Reitaku University Journal Vol. 95. December 2012

Dickens and The Literary City:

A Study of London as Stage and Protagonist in Charles Dickens` Works.

Neil Matthew Addison

Abstract: *This paper seeks to discuss Charles Dickens' literary depiction of the city of London, and its effect upon his protagonists. Dickens` London provides the vocational setting for many of his characters, affording him the chance to illustrate the hard conditions endured by the city`s working population. His characters also draw much from pantomime and theatre, often resembling stage caricatures set against the backdrop of London. However, the city is more than just a stage or setting in Dickens` texts; often presented as a great immoral hub of activity which determines the fate of those living within its environs. Many characters trapped within its confines are subjected to exploitation, whilst others are depicted as inhuman, viewing the world purely in economic terms of profit and loss. This paper will also discuss how Dickens employs rural surroundings as a favourable counterpoint to that of London, whilst examining how on many occasions the contamination which the city precipitates proves too strong for Dickens` characters to evade. Finally this paper will conclude with an examination of Dickens*

proffered remedy; moralistic characters who attempt to aid or rejuvenate those contaminated by the ills of the city.

Key Words: English Literature, Victorian England, Industrialization.

1. Introduction.

London is a writer's city, and the history of English literature is rich in literary reflections of the British capital, from Shakespeare to Pepys, Defoe and Boswell. Shakespeare`s *Henry V* lamented "Would that I were in an alehouse in London" (Wells, 1998:3.2.13) whilst Pepys celebrated the lively streets of 17th century London in his diaries. London also provided the inspiration and the setting for the novels of Charles Dickens, and the young writer noted in *Sketches by Boz* what "inexhaustible food for speculation do the streets of London afford" (Dickens, 1999:58). The novelist documented the city in his sketches, and employed it as a canvas in his novels, following in a long tradition of writers that have relayed the excitement of London life. However, London has also been depicted throughout the history of English literature as a centre of pollution, sickness, squalor and poverty. During Shakespeare`s time the streets of London were narrow, cobbled and slippery with the slime of refuse (Burgess, 1970:71). Whilst Pepys documented his life as a bon vivant, he was also the chronicler of plague ridden London, recording in his diaries the "melancholy" of "so many poor sick people in the streets" (Latham, 1978:91) as the rich and affluent fled to the countryside. Defoe imagined the horrors of the plague ridden

city in his *Journal of the Plague Year*, describing "sadness and sorrow sat upon every face" (Defoe, 1966:37). By the mid 19th century, Dickens` London was the city of pollution, cholera and the Great Stink (Barker & Jackson, 1983:279) and the mature novelist referred to the city as a "vile place" during one of his trips to the capital (Schwarzbach, 1979:14). Whilst the young writer had delighted in the inexhaustible food of speculation that London offered, the older novelist described how living away from London had engendered a change in his perception towards it, observing that "Whenever I come back from the country now, and see that great canopy lowering over the house tops, I wonder what on earth I do there" (14). This change in perception towards London was also reflected in his novels, where London was juxtaposed unfavourably against the charms of the countryside. In *David Copperfield*, his semi-autobiographical protagonist returns to the capital from a cathartic period of rest in Switzerland, remarking that he had seen "more fog and mud in a minute than I had seen in a year" (Dickens, 2004:825), whilst in *Bleak House* Dickens employs financial terminology to describe the mud and soot "'accumulating at compound interest" (Dickens, 1996:13), linking the growing filth of the city with the economic value system of monetary gain and greed which was accompanying it. In depicting the city as a metaphor for vice and sin, Dickens followed in a tradition of radical writers and poets such as Cobbett, Blake and Wordsworth who depicted London as the catalyst for selfishness and corruption.

This paper seeks to discuss Dickens` depiction of the city, and its effect upon his characters, whilst also discussing London`s position in Dickens` texts as a protagonist itself. London provided the vocational setting for many of his characters, allowing him to depict and highlight the

injustices suffered by the working poor. Some of Dickens` most famous literary creations were also influenced by characters from the theatre and pantomime. Boswell argued that for the dramatic enthusiast London could be employed as "the grand scene of theatrical entertainments" (Barker & Jackson, 1983:1), and in Dickens` novels the city is employed as a dramatic theatrical stage. However, London is more than a theatre stage in Dickens` texts; it is often presented as a great immoral centre of activity which appears on occasions to take on a life of its own and determine the fate of those living within its environs. Those characters trapped within its mechanisms are often subjected to vocational or sexual exploitation, whilst other characters are depicted as being concerned solely with the chase for money and vocational success.

2. The City as Workplace.

London provided the vocational setting for many of Dickens` protagonists, affording him the chance to highlight the privations suffered by those working in its warehouses and factories. By the late 18th century the industrial revolution had ushered in a factory system which divided labour into distinct geographical and economic factions; those who lived scattered around the countryside and those who clustered closely around the city factories (Parker & Reid,1972:99). The Oxford historian Frederick York Powell wrote that "The English people never, by any plague, or famine, or war, suffered such a deadly blow at its vitality as by the establishment of the factory system" (Briggs, 1983:185). Particularly extreme inequalities in wealth and class existed between those who inhabited concentrated areas of urban population such as the capital. In London rich and poor lived close beside one another, and a stone's

