hunted. Wrayburn has turned the situation to his advantage, and now makes great efforts to torment the already tormented Bradley Headstone:

‘Having made sure of his watching me, I tempt him on, all over London. One night I go east, another night north, in a few nights I go all round the compass. Sometimes, I walk; sometimes, I proceed in cabs, draining the pocket of the schoolmaster who then follows in cabs. I study and get up abstruse No Thoroughfares in the course of the day. With Venetian mystery I seek those No Thoroughfares at night, glide into them by means of dark courts, tempt the schoolmaster to follow, turn suddenly, and catch him before he can retreat. Then we face one another, and I pass him as unaware of his existence, and he undergoes grinding torments.’ (542)

This is the game of cat and mouse, and again beastly behaviour wipes out the borders between man and beast. The grotesque behaviour causes the reader to reflect on whether this is horrifying, amusing or both. Wrayburn’s torment of the madly jealous Headstone is an act of evil and much like torture, but still we find it amusing and justify it because of Headstone’s actions.

Although Wrayburn enjoys toying with Headstone, he does not fully understand the fierceness of the other man’s jealousy. Headstone is willing to commit the ultimate crime: murder. Rogue Riderhood is well aware of the escalating tensions between Wrayburn and Headstone, and plans to use this knowledge to procure money from Headstone in exchange for information about Wrayburn’s movements. Ultimately Riderhood proves the far greater and deadlier enemy to Headstone than Wrayburn.

Bradley Headstone’s attempted murder of Eugene Wrayburn is described through the eyes of Wrayburn, and thus does not reveal Headstone’s feelings at that exact moment. The grotesque act of the murder attempt is committed by a mentally unstable man blinded by jealousy. The ability to reason is what separates us from animals, and Headstone has descended to the lowest level and lost his humanity. The torment he endures once he realises that his attempt at murdering his rival has failed, and only resulted in bringing the latter and Lizzie Hexam together, proves too much for him to bear. In his inquiry after Lizzie he discovers

that all is ruined, and falls into a seizure. The torments he undergoes after the discovery are:

First, he had to bear the combined weight of the knowledge of what he had done, of that haunting reproach that he might have done it so much better, and of the dread of discovery. This was load enough to crush him, and he laboured under it day and night. It was heavy on him in his scanty sleep, as in his red-eyed waking hours. It bore him down with a dread unchanging monotony, in which there was not a moment's variety. (791)

The first line in the quotation indicates that he has a conscience and feels remorse for his evil deed, but all he is really remorseful for is the fact that he hasn't done his job properly. He loathes himself and dreads being discovered as the attacker, as well as feeling malcontent because of his unsuccessful attack. The grotesque mentality on display causes the reader to experience relief and perhaps even delight in Headstone's torments, as one feels a certain degree of justice in his suffering.

Headstone's end is now in sight as Riderhood is determined to blackmail him for all he is worth. Although Headstone previously pursued Wrayburn, in an ironic twist of fate, now Headstone is the individual being pursued by Riderhood. It is this frightening revelation that forces Headstone to see the horrifying reality of his existence. He cannot escape Riderhood, and realises that the only means of escape is death. Thus he becomes the victim of his own crime, dragging Riderhood with him.

Gaffer Hexam, Mr. Venus and Silas Wegg

Because of their shared grotesque features, I have chosen to analyse these characters in one sub-chapter rather than to treat them separately. The twisted parallel of honest work versus villainous fraud summed up in a flesh – money

equation will be the main focus here. The obsessive search for money is the main motivation for these characters, and can be compared to that of a drug addict's search for drugs. Michael Hollington argues that:

Money is the opium of the Victorian middle classes, and the [...] consequences of addiction to it are grotesque visions that far outstrip those procured by any individual addict.⁴

Gaffer Hexam's livelihood, as we see in the novel's grotesque opening scene, consists of dragging corpses out of the river, taking their money and claiming the reward offered for them. When accused of being a robber, he justifies himself by answering:

Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? T'other world. What world does money belong to? This world. How can money be a corpse's? Can a corpse own it, want it, claim it, miss it? (4)

Kincaid states that: 'This passage not only establishes the main theme of the novel but also implies that there is one gigantic illusion – money – which is exposed by the one firm reality – death.'⁵ While fishing corpses out of the fast-flowing Thames in order to get to their pockets, Gaffer Hexam makes sharp reference to the limits of earthly possession. Gaffer is attached to the dirty water of the commercial river because of his dirty livelihood. The parallel to the fishing business is striking, and the grotesque fishing done by Gaffer makes the reader experience feelings of horror or disgust. Something very strange and even ludicrous is made so abnormal that our laughter at the ludicrous turns to horror. Hexam uses dead bodies as a commodity valued at a certain amount. He puts a

⁴ Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (Kent: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 232.

