Moral Hostages and Guilty Men

An exploration of the functions of disability in Dickens’s novels

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Abstract
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Chapter One

‘Hunchbacks, Imbeciles and Precocious Children’

‘To the Memory of Charles Dickens (England’s most popular author) who died at his
residence, Higham, near Rochester, Kent, 9 June 1870, aged 58 years. He was a sympathiser
with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England’s greatest
writers is lost to the world.’ (Dickens’s epitaph)

‘I believe Dickens to be as little understood as Cervantes, and almost as mischievous.’ John
Ruskin. (Letter to Charles Eliot Norton, 8 July, 1870. Cited in Kincaid 7)

‘His literary genius consisted in a contradictory capacity at once to entertain and to deride –
very ridiculous ideas.’ (G. K. Chesterton Charles Dickens 111)

Introduction

Of the many Victorian writers who depicted disability in their work, Charles Dickens stands
out for several reasons. He portrayed the disabled throughout his writing career, both in his
fiction and journalistic work, to an unrivalled extent. Not one of his novels is uninhabited by
the ranks of the disabled. He consistently uses disability as a metaphor, not merely in
characterization but also in his settings. He covers a wide range of impairments in his work,
covering the full spectrum of physical, psychological and intellectual disabilities. Some of his
characters, such as Tiny Tim in A Christmas Carol, have helped to construct certain disability
stereotypes which continue to inform our cultural understanding of disability today, and can
thus be considered a part of disability discourse. Leslie Fiedler refers to the extraordinary
impact of this character in his article, ‘Pity and Fear: Images of the Disabled in Literature and
the Popular Arts,’ pointing out that it was Tiny Tim’s ‘image which presided over the
founding of charitable institutions…to care for “crippled children,”’ and adding that ‘his
image has remained in the years since Victoria, when so much else has been desacralized, as
an ikon as “sacred” in its way as that of the Christ Child at his Virgin Mother’s breast.’
(Fiedler 67)
However, Dickens’s disabled characters are far more than purely sentimental figures, defying the one-sided perspective presented by many critics, such as Henry James, who contemptuously refers to Jenny as belonging ‘to the troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and precocious children who have carried on the sentimental business in all Mr. Dickens’s novels,’ in his review of *OMF* in 1865 (*James Dickens: The Critical Heritage* 471). What is surprising about James’s remark is the lack of history it displays. He overlooks the broader cultural context of the *hunchback* and the *imbecile*, combined as a figure of subversive power in the cultural entity of the fool; Dickens, on the other hand, looks at least as far back as Shakespeare in using these types of figures.

Despite the complexity of Dickens’s use of disability, there has been no large-scale scholarly attempt to provide a meta-perspective on this in his writing. Disability in some of his works has been examined in relation to specific genres, such as sentimental fiction, melodrama, parody and the grotesque. Some scholars have also examined aspects of his use of disability in relation to specific literary theories, such as Gender theory and Cultural Studies. So far, however, there has been no comprehensive attempt to synthesise these findings or examine the oppositions which underlie them. Julia Miele Rodas supports this view in her article, ‘Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha, and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher: Charles Dickens and the Uses of Disability,’ stating that ‘while there is not yet any comprehensive scholarly analysis devoted exclusively to Dickens and disability, this topic has excited the interest of a small circle of Dickens scholars.’ (Rodas 52).

Like me, Rodas perceives something inherently ambivalent about Dickens’s relationship to disability (Rodas 51). She locates this ambivalence in his role as a ‘satellite persona,’ which she defines as ‘a (presumably) non-disabled person who appears to construct his or her own personal identity around a nexus of disability, which is perceived as requiring mediation…The key is that the identity and/or importance of the satellite be understood (by himself or by others) as residing (even temporarily) in his connection to the central “disabled” subject.’ (Rodas 93 note 2) Her main point of focus is on Dickens the man – his involvement with the blind deaf-mute Laura Bridgman, and the interaction between Dickens and Mrs Hill (the real-life inspiration for Miss Mowcher), targeting his efforts to control and contain his subjects and boost his own image at the same time. Rodas raises some important issues in her article, and I shall return to her concept of the ‘satellite’ in Chapter Three. However, unlike her, my focus is directed primarily on Dickens’s fiction, with emphasis on his novels. I believe that his ambivalence towards disability can be located in several specific aspects of
his work, and I intend to show that it is a result of the following factors: 1) his inherently ambiguous characterization of disabled characters, caused in part by the idiosyncratic mixture of literary genres, traditions and modes, that frame disability in differing and often opposing ways; 2) his fundamentally moral construction of disability in his fiction, which creates ambivalent forms of closure for his disabled characters; 3) a conflict between his roles as social critic and entertainer, which is particularly evident in his use of disability as a humoristic device. These contradictions sit uncomfortably with his public reputation as ‘a sympathiser with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed,’ creating unresolvable oppositions.