throw from the affluent Strand laid courts and passages filled with rubbish and excrement, while hideous slums made up a substantial part of the metropolis (Chesney, 1972:5). Those without money enough to inhabit slum lodgings were forced to sleep in the streets, and by the turn of the 19th century Patrick Colquhoun, an enlightened police magistrate, estimated that there were over 20,000 people living homeless in London (Mitchell & Leys, 1963:295). However, these social inequalities gave birth to a growing radical literature, exemplified by the texts of Thomas Paine, Joseph Priestley and William Cobbett. In *Rural Rides*, Cobbett juxtaposed London unfavourably with the countryside (Cobbett, 1961), whilst referring to the capital pejoratively as "the Wen" (Mitchell & Leys, 1963:294). Cobbett was instrumental in creating a radical English culture and Thompson notes that Cobbett bludgeoned his readers with radical pamphlets, until "men were talking and arguing like Cobbett all over the land" (Thompson, 1968:824). Poets articulated this talk in literature, and Wordsworth, in his poem *London* described England as "a fen of stagnant waters" (Wordsworth, 1996:276:lls.2-3), in contrast to the flowers of rural Windermere which gave "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" (281:ll.206). William Blake observed in "every face" he encountered upon the London streets "marks of weakness, marks of woe" (Blake, 1996:73:ll.3-4), which bore the hallmarks of the stark inequalities encountered in the city.

One of the greatest evils in Cobbet`s wen was sweated labour in all its myriad forms (Mitchell & Leys, 1963:290) and the young Dickens` arrival in London corresponded with his personal experience of this. Following his father`s arrest and imprisonment, Dickens found himself abandoned and underfed in London, eventually being employed as a

laboring hind in a blacking factory (Wilson, 1972:52). The blacking warehouse period was documented in the semi-autobiographical *David Copperfield* as “a period of my life which I can never lose remembrance of” (Dickens, 2004:161). The experience was to have a profound and lasting effect on Dickens` life that many years later, in his own words “made me cry” (Wilson, 1972:52) whilst it also influenced his writing and “his passionate regard for the woes of humanity” (292). Dickens’ novels were greatly concerned with the penury and privation endured by the poor of London, and in particular the plight of working children. In *Oliver Twist* Dickens documented the travails of children forced to labor in the workhouses, and chronicled the dangerous lives of the child gangs that roamed the streets working for brutal criminals (Dickens, 1982). In *Bleak House* the child sweeper Jo is the central victim of the novel, being moved ceaselessly from place to place by the police until he eventually dies (Dickens, 1996). In *Sketches by Boz* Dickens laments the fate of a young shop girl forced to work with her “pale face” (Dickens, 1999:60), “sad and pensive in the dim candlelight” (61), whilst also fearing the life of vice she will be forced towards if she is cast out onto the street.

Stark economic inequality ensured that one vocation in particular thrived in Victorian London, as poverty and starvation led an increasing number of girls towards prostitution. Indeed, extraordinary levels of prostitution during the 18th century led Boswell to describe the capital as “the great emporium for ladies of easy virtue” (Barker & Jackson, 1983:1). However, whilst Boswell`s description of London prostitution betrayed a predilection for vice, Dickens established Urania Cottage, a home for fallen girls (Wilson, 1972:96). In his works these fallen girls were personified sympathetically and wretchedly as victims, as in the case of

Nancy, who extends kindness to Oliver, and is brutally murdered by Sykes. The prostitute in *Little Dorrit* is described wretchedly as uttering a "strange wild cry" (Wilson, 1972:96), whilst Martha in *David Copperfield* is denoted by her wretched moaning. Martha is discovered preparing to drown herself in the Thames (Dickens, 2004:686) describing it as "the only thing in the world I am fit for, or that's for me" (687) when she is discovered and saved. Dickens links her with the decaying river of London, describing her as "part of the refuse that it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay" (687). The fallen women of London were analogous to the decomposed, polluted and sickly river of the city, being used by the rich, but discarded and left uncared for (Mitchell & Leys,1963: 271). However, the polluted Thames River produced what became known as the Great Stink, which directly affected Parliament, and ensured that the windows at Westminster had to be draped in chloride of lime to ensure that members could breathe (272). Just as the polluted river water connected the rich and poor of London, so prostitution formed a bond between the poor and respectable in society (Chesney, 1972:363). Blake had observed that the "harlot`s curse blasts the new born infants tear" (Blake, 1996:74:ll.14-15), noting the sinful influence that each generation exercised over the next, and in Dickens` *Oliver Twist* the prostitute Nancy accosts the young Oliver in the street, leading him away from the care of Mr Brownlow. However, in Dickens` novels fallen women are also depicted as resembling a force for good, whilst gaining redemption in the process. Nancy later aids Mr Brownlow in locating Oliver, while it is Martha who leads the search for and saves Little Emily in *David Copperfield*, leading to a new married life in Australia.

In Victorian London, just as prostitutes were shunned by respectable

society, most people were chiefly judged and measured by their vocations, and in Dickens` novels his city characters often view their fellow Londoners by their professional roles. Indeed, his characters are very often portrayed as products, or extensions of the profession or trade they follow, and Hawthorn argues that the personalities of the characters in Dickens novels “become so subdued to this work that they disappear altogether, so what we are left with is a sort of personified job" (Hawthorne, 1987:41). In *Bleak House* Tulkinghorn is depicted as the walking personification of a vocation and Lady Dedlock claims to Esther that Tulkinghorn is “indifferent to everything but his calling" (Dickens, 1996:581). This submergence of the individual into his vocation was argued by Marx to be an inevitable result of capitalism, noting that the more the individual gave, without equivalent, to the capitalist, the less time he could preserve for himself (Marx, 1995:221), and Tulkinghorn is an example in Dickens of how the system has turned a man into his job. Other Dickens characters in *Bleak House* have schizophrenic characteristics, contradicting themselves in the struggle to hold onto their individuality. Coavinses is disliked by his neighbours and is blamed for his calling, although he is presented as carrying out his family responsibilities admirably. Skimpole claims “Don't be ruled by your occupation....We can separate the individual from the pursuit" (Dickens, 1996:97). The dogged Inspector Bucket, who Dickens based on the famously dedicated Inspector Field of Scotland Yard (Chesney, 1972:130), is helpful and friendly enough to avoid arresting George until an un-embarrassing moment. However, Bucket struggles to separate his avuncular character from his bloodhound professionalism and he admits to George “Duty is duty, and friendship is friendship. I never want the two to clash if I can help it” (Dickens, 1996:734). Although Bucket tries to separate his friendship with George from his vocational duties it is clear that,