⁵ Kincaid, p. 223.

prize on death. But Dickens does not treat this scene solely as disgusting. After Gaffer's argument with Riderhood where he distinguishes his honest robbery of the dead from that of stealing from the living, he: 'Compos [es] himself into the easy attitude of one who had asserted the high moralities and taken an unassailable position' (5). Kincaid comments that:

The combination of amusement and horror acts to expel not only his occupation, but his method: the creation of self-serving and meaningless distinctions, the hollow smugness, the selfishness which alienates him from his 'partner' and his daughter, and from any sane conception of reality.⁶

The scene causes the reader to laugh at Gaffer because he is set in an absurd situation. Gaffer feels he stands on a morally higher ground than his 'partner', but anyone can see that he does not. The amusement derives from his naïve and childish behaviour.

The most striking examples of the body as commodity in the novel is in the taxidermist Mr. Venus's shop. His name is a grotesque symbol of love, and he is a grotesque artist. His shop is one hideous extended metaphor of the flesh – money equation, with human molars in the drawer among the halfpence, and the partially assembled skeleton of a French gentleman in the corner.

'Bones, wariou. Skulls, wariou. Preserved Indian baby. African ditto. Bottled preparations, wariou. Everything within reach of your hand, in good preservation. The mouldy ones a-top. What's in those hampers over them again, I don't quite remember. Say, human wariou. Cats. Articulated English baby. Dogs. Ducks. Glass eye, wariou. Mummied bird. Dried cuticle, wariou.' (81)

Mr Venus refers to the human remains as he would refer to groceries in a grocery store. His wide selection of grotesques such as preserved babies in glass jars and

⁶ Kincaid, p. 231.

hampers that he labels with a rather unfavourable indifference as ‘human wariou’s’, produce a sense of horror in the reader. When babies, the most innocent and pure of all human creatures, are taken advantage of even in death, displayed for entertainment in the horror cabinet, and used purely for economic reasons, all common sense and reason warns us that this is an unholy act. Some things are too important to be tampered with, such as the death of a baby. But, as we have seen, a classic reaction to the grotesque is the experience of disgust and amusement, horror and laughter, at the same time.⁷ With Mr. Venus’s shop, Dickens takes his recurrent theme of dust as wealth into the realm of human garbage, and shows humans literally turned into objects to be exchanged for profit in the money-driven society.

Hollington states that Mr. Venus and Silas Wegg ‘might also be seen as amongst the most brilliant exhibits of Dickens’s grotesque art.’⁸ He furthermore argues about Mr. Venus’s grim collection:

The rhetoric is familiar, too, and the language – ‘grim’ and ‘ridiculous’, especially in tandem, by now regular synonyms for the grotesque. The grotesque, embodied in Venus’s shop, expressing itself there in a humour as wild and disturbing as anything in Dickens’s work [...], is a benchmark for the grimly ludicrous horrors of Victorian bourgeois society.⁹

Silas Wegg, the villain hired by Boffin in order to have someone read to him, has taken the flesh – money equation a step further. He has commodified himself by selling his amputated leg to Mr. Venus for a few pounds, to be included in one of Venus’s reassembled skeletons. Wegg has not given up his leg entirely, and when he falls in with the saintly Boffin and gets a bit of money, the first thing he

⁷ Thomson, pp. 24 – 25.

⁸ Hollington, p. 233.

⁹ Hollington, p. 236.

does is go to Mr Venus, who purchased and preserved the limb, in order to buy it back.

‘I have a prospect of getting on in life and elevating myself by my own independent exertions,’ says Wegg, feelingly, ‘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.’ (82)

His absurd pretensions to collect himself only serve to throw his coarseness into relief. *Our Mutual Friend* captures contemporary society through a single metaphor of waste. Wegg’s improvement in fortunes depends upon the Golden Dustman, Boffin, whose inheritance of a series of ‘dust heaps’, huge piles of waste, links the symbolic words of ‘wealth’ and ‘filth’. Wegg’s leg is the metaphor, and the reader sees the body itself as waste, a sort of rubbish. Wegg may assemble the various components of his body, but he lacks the vital coherence to do anything more than holding on to it. He can not re-attach the leg to his body, and this is a source of humour. Venus’s attempt at referring to the incident with his wooden leg in a delicate manner is so grotesque that it is hilarious. Wegg still refers to the lost leg as ‘me’, and wants to know ‘his’ value. Mr. Venus answers:

‘[...] you might turn out valuable yet, as a –’ here Mr. Venus takes a gulp of tea, so hot that it makes him choke, and sets his weak eyes watering: ‘as a Monstrosity, if you’ll excuse me.’ (82)

Wegg’s attempt to blackmail Boffin is also one of the novel’s more humorous episodes. Kincaid argues that:

The commercial society, of which Wegg is both an extension and a symbol, is largely based on the hallucination of money, and our clarifying laughter works to expel that society.¹⁰

¹⁰ Kincaid, p. 227.

Wegg's manipulation of the reality of the naïve Mr. Boffin shows the reader that *he* is in fact the one out of touch with reality, and our laughter exposes the illusion. Wegg is actually blackmailing the wrong man, and the hallucination of money reflects Wegg's actions.

Eugene Wrayburn

The character Eugene Wrayburn is also mentioned in the sub-chapter on Bradley Headstone, but I find it necessary to explore this character in more detail. This discussion will deal explicitly with the relationship between Lizzie and Eugene. Eugene's love for Lizzie Hexam makes him want to prove his good-heartedness, but they are separated by social class. Eugene helps Lizzie become educated, but not without self-interest. When she flees from his advances, partly due to his idleness, he is thrown back on his old self. He is a careless person, and Jenny Wren recognises this when he 'casually' tries to persuade her to tell him where Lizzie is hiding: 'I think of setting up a doll, Miss Jenny,' he says (238). Jenny's snappish reply is: 'If you want one, go and buy one at the shop' (532). This seemingly innocent question receives a harsh answer, but this shows the reader that Jenny understands the implication. To 'set up a girl' is an analogy for paying for a prostitute at a brothel.¹¹ The grotesque idea of persuading a young girl to give in to her feelings for the satisfaction of his lust, and thus lose all honour, reveals Eugene as a selfish and egoistical person who cares little for others as long as he gets his will. Despite all of his previous good intentions, he is now revealed as a

¹¹ Brian Cheadle, 'The late novels', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, p. 88.

villain who wants to take advantage of her. Lizzie tells Eugene that ‘Think of me, as belonging to another station, and quite cut off from you in honour’ (693). Eugene is far superior to Lizzie, but now realises that Lizzie also understands the consequences of them uniting. Her value lies in her honour, and the dispersing of this honour could lead to ruin. She can not give in to her feelings. Eugene finds himself in a dilemma. As he expresses it: ‘Out of the question to marry her, [...] out of the question to leave her’ (698). The only option left is seduction. Eugene moves toward something evil with ‘wicked’ thoughts, but the whole thing is pre-empted by Headstone’s murderous attack (698).

The involvement with a person from a low social class such as Lizzie’s could have a huge effect and socially entrap Eugene. His power over Lizzie is enormous, and he enjoys this power in the role as the seducer: ‘Yet I have gained a wonderful power over her, too, let her be in earnest as she will’ (696) The grotesque and cruel act he performs when he forces Lizzie to admit her love for him has been called a prefigured rape by Brian Cheadle:¹²

There was something in the attitude of her whole figure as he supported it, and she hung her head, which besought him to be merciful and not force her to disclose her heart. He was not merciful with her, and he made her do it. (695)

Eugene weeps after Lizzie leaves, but he resents his tears and justifies his actions by stating to himself that: ‘She must go through with her nature, as I must go through with mine’ (696). Instead of leaving her alone as she requested, he resolves to seek her up again and not give up on his seduction. He shuts himself off from decency, but in a twist of fate he is ‘saved’ from himself by the attack of

¹² Cheadle, p. 89.

Bradley Headstone. This grotesque 'remedy' causes Eugene to sort out his priorities, and on the brink of death he marries Lizzie who is rewarded for her heroic rescue as well as for her firmness. Kincaid states that:

Their marriage ceremony, conducted on the edge of death, is the perfect symbol of his comic rebirth, a rebirth which assaults the old society by the creation of a new and competing one.¹³

The comic detachment he has attained is eliminated when he is almost killed and dumped in the slimy water of the river. The fact that this causes him to marry the daughter of a corpse-catcher is thus the ultimate symbol of grotesque humour.

Concluding Remarks

Our Mutual Friend is as filled with grotesque characters as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*. As in *Great Expectations*, the obsessive search for money enables Dickens to play with the grotesque.