While the scope of this thesis only allows me to examine a relatively small portion of Dickens’s work, with the main focus on two of his novels, I will try to provide breadth by referring briefly to his other works and supporting my arguments with the work of other scholars who have addressed specific aspects of Dickens’s use of disability.

Methodology
My work builds upon a close reading of the two novels *Barnaby Rudge* and *Our Mutual Friend*, focusing on the functions and representations of disability. I compare these examples to others from Dickens’s oeuvre: novels, short stories, non-fiction books, articles and letters, to see how they fit into his authorship as a whole. To further understand Dickens’s relationship to the social and cultural context of the period, I look at sources such as the work of other writers that influenced him, not only in the realm of fiction but also in social criticism, philosophy and science. I also consult biographies of Dickens, as well as his own letters, for corroboration of meaningful events. To ascertain how disability was constructed and perceived during the Victorian period, I refer to both general histories of the period, and studies of specific topics of relevance.

Theory
My work is informed by a broad range of sources. I have examined a selection of Dickens’s criticism ranging from contemporary assessments up to the present; from a time in which literary discourse was largely concerned with how realistic a novel was, to the plethora of theoretical directions that have burst forth throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. I can name the following streams of influence: Dickens scholarship, New Historicism and Cultural Studies, Victorian Studies, Gender and Queer Studies, and not least Disability Studies, a
relatively new and ever-broadening field in terms of literature. I have tried to take a balanced view of all of these contributions, without specifically allowing one to dominate. As a result, I cannot claim adherence to any one theoretical direction, but have taken what I see as relevant from these many approaches.

What follows

The remainder of this chapter consists of a presentation of topics that help lay the groundwork for an understanding of my thesis: Dickens and Victorian society, disability and Victorian literature, my theory concerning Dickens’s moral constructions of disability, and an explanation of the terminology of disability. I refer to some of the more important theories and scholars working in the field of disability and literature, in addition to presenting my own theory.

In Chapter Two, I examine *Barnaby Rudge*. My focus here is on Dickens’s use of ‘invisible disabilities,’ those afflictions which came under the broad heading of insanity at the time. I analyse his characterization in relation to genres, stereotypes and literary models to establish how this creates ambiguous impressions of these disorders. I show how his moral constructions of disability create oppositions in the text. I look at how the personal identity factors of gender and class affect his depictions of disability. I look at the connection between disability and the themes of the novel, his metaphoric use of disability, and his roles as social critic and entertainer in relation to this particular work. Finally, I examine the relationship between disability and belonging, focusing specifically on work and place.

In Chapter Three, I discuss *Our Mutual Friend*, with focus on the functions of physical disability. I look at how mobility disorders are constructed differently according to the genres, narrative traditions and literary modes adopted by Dickens in this text. I also show where Dickens’s moral constructions of disability fit in here. I examine the impact of gender, sexuality and class on the representation of mobility disorders. I show how the issues of work, place, erasure and omission further contribute to ambivalence, and finally I connect disability with one of the main themes of the novel.

Chapter Four is the conclusion of my thesis, where I sum up my findings to prove that Dickens’s ambivalence about disability is clearly evidenced in his texts, visible in a number of aspects of his work.
Dickens and Victorian society

Dickens was deeply committed to the social issues of his day, and his letters and articles bear witness to the countless visits he made to different institutions. His visits to prisons and workhouses informed both his articles and his fiction. His visits to specialized institutions for the treatment of different disabilities, however, are recorded primarily in his articles, non-fiction books and letters. This split is significant to my mind, raising questions about what he perceived as appropriate subjects for fiction and the rightful place of the disabled. I will expand on this point in my examination of specific works.

In pre-welfare state England, the plight of the lower-class disabled was dependent upon both Charity and the Workhouse, and Dickens explores these avenues in his fiction. While this is a feature of both of the novels I discuss, it is of particular importance in OMF, raising questions about authenticity; how can we differentiate between those deserving of help and those who attempt to defraud? This affects Dickens’s characterizations, presenting disability in a less-than-sympathetic light at times.

The social impact of the transition from agricultural economy to one based on industry during this period cannot be underestimated. Dickens was very much aware of the negative consequences of this change and this is evidenced in his fiction. The problems of overcrowding and unhygienic living conditions in ever-growing cities, crime, a lack of education that might help one out of poverty, and a class system that reinforced inequality, are all themes he explored in his fiction, and these intersect with disability. Dickens used his fiction as a platform to expose the grim reality of society’s ills, but he also wanted to be able to wave a magic wand over this and make it disappear. This meeting of real-life concerns with fictional representations contributes to a sense of ambivalence in his representation of disability.