if he can't help it, friendship will be sacrificed, while, in moving on the child sweeper Jo, Bucket follows his vocational calling rather than his heart. The legal clerk Mr Guppy`s marriage proposal to Esther also follows the language of his vocational calling rather than his heart, as he asks “Would you be so kind as to allow me to file a declaration - to make an offer" (Dickens, 1996:150). Guppy`s speech is enmeshed in legal jargon, losing all sense of emotion and romance, but this inappropriate proposal is arguably the result of Guppy`s social being. Marx had argued that capitalism would not only make demands on men`s time vocationally, but also determine the way men thought and used language, maintaining that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1977:1). This conversational clumsiness is not purely Guppy`s own fault, as he perceives the world in relation to the vocabulary that his legal vocation has given him. This illustrates the intrusion of professional considerations into the lives and minds of Dickens` London characters, turning them into vocational personifications or two dimensional caricatures.

3. The City as Pantomime Stage.

Dickens novels contain a rich and a memorable collection of imagined characters, from pantomime villains, such as Scrooge, and Fagin, to corpulent comic clowns such as Mr. Micawber and Mr. Pickwick. These characters, or caricatures, set against the stage of London, draw much from his love of the theatre and pantomime. For Dickens, the world of the theatre and pantomime was a haven from the ardours of the city, which he often found hideous (Wilson, 1972:38). In *David Copperfield* Dickens

documents the experience of leaving the theatre and stepping out into the London streets, noting how "I felt as if I had come down from the clouds…to a bawling, splashing…muddy, miserable world" (Dickens, 2004:291). This pantomimic influence was employed in his characterization, with London set as the theatre stage upon which his characters acted. The imaginative, atmospheric tales of the *Arabian Nights* and *The Brothers Grimm* also inspired Dickens to interpolate a fairy tale quality into his narratives, and in his narration Dickens often veered into the realms of fantasy or imagination. In *Sketches by Boz* Dickens spies a man in London`s St James Park and begins to construct him as an imaginative caricature, speculating that "there was something in the man`s manner and appearance which told us, we fancied, his whole life" (Dickens, 1999:208). Dickens thus fancies him alternating in comic fashion between reading a newspaper whilst attempting to "eat a bit of beef" (208). However, this approach was also employed by Dickens to bring inanimate objects to life, and this is demonstrated in his description of the London Street stalls that Scrooge passes by in *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens personifies the London street foods as characters, describing the "ruddy, brown faced, broad –girthed, Spanish onions, shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish friars, and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls" (Dickens, 1988:48). Thus Dickens rather remarkably succeeds in giving onions a character, demonstrating his characteristic tendency to bring pantomimic life to both his protagonists and the background London stage they inhabit.

However, for some critics this manner of fantastical characterisation diminished his stature as a serious novelist. Orwell claimed that "he is all fragments, all details – rotten architecture but wonderful gargoyles"

(Orwell, 1970:133), whilst Woolf concluded that "what we remember is the ardour…this man`s nose, that man`s limp" (Woolf, 1947:67). For example, in *David Copperfield* the narrator`s nemesis and alter-ego, Uriah Heep, is depicted as a two dimensional stage villain, with his ghastly writhes, cadaverous face and grisly hands. When David spies Heep sleeping in his London rooms he describes him "lying on his back…gurgling taking place in his throat, stoppages in his nose, and his mouth open like a post office" (Dickens, 2004:391). The passage is pure fairy tale; one imagines sleeping ogres, or a dragon guarding its hoard whilst the hero watches horrified. Heep is depicted grotesquely, personified more as caricature than character. Nevertheless, whilst Dickens believed passionately in the value of pantomime and theatre as entertainment, the fairy tale elements of Dicken`s fiction also resembled the basis for his psychological insights and his social vision (Eigner, 1989:8). This social vision, which included a deep concern for the poor of London, ensured that, as T.A Jackson argued, Dicken`s novels contained caricatures because "Victorian society turned real people into caricatures of themselves" (Hawthorne, 1987:18). Whilst many of Dickens` London characters resembled specific pantomime types, some were also employed for moralistic as well as entertainment purposes, manifesting negative traits which were bound up with life in the city, such as financial greed, villainy, or impecuniousness.

Many of Dickens` London characters served as walking personifications of bad values which the city engendered. In *A Christmas Carol* Ebenezer Scrooge is characterized as a classic pantomime villain, whilst also embodying the personification of a ruthless economic doctrine. The narrator advises us that "he was a tight fisted hand at the grindstone,

Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, clutching, covetous old sinner" (Dickens, 1988:6). From the rhetorical nature of the language Dickens employs, one imagines Scrooge entering the pantomime stage and facing the jeers and catcalls of the audience. However, Scrooge is a pantomime caricature because he is a mechanised representation of the city he lives in. Engels noted that the selfish egotism of London people was symptomatic of the disintegration of society into individuals, which "has been pushed to its fullest limits in London" (Engels, 2000:1704). Human beings had become atomised and estranged from each other due to the compartmentalized living conditions found in London. They could not relate towards one another morally because they no longer knew one another; hence they related towards one another amorally and considered each other in economic terms. Malthus` *Essay on the Principle of Population* had outlined population as a phenomenon which would increase or decrease in response to various factors (Malthus, 1976), and in *A Christmas Carol* Scrooge thinks in similar terms, claiming that the poor must die to "decrease the surplus population" (Dickens, 1988:4). Dickens therefore represented Scrooge as the walking caricature of an economic doctrine where the poor were viewed in dehumanised terms as an expendable surplus. Grandfather Smallweed in *Bleak House* is personified similarly to Scrooge as a villainous pantomime villain who is obsessed with the struggle for money. Marx had seen this brutal economic struggle as another result of capitalism, and argued that it rested "exclusively on competition between the labourers" (Mark,1967:93). For Smallweed, the brutal competition for work and money ensures that friendship cannot exist; a friend is someone to take advantage of in order to improve one`s own financial status. He snarls advice at his grandson, regarding Guppy, to