In this novel, the reader experiences a feeling that sentimentality in the end wins over the grotesque. The fact that Silas Wegg is revealed as a villain, and Bradley Headstone dies, suggests that justice have prevailed. The sentimental parts of the plot, involving the relationship of Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn, end happily as the two marries.

¹³ Kincaid, p. 244

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This dissertation has examined grotesque characters in *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens's later novels are darker than his earlier work, but return to some of the same political and social concerns. Dickens creates lots of room for grotesque characters in these novels, and in conclusion I would like to consider the differences and similarities between them.

A Tale of Two Cities is a novel with plots, subplots and a variety of characters. The characters I have chosen to return to in this chapter are those that in my opinion best display various grotesque features. The grotesqueness of situations, dialogue and mentality figures prominently, and are very important to the novel because it gives the reader an emotional relationship to the characters. The grotesque mentality present is in many ways even more grotesque than physical grotesqueness. We feel empathy for the oppressed, mainly presented through the Manettes and Charles Darnay, and we detest the French aristocracy, mainly presented by Monsieur the Marquis. But as the plot unfolds, our sympathy somewhat shifts as the oppressed become the oppressors and reveal grotesque features such as extreme bloodlust and a thirst for vengeance, mainly portrayed in Madame Defarge and her accomplices. Told through the trials and hardship of the Manette family, the grotesque figures prominently in the. Thomson argues that the grotesque is extravagant and that it has an element of extremeness about it, and the reader experiences disgust and amusement, laughter and horror simultaneously.¹

¹ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque: The Critical Idiom* (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 22-24.

Situations arise where reactions of both laughter and fear are evoked. The main role of the grotesque in *A Tale of Two Cities* is to display the horror of the revolution, but to do so with the help of comical elements. The grotesque is easily recognisable as it is often physically manifested in actions.

In *Great Expectations*, the reader is likely to find Pip's fate fulfilled. Earlier in his life, he changed from an innocent, caring boy into an arrogant young man as a result of his unrealistic hopes and expectations. However, when those expectations come to an end, so do his undesirable traits, as he is shown to be a truly good-hearted person. The grotesque figures prominently in this novel, although it has a more internal function than in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The element of bewildering and disorienting the reader and making him confront the world with a different perspective, can be summed up as 'alienation.'² The familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing. This has to do with the fundamental conflict within the character of the grotesque and the placing of familiar elements in a disturbing light.

Whether the effect of the grotesque is liberating is open to discussion, but in Thomson's analysis of the difficult role of the comic in the grotesque, he first argues that laughter at the grotesque is not 'free', and that the horrifying aspect cuts across our amusement. Then he argues that it can also be the other way around: our response to the horrifying may be undercut by our appreciation of the comic side of the grotesque.³ The role of the grotesque in this novel is to cause a reaction in the reader, and to participate in the emotional rollercoaster Pip. As a

² Thomson, p. 59.

³ Thomson, p. 59.

contrast to *A Tale of Two Cities*, the grotesque has a more internal function in *Great Expectations*. Instead of having a very physical presence, the grotesque is concentrated to the minds of the characters.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens is at his most dark and pessimistic. This is seen in the violent negative tendencies in much of the humour. It is in many ways more aggressive and seeks away with corruption. This violent humour is that of rejection, and it pushes the reader towards disgust rather than terror or compassion. The theme of money is central, but the novel is, even more so, an attack on egoism. Kincaid goes so far as to say that:

The old society has erected a system of camouflages and substitutes which makes love impossible and which turns the joy of life into a hysterical delusion, symbolized by the mad search for money.⁴

The plot of *Our Mutual Friend* is in certain ways a reworking of *Great Expectations* where material success is at the core of the novel. Opportunistic and grotesque behaviour describes the characters in this novel, and the plot evolves around the actions of these characters. The story is set in the city with its peculiar modernity.

Everywhere, those not speculating or trading in purchasable identities – the vast majority who are not falsely presuming to realize great expectations – are subjects to its routines, or caught up in an improvisational economy of survival.⁵

The grotesque search for money as the ultimate solution to all problems in the novel is Dickens's way of performing a social analysis of his contemporary

⁴ James R. Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1971), p. 230.