"Live at his expense as much as you can…that's the use of such a friend. The only use you can put him to" (Dickens, 1996:337). It is evident that Dickens intended the Smallweed family to characterise those in society that had lost all traces of basic humanity and common decency in the brutal acquisitive struggle for economic gain. However, whilst Smallweed is part villain he is also part pantomime clown, throwing cushions at his wife and hurting himself. By juxtaposing the pantomime comedy of Smallweed`s villainous character with his inhuman and myopic doctrine, Dickens successfully illustrates the absurdity of such an economically centred raison d'être.

In Dickens` texts, crime is depicted as an inevitable consequence of selfish economic values, and Wilson argues that "Dickens hammered home the point that crime was the result of the terrible poverty and ignorance in Victorian society" (Wilson, 1972:131). Therefore, the criminal Fagin, in *Oliver Twist*, is depicted in similarly grotesque fashion to the miserly Scrooge and Smallweed, being described as "shrivelled" (Dickens, 1982:50) with a "villainous looking and repulsive face…obscured by a quantity of matted red hair"(50). Other words such as "greasy" and "old" (50) further infuse Fagin with the qualities of a theatrical stage villain. Fagin was a pantomimic representation of a diverse, turbulent and vicious criminal underworld which lay beneath the surface of Victorian London. Slum dwellings, or rookeries which lay sprawled across the city became citadels of the underworld, and gave home to some of the most dangerous criminals in London (Chesney, 1972:104). Dickens himself made a tour of several dangerous slums towards the end of 1850, accompanied by four police officers (130), and this expedition provided a wealth of material for his characterisations. The underworld remained a clearly recognizable

part of the society and economic values that had produced it (32), and Fagin, Scrooge and Smallweed are similarly depicted by Dickens because the street thievery of Fagin is analogous to the amoral economic thievery of the two misers. Therefore, Fagin is, similarly to Smallweed, often the butt of Dickens` humour due to his hideousness, but also due to his dehumanised values.

Values of greed and selfishness helped shape the pantomimic depiction of many Dickens characters, but Dickens was also concerned with the problem of impecuniosity due to his father`s imprisonment for debt (Wilson, 1972:43) and Mr Micawber exemplifies these values whilst waiting to see if "anything turns up" (Dickens, 2004:270). Life in the overpopulated city had alienated people from each other, breaking down traditional bonds of community and comradeship, and with this came an abdication of responsibility to one`s fellows. Micawber demonstrates this lack of responsibility, running up large amounts of credit and evading his creditors for a considerable amount of time through losing himself amongst the sprawling masses of people living in London. Whilst his famous sermon in *David Copperfield* on the perils of outspending one`s earnings notes that "annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness…. annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery" (Dickens, 2004:186) it is his creditors who experience most of this misery, as Micawber never repays them. Micawber follows in the English theatre tradition of clowns, and Eigner links Micawber with Shakespeare`s Falstaff, claiming that both share "a questionable moral character, an improvident life style, and an immense appetite, not only for life, but quite literally for food and drink" (Eigner, 1989:159). Micawber is also similar to the nursery rhyme character

Humpty Dumpty, due to his egg like appearance. He is described in David Copperfield as having “no more hair upon his head (which was a large one, and very shining) than there was upon an egg” (Dickens, 2004:166). Just as children laugh when Humpty Dumpty falls off the wall, so the reader is encouraged to chuckle at Micawber`s financial misfortunes and his escapades in avoiding his creditors. However, Micawber`s characterisation is also based upon the character of Dickens` father, John Dickens, whose impecuniosities Wilson describes as “financial Micawberism” (Wilson, 1972:43). These parental values ensured that the young Dickens was sent to work in the blacking warehouse as a labouring hind. Therefore, Micawber`s workshy but eternally optimistic character is employed as a comic narrative by Dickens to highlight the folly of financial irresponsibility (49). This comedy is starkly contrasted with the later chapters where it is only through his moral redemption and honest hard work that Micawber is able to finally achieve true financial success.

In Dickens` novels, whilst the London poor often suffer, those with money are often unaware of the problems experienced by those without it. In *Bleak House* Dickens noted that “'the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jewellers cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds” (Dickens, 1996:20), whilst in *The Pickwick Papers* Mr Pickwick exemplifies this social ignorance. Pickwick is another of Dickens` characters who follows in the tradition of theatre clowns, and is perfectly suited to provide amusement because of his weight. Thus Pickwick is the continuous comedic butt of Dickens` slapstick humour, from inadvertently entering in a sleeping lady`s bedroom, to ending up in the stocks having rotten fruit and eggs thrown at him. During the skating

scene, where Pickwick disappears beneath the ice, Dickens relays in comic fashion how “Mr Pickwick`s hat, gloves, and handkerchief were floating on the surface, and this was all of Mr Pickwick that anyone could see” (Dickens, 1992:372). However, as a gentleman of leisure Pickwick also exemplifies a mixture of values such as affluence, pomposity and naivety, being wholly innocent of the London street. This innocence is illustrated in the confrontation scene with a cabman. The cabman assumes that Pickwick's leisurely scribbling in his notebook resembles an attempt to report him to his superiors. Pickwick, in contrast, has little perception of how his note-taking will be perceived by a working Londoner. Hence a scene of high farce ensues, in which the cabman gesticulates “come on”(75) at the party, and knocks Mr.Pickwick's spectacles off. When denounced as an informer by the cabman, Pickwick still fails to perceive the misunderstanding, professing his innocence “in a tone which, to any dispassionate listener, carried conviction with it” (75). However, for a working Londoner like the cabman such profusions of honour and moral integrity carry little substance; the values of the street deal in suspicion and aggression because such behaviour is necessary to survive. Pickwick's gentlemanly innocence collides dramatically with the London cabman’s hard bitten, cynical world. Through the farcical scenes of slapstick comedy that the naive Pickwick endures in the city, Dickens emphasises the gap in understanding between those with inherited money and possessions and those that have to survive and fight on the city streets. However, whilst Dickens turned many of his London characters into pantomime caricatures of bad values and folly, the city of London was employed as more than a stage in his works, being portrayed as a great immoral hub of activity which influenced and determined the fate of those

living within its environs.

4. The City as Protagonist.

By the mid 1840s Dickens had arrived at a point in his career at which he set out to trace an anatomy of society (Hawthorne, 1987:14), and this culminated in the writing of his novel *Bleak House*. The text was intended to portray the nature and structure of a whole city society and by placing the single word London as the first sentence of *Bleak House,* Dickens references the city itself as bleak. The word fog opens the start of paragraph two, being a metaphor for the legal institution of Chancery and the English web of antiqued institutions. Dickens had already employed fog as a metaphor for the opaqueness of the London legal system in *Martin Chuzzlewit.* Tom Pinch`s office at Middle Temple chambers is described as wreathed in a "ghostly mist", with a "ghostly air", which "thickened round and round him all day long" like a "motionless cloud", whilst also comparing it to the "London smoke" (Dickens, 1999:582). The legal system of London is therefore shrouded in mystery in a similar fashion to the way Chancery is described in *Bleak House*. However, *Bleak House* is not merely an attack on a number of social abuses but more an indictment of the whole dark muddle of the city itself. Dickens switches between descriptions of the mysterious and nebulous Chancery and the bleak and foggy city of London as both seem to take a life of their own. Marx argued that bourgeoisie society had conjured up such vast areas of production and exchange that they had become "like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up" (Marx, 1967:85) and in *Bleak House* the characters are not made personally responsible for the evil they do. Hence the Lord Chancellor is

presented as a kind and considerate individual, whilst his office is described as inhuman. The city and its legal system have become a thing external to the individuals who created it, turning those individuals into objects themselves.

The lives of the characters that inhabit Dickens' text are affected quite substantially by the city and the legal system in which they live, and in *Bleak House* Richard, Jo and Lady Dedlock are all worn down by the city around them. The capitalist city is run by laws such as Chancery, and Wiglomeration, which are unfathomable to the individual trapped within its vast interlocking system, being too labyrinthine and complex for any ordinary citizen to be able to understand. Esther expresses confusion when reading a newspaper in the court of Chancery, claiming "I read the words in the newspaper without knowing what they meant, and found myself reading the same words repeatedly" (Dickens, 1996:43). Gridley cannot gain revenge for the havoc that Chancery has wreaked upon his life because there is no individual to take revenge upon. The city society is to blame, as he realises that "I mustn't look to individuals. It's the system" (Dickens, 1996:251). The description of a counsel disappearing back into the fog of the court enhances Gridley's frustration at the anonymity of his persecutors. Speaking his piece “"the very little counsel drops, and the fog knows him no more. Everybody looks to him. Nobody can see him” (Dickens, 1996:19). The counsel, a small but significant part of the whole process, disappears back into the obscurity of the fog. Gridley cannot perceive or fathom the intricacies of the nebulous system and cannot directly blame anyone, because no one individual appears culpable or practically assailable. Thus Gridley slowly sinks into a despair that turns to violence, promising "I will have something out of someone for my ruin" (251).

However, Gridley's frustration leads to a series of prison sentences for threatening solicitors which eventually culminates in his own demise. The capitalist city has, in fact, had something out of him, and his life is slowly taken from him while he wastes away in a London prison. Similarly, it is inside the Fleet prison that Mr Pickwick completes his transformation from naivety to bitter experience. Pickwick learns of a Chancery prisoner who suffers a similar fate to Gridley, and exclaims “has this man been slowly murdered by the law” (Dickens, 1986:718). In *Little Dorrit* prison imagery is employed by Dickens to give one the impression of London itself as a giant open air cell. Arthur Clennam's return to the city after a long absence is described as one re-entering a penitentiary. Dickens describes a gloomy and stale city where “everything was bolted and barred that could by possibility furnish relief to an overworked people” (Dickens, 1998, 40-1). Whilst Blake had described a regulated London of chartered streets, “Near where the charted Thames does flow” (Blake, 1996:73.ll.1-2) London in *Little Dorrit* possessed “nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets” (Dickens, 1998, 40-1). The inhabitants of the city appear condemned, with no escape, because everything is barred and bolted, and Daleski notes that “The imagery of this passage makes it clear that we are intended to view London itself as a whole prison" (Daleski, 1970:194).