⁵ Brian Cheadle, 'The late novels', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2001), pp. 86-87.

society. A search for money is not necessarily grotesque, but the length some of the characters are willing to go shows that they will do anything, even commit murder and sell off parts of their own bodies. As a contrast to *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, the grotesque figures prominently at both the mental and physical level in *Our Mutual Friend*. Eugene Wrayburn's grotesque mental tormenting of Bradley Headstone leads to Headstone's grotesque physical attack on Wrayburn. Also Silas Wegg's grotesque mentality in his action of physically selling his amputated leg confirms this notion.

In these three novels we are presented with numerous different grotesque characters. The theme of social difference and injustice is easily recognisable in both *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, and the theme of obsessive search for money is easily recognisable in both *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. The resurrection theme figures prominently in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Our Mutual Friend*, and as these novels have several similarities thematically, there are several similarities between grotesque characters as well.

The characters Jerry Cruncher and Gaffer Hexam both make a living out of death. Their grotesque scavenging for corpses sets the tone early in both *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Jerry Cruncher unearths bodies in the graveyard while Gaffer Hexam fishes bodies out of the water. Both activities are performed at night. As Cruncher sells the bodies to doctors for medical experiments, Hexam first robs the corpses of anything valuable before claiming the reward for them. This grotesque way of profiting from death draws a clear parallel between grotesque characters in these two novels.

Another example of this similarity is the parallel between the struggle of Madame Defarge and Monsieur de Marquis's family (Darnay and the Manette's),

and Bradley Headstone and Eugene Wrayburn. Both Defarge and Headstone are driven by their hate and their grotesque need for revenge. They both fight against people with a higher social class than themselves, and the conflict has arisen because of this class difference. Monsieur de Marquis and his brother had the power to rape and murder Madame Defarge's sister, father and brother because of their high social class. Defarge and Headstone display a striking similarity both in mentality and fate. As Headstone plans his murderous attack on Wrayburn, so does Defarge plot in her own way by attempting to drag the Manettes to the guillotine. They also falls victims to their own crimes. As Madame Defarge is shot by her own gun by Miss Pross, so does Bradley Headstone die in his murder/suicide alongside Rogue Riderhood.

There are also similarities between Madame Defarge, Miss Havisham, and Bradley Headstone. The main thing is that they are all driven by hate and revenge, and the similarities are the forces that drive them. This analysis will concentrate on clarifying the grotesque drive in these characters. As Miss Havisham wants to avenge her heart, she is willing to go to extreme lengths to gain satisfaction, much as Madame Defarge and Bradley Headstone. But unlike them, her struggle is not rooted in class difference, it is about gender, and she has not such a craving for blood as the two others.

Grotesque healing is a common feature of all three novels. Sidney Carton's healing, by willingly replacing Charles Darnay in the line for the guillotine, echoes throughout the two other novels. He heals himself by dying, knowing his death will save the Manettes. Similarly, Mrs. Gargery changes from being violent to being a likeably and easygoing woman. The change is a result of Orlick's attack on her, knocking her violently on the head. This grotesque remedy also includes

Eugene Wrayburn. His advances towards Lizzie Hexam prove resultless, and his sneaky resolution to seduce her and trick her into ruin is both grotesque and vicious. His change derives a result of Headstone's attack. He is violently knocked on the head and dumped in the water. He survives because Lizzie saves him, and he finally decides to do the honourable thing and marry her. These bloody 'remedies' are grotesque because they all involve violent physical attacks, and they all somehow change the characters for the better.

Sidney Carton and Eugene Wrayburn also display another similarity. They both drift around with a feeling of no purpose and a sense of life without meaning. This changes when they decide to take a stand and choose love in order to give meaning to their lives. As Carton chooses to die for his love Lucie Manette, Wrayburn realises that life is not worth living without his love Lizzie Hexam.

One can also argue that there is a grotesque similarity between the upbringing of Jenny Wren and Pip. Their upbringing is filled with hardship. Jenny Wren has a parent, but the roles are reversed and she has assumed the role of the parent. Pip is raised 'by hand', meaning both bottle-fed and abused by a sister who has assumed a male role.

The last parallel to be discussed in this dissertation is that between Headstone and Cruncher. Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend* has a name that is associated with a graveyard, and Jerry Cruncher, whose name is also associated with bone crunching, steals corpses from graveyards.

The grotesque characters in these novels are in my opinion one of the main reasons for their massive popularity. The reader involves himself emotionally just as much today as 150 years ago, much because of these characters. The anger towards Monsieur de Marquis, the sympathy towards the Manettes, the disgust

towards Miss Havisham and the horror of Jerry Cruncher's nocturnal job, are only some of the timeless emotions Dickens arise with his grotesque characters.

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