In *Bleak House* Dickens portrayed the city as an entropic prison in which no one could escape contamination from its ills. On the first page of the novel the city was described as having “As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth” (Dickens, 1996:13) and Dickens illustrated how London was slowly returning to

primeval slime, morally, spiritually and literally, claiming that it would not be extraordinary to witness a "meglasaurous waddling like an elephantine up Holborn Hill" (13). However, many of his London characters remain unconcerned by the mud and the filth, whilst in some cases seeming proud of its condition. Guppy relishes the thick London fog, and shows it off to the newcomer, Esther, boasting "This is about a London particular now, ain't it miss?" (51) Guppy is more concerned with ascending the financial ladder than concerning himself with the London particular. However, Dickens illustrates in *Bleak House* how a city left uncared for will eventually spread disease that will affect all members of society. In 1849, three years before *Bleak House* was published, London was afflicted by an outbreak of cholera, which in the last three months of the year saw deaths total 12,847 (Barker & Jackson, 1983:279). Polluted water, poor sanitation and slum conditions were instrumental in spreading the disease. The poor were the worst affected, and a group of 54 slum dwellers sent a letter to the Times expressing their fears (279). The imagined result of these fears is represented in *Bleak House* by Dickens, where a plague bred in the slum tenements of Tom-All-Alones is spread by waifs amongst the rich, illustrating that social ills will eventually find their way back to their maker. Despite retreating to a pastoral setting Mr. Jarndyce finds no refuge from the terrible disease as he is continually tormented by the east wind. Since the medieval times the better residential suburbs of London had always been built farther and farther westward, so that airborne pollution and famine would be carried out of the more affluent quarter's way towards the eastern part of the city where the poor generally lived (Schwarzbach, 1979:127). However, the wind frequently blew the wrong way, ensuring that the east wind contaminated the rich as well as

the poor (127). Whilst Shelley`s *Ode to the West Wind* was "the trumpet of a prophecy" (Shelley, 1996: 873:ll.69) which could awaken a new birth, the east wind is employed by Dickens as a metaphorical analogy to represent social ills. St Albans is no refuge from the contamination due to the east wind blowing pollution across the country, or Jo carrying disease from the city to the countryside. The plague is employed as a symbol of the guilty connections between the high and the low in society. A disease created by slum city conditions, that the rich allowed to fester, returns to haunt and afflict the affluent, illustrating that if one despoils one's own backyard then this will eventually affect the homeowner.

Nevertheless, the threat of sickness and disease was just one possible manifestation of poverty and want. In *Sketches by Boz* Dickens noted how "it is strange with how little notice, good or bad, a man may die in London" (Dickens, 1999:207), and in *Bleak House* it is not a man but the child sweeper Jo who is left to die on the London streets without notice or hope. Dickens illustrated that it was dangerous to fail to anticipate the poverty and want of the poor, and his novel *Barnaby Rudge* depicted the Gordon Riots of 1780, which saw hysteria threaten London`s safety, with 458 Londoners killed, and with a dozen public buildings and over a hundred private ones destroyed or damaged (Barker & Jackson, 1983:231). In the novel Dickens observed that "the crowd was the law, and never was the law held in greater dread" (Wilson, 1972:154). Whilst anti-Papist feeling was blamed, the strange behaviour of the 30,000 mob can more likely be attributed to want and penury than to religious fervour (Mitchell & Leys, 1963:246). Dickens ultimately feared that ignorance towards the poor would lead to a violent uprising which would leave individuals and their

city destroyed, and in *Bleak House* and *Barnaby Rudge* he showed how a capitalist city created to bring about economic gain for an elite few could potentially destroy not only itself but all involved. However, while the city was portrayed in Dickens` texts as hell, the country was seen as a quasi-paradise (Schwarzbach,1979:16).

5. The City and the Countryside.

Whilst Dickens was preoccupied with the city as an image of moral confusion, the countryside was often depicted as a rural paradise, which Wilson argues resembled "a symbol to him of English happiness, of hospitality, and good old customs, of innocent cheer" (Wilson, 1972:43). Set against the backdrop of London`s moral confusion Dickens offers the alternative of pastoral sentimentalism; in some instances this alternative takes the form of retreat into the country or natural surroundings. In *Little Dorrit* the Dorrits escape from London and journey across the wide open spaces of the Alps. One passage details how "the snowy mountain tops had been so clear that unaccustomed eyes, cancelling the intervening country...would have measured them within a few hours easy reach" (Dickens, 1998:417). In *David Copperfield* the alps provide a cathartic experience which cures David`s pain, and he narrates how "in this serenity, great nature spoke to me and soothed me" (Dickens, 2004:821). The valley in Switzerland appeals to David because it reminds him of Yarmouth and possesses a sense of community. In the moral confusion of the city it is difficult to take the right path, and he is led astray by the duplicitous Steerforth, whose self centred philosophy is to win the race and ride on at all costs. In Yarmouth, by contrast, David feels a sense of community, human

spiritedness and warmth at the Peggotys` Boat House, which proves a useful counterpart to London. The Boat House achieves the status of pastoral retreat, set upon the beach and within easy distance of the crashing waves, and David considers it “the most delicious retreat that the imagination of man could conceive” (43).

In *The Pickwick Papers* the characters experience a sense of community and belonging at Dingley Dell which is found lacking in the city. The author relates a pleasant scene of fellowship and warmth, in which “The little party formed a social circle around the fire, [and] Mr. Pickwick thought he had never felt so happy in his life, and at no time so much disposed to enjoy, and make the most of, the passing moments” (Dickens, 1986:65). The countryside is then an obvious mode of escape for many of Dickens’ protagonists damaged or confused by the city, and community and fellowship take the place of alienation and self interest. In *A Christmas Carol,* Scrooge's redemption begins by leaving the city. The Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge the memory of his old childhood in the countryside “recognizing every gate and post and tree” (Dickens, 1988:29) while “the sounds of merry boys` shouting filled the fields” (30). The aesthetic backdrop of rural surroundings is an important counterpart to the darkness, fog and limited vision Scrooge encounters living in the city, and the countryside rejuvenates Scrooge whilst the warmth of the boys’ cries cheers his spirit and thaws his numbness.

In *Great Expectations* Magwitch's encounter with Pip on the marshes illustrates the compassion and basic kindness that the rural innocent possesses. Pip's childish compassion for Magwitch, illustrated in the

scene where he hands the convict his wittles, and affirms that he is “glad you like it” (Dickens, 1994:15) betrays an innocent concern for a hungry, desolate man. It is this childish concern that makes Magwitch wish to reciprocate the feeling, and help him in turn. Pip`s guardian, the rural blacksmith Joe Gargary, also displays a common decency, and this compassion is displayed in the scene where Magwitch confesses to stealing bread from Joe`s forge. Despite being the victim of theft, the blacksmith displays admirable compassion for the convict as he says “we don't know what you have done, but we wouldn't have you starved to death for it, poor miserable fellow-creatur” (34). Andrews defines Joe as “the most impressive example in Dickens of a man who blends in himself a childlike simplicity and openness with a mature wisdom and humanity” (Andrews, 1994:96). Joe personifies these qualities of rural kindness and decency, and the adult Pip later resolves to act as Joe would, in an attempt to find some form of redemption from his bitter experiences in the city.

However, it is too simplistic to view the countryside as a quasi-paradise or Eden. While Oliver Goldsmith had celebrated the country as a lost paradise in *The Deserted Village*, George Crabbe responded in *The Village: Book I* that “the Muses sing of happy swains, Because the Muses never knew their pains” (Bronowski, 1973:260). This aesthetic celebration of the countryside was a mere pastoral myth, and Schwarzbach argues that “against the stark reality of their present lives was set this pastoral dream, the myth of a lost rural Eden” (Schwarzbach, 1979:21). Indeed, many characters in Dickens` novels face similar problems in pastoral settings that are predominant in the city. Jo the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House* is also harried in the countryside, and

is treated with general mistrust. The Brickmakers live in rural St Albans but their dwelling lies amongst stagnant pools, similarly to the famine, filth and disease encountered in London. Instead of receiving food and clean shelter they are lectured by the sanctimonious Mrs. Pardiggle, a moral policeman who takes “the whole family into custody” (Dickens, 1996:132). Dickens employs the same prison imagery in these sections that he uses to describe London. Despite the homely warmth of Dingley Dell, Pickwick and company at times find the country as confusing and embarrassing as the city. Mr.Winkle struggles desperately at the shooting party, much to the locals` amusement; Mr. Pickwick ends up in the stocks by not being aware of certain trespassing rules, and at the skating party falls through the ice and has to be rushed off to bed. When en-route to Manor Farm, and de-horsed, Pickwick reflects that their rural experience was “materially dampened as they reflected on the singularity of their appearance, and the absurdity of their situation” (Dickens, 1986:59). Dickens` sentimental pastoralism is a largely ineffectual method of dealing with many of the problems caused by the city. Escaping into the country offers a temporary respite from the moral confusion of the city, and many of Dickens' protagonists cannot avoid London for long, or even leave in the first place. Many are trapped, while those such as Copperfield or Pickwick are continually returning to the capital. Soon after his pastoral experience Scrooge is transported back into urban surrounds once more, noting how he scarcely seemed to enter the city, but “the city rather seemed to spring up about them and encompass them of its own act” (Dickens, 1988:69). This description connotes the image of London as a living, growing organism, swallowing up the countryside on its journey across the land. In the process of time a city's boundaries widen and this must be at the expense

of the surrounding land; mere rural sentiment cannot endure for long against such a force.

6. Conclusion: The City and Regeneration.

Dickens` texts portrayed a city where the effects upon the individual were drastic, and his characters were often depicted as comic or grotesque representations of bad values emanating from the city, whilst also being personified as cogs in a vast impersonal mechanical wheel. Dickens highlighted the estrangement of his city characters from each other, while many of his protagonists were shown to suffer quite considerably due to the impersonal and amoral nature of the city. Moreover, the pastoralism depicted by Dickens in his novels failed to offer most of his characters the chance of regeneration, and proved ineffectual against the moral confusion of the growing city. However, this was not the only alternative Dickens proffered in his novels, as he employed isolated characters who did regenerate or heal those damaged by the city; Mr. Jarndyce, Esther Summerson and Allan Woodcourt are all employed in this capacity in *Bleak House.* Esther and Allan Woodcourt thus resemble doctor and nurse figures, and Esther praises her husband's healing qualities as she claims that “I know that in the course of that day he has alleviated pain and soothed some fellow-creature in the time of need” (Dickens, 1996:879). Other benevolent protagonists or regenerative characters include Meagles, Doyce, the reformed Scrooge, Mr.Pickwick, Magwitch, Betsy Trotwood, Marley, the Three Ghosts of Christmas, and Arthur Clennam. Meagles, Clennam, Doyce, Pickwick and the redeemed Scrooge are particularly distinguished by the fact that all use their position or finances to aid those left by the wayside, and

Orwell criticised Dickens` reliance on "that recurrent Dickens figure, the good rich man…handing out guineas" (Orwell, 1970:84-5). However, Dickens` regenerative characters often perform more subtle actions than merely providing financial assistance. Betsy Trotwood is not only a financial fairy godmother to David Copperfield, but also regenerates Mr. Dick through kindness and understanding, while Joe the blacksmith uses kindness and patience to regenerate the world weary Pip, allowing him to aid Magwitch in turn. Amy Dorrit is also regenerative, bringing light into the Marshalsea and comforting both her father and later Clennam, while Mr. Peggoty`s kindness restores Mrs. Gummidge, Little Emily and Martha. Thus Dickens offers more than mere sentimental pastoralism providing isolated protagonists who regenerate others through acts of philanthropy and altruism. Bleeding Heart Yard, set in the midst of the city, attempts to combat London`s values of self interest and greed by displaying traditional values of community spirit and human kindness. Dickens narrates in *Little Dorrit* that there was "a family sentimental feeling prevalent in the yard, that it had character" (Dickens,1998:138). The residents of the yard cannot escape into pastoral climes, thus they attempt to turn the yard itself into an abode of decency; set against the backdrop of "the aspiring city" (138). Dickens` main literary weapon against the entropic, destructive moral force of the city is the employment of characters that manifest values such as kindness and decency.

However, ultimately his benevolent protagonists are restricted in their acts of altruism. They can aid only some of the many living in Victorian London, their acts of kindness outnumbered by the sheer proliferation of want and poverty. Mr Brownlow aids Oliver, but not the other children in

Fagin`s gang. Betsy Trotwood adopts David, while Mealy Potatoes and the other labouring hinds continue to work in the blacking factory. While Little Dorrit regenerates and redeems Arthur Clennam through her love, the city continues unchanged, and while “they went quietly down into the roaring streets...the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar” (787). Dickens` regenerative characters are therefore heavily outnumbered in his texts by the multitude of uncaring, atomised characters that live in the city. This is because in Dickens` texts the city system engenders values of greed and self interest. Pastoral sentimentalism is largely ineffectual as a permanent means of escape, and Dickens` small collection of morally upright but outnumbered protagonists cannot regenerate an entire city.

Therefore, in Dickens’ texts the city functions in several different ways. It is utilised as a backcloth, or stage, upon which his pantomime inspired characters display corrupt values such as greed and self interest, and is also employed as a vocational setting where the injustices suffered by the working poor are displayed. As a counterpoint to this, Dickens’ regenerative protagonists act as a moral signpost, exemplifying values of kindness and decency, and indicating the way those living in the city should behave, whilst gaining small victories in the constant battle against a vast hub of immoral activity. However, the city system is ultimately Positioned as the catalyst of such immoral activity; it is depicted as a protagonist, or an antagonist, that urgently needs to be dealt with before individuals living within its confines can be aided.

Bibliography

Abrams, M.H, Greenblatt, S, (eds.) 2000, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Norton & Company.

Andrews, M, 1994, *Dickens and the Grown Up Child*, MacMillan Press.

Barker, F, Jackson, P, 1983, *London: 2000 Years of a City and its People*, Cassell:London.

Blake, W, 1996, *Songs of Innocence and Experienc*e, in Wu, 1996.

Briggs, A, 1983, *A Social History of England*, Published by Book Club Associates: London.

Briggs, A, 1985, *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes 1851-67*, Pelican Books.

Bronowski, J, 1973, *The Ascent of Man*, Published by the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Burgess, A, 1979, *Shakespeare*, Penguin Books Limited.

Chesney, K, 1972, *The Victorian Underworld*, Pelican Books.

Cobbett, W, 1967, *Rural Ride*s, The Pelican Library.

Daleski, H.M, 1970, *Dickens and the Art of Analogy*, Published by Faber and Faber Ltd.

Defoe, D, 1966, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, The Penguin English Library.

Dickens, C, 1982, *Oliver Twist*, Published by The World`s Classics.

Dickens, C, 1986, *The Posthumous Papers of The Pickwick Club*, Published by Oxford University Press.

Dickens, C, 1988, *A Christmas Carol*, in the Chrismas Books, 1988.

Dickens, C, 1988, *The Christmas Books*, Published by Oxford University Press.

Dickens, C, 1994, *Great Expectations*, Published by Everyman.

Dickens, C, 1996, *Bleak House*, Published by Penguin Books.

Dickens, C, 1998, *Little Dorrit*, Published by Penguin Classics.

Dickens, C, 1999, *Sketches By Boz*, Wordsworth Classics.

Dickens, C, 1999, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Penguin Classics.

Dickens, C, 2004, *David Copperfield*, Penguin Classics.

Eigner, E.M, 1989, *The Dickens Pantomime*, Published by the University of California Press.

Engels, F, 2000, *The Great Towns*, in Abrams et al, 2000.

Foot, M, Kramnick, I (eds.), 1987, *The Thomas Paine Reader*, Penguin Classics.

Hawthorne, J, 1987, *Bleak House – An Introduction to a Variety of Criticism*, Published by Macmillan.

Latham, R (ed.), 1978, *The Illustrated Pepys: Extracts From the Diary*, Book Club Associates.

Mathus, T 1976, *An Essay on the Principles of Population*, Pelican Books.

Marx, K, Engels, F, 1967, *The Communist Manifesto*, Pelican Books.

Marx,K 1977, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow.

Marx, K, 1995, *Kapital*, Published by the Oxford University Press.

Mitchell, R.J, Leys, M.D.R, 1963, *A History of London Life*, Pelican Books.

Owell, G, 1970, *Charles Dickens*, in Orwell 1970.

Orwell, G, 1970, *Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays*, Penguin Books.

Parker, M, St. J, Reid, D.J, 1972, *The British Revolution 1750-1970: A Social and Economic History*, Blandford Press.

Schwarzbach, F.S, 1979, *Dickens and the City*, Athlone Press.

Shelley, P.B, 1996, *Prometheus Unbound*, in Wu 1996.

Thompson, E.P, 1968, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Pelican

Books.

Wells, S and Taylor, G, (eds.) 1998, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, Oxford University Press.

Wordsworth, W, 1996, *Lyrical Ballads*, in Wu 1996.

Wilson, A, 1972, *The World of Charles Dickens*, Penguin Books.

Woolf, V, 1947, *The Moment and Other Essays*, Published by the Hogarth Press.

Wu, D, 1996, *Romanticism: An Anthology*, Blackwell Anthologies.