Disability and Victorian literature

Fiedler draws attention to the particular emphasis on disability in Victorian literature in the following excerpt:

Not until the rise of sentimentalism and the obsession with the excluded and marginal, which climaxes in the reign of Victoria, did the blind, the deaf and the halt become major characters in large numbers of books written by authors and intended for readers who, thinking of themselves as non-handicapped, are able to regard the handicapped as essentially alien, absolute others...fellow human beings with
drastically impaired perception, manipulation and ambulation tend, of course, to be
erstereotyped, either negatively or positively; but in any case rendered as something
more or less than human. (Fiedler 58-59)

Fiedler’s assertion of the ableism of writers and readers is arguable; there were a number of
popular Victorian writers who had disabilities themselves, such as Wilkie Collins and Harriet
Martineau, who depicted disabled characters in their work. Popular literary genres were aimed
at a broad readership, which contained both the able-bodied and the disabled, and Dickens
aimed at a broader readership than many of his contemporaries. Nonetheless, Fiedler raises
the important issues of stereotyping and the othering of the disabled, which are also present in
Dickens’s work and contribute to impressions of ambivalence. In other sections of this article,
Fiedler connects the emotional responses of pity and fear to literary representations of the
disabled, a dyad which other scholars, such as Martha Stoddard Holmes, have further
expanded upon. He also traces the historical development of the figure of the **cripple**
back to Ancient Greek mythology, where its function was one of humour, through to its
transformation as a figure of pity and fear in the Victorian period. I will come back to this
point in Chapter 3, when I examine the characterization of Silas Wegg, which embraces both
of these functions, creating opposition.

In her book *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture*, Martha
Stoddard Holmes focuses on the function of the disabled in Victorian melodrama, claiming
that ‘Victorian discourses of disability, and the texts that convey them, are overwhelmingly
“melodramatic.”’ (Stoddard Holmes 4) She points to the intimate connection between
disability and melodrama, describing disability as ‘melodramatic machinery, a simple tool for
cranking open feelings.’ (3) While melodrama is originally a theatrical form, its structures can
be found in literature, especially in the sentimental, Gothic and sensation genres, which share
some of the same stereotypes and a common commitment to feeling which is in direct
opposition to the rationality of realism. Dickens draws on all of these genres but combines
them with others which oppose these constructions of disability, creating ambivalence in his
work.

Stoddard Holmes identifies three major melodramatic disability stereotypes that recur
in Victorian literature: ‘the afflicted child, the begging imposter, and the unmarriageable
woman.’ (135) She sees them as an expression of ‘Victorian concerns with identifying what
kinds of bodies should marry and what kinds of bodies could work.’ (4) They were intended
to provoke specific emotional responses from readers – fear and anger towards the begging
imposter, pity for the afflicted child and unmarriageable woman. She also adds desire to Fiedler’s dyad of pity and fear, in connection with the disabled woman (72). In his work, Dickens contributes to the construction of these stereotypes but he also plays with them, inverting them at times and creating uncertainty in the reader.

While heightened emotion could be experienced by readers as a purely vicarious pleasure, it was also intended to serve a moral purpose in fiction. In *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian literature*, Fred Kaplan explains that ‘sentimentality assumes the existence of innate “moral sentiments,”’ (Kaplan 16) which are necessary for moral performance. He sees this against the background of Victorian society, claiming that:

> The Victorian “sentimentalists” believed that the alienating and dehumanizing pressures and structures of modern culture, all of them dry-eyed exponents of misery and suppression, are more and more separating human beings from their natural sentiments, and that the desire to repossess them is widespread even if dormant. The novelist’s purpose, among others, is to awaken that desire and to help it fulfil its needs. (Kaplan 41).

Kaplan clearly counts Dickens as one of these novelists with a purpose; he refers to ‘Dickens’s conviction that novels are vehicles, among other things, for teaching virtue.’ (Kaplan 40) However, what Kaplan describes here as ‘other things’ sometimes creates collisions with sentimentalism in Dickens’s literature. Here I am thinking of his desire to amuse, which is a central aspect of his novels, distinguishing him from many of the other sentimental writers. Laughter and comedy have a tendency to undermine other emotions, destabilizing meaning and leading once more to a sense of ambivalence. This is an important point that I will return to when discussing specific works.

My theoretical contribution - Dickens’s moral construction of disability

I detect a recurrent pattern in Dickens’s depictions of disability, especially in his novels, which I believe relates directly to the idea of moral sentiments and the aim of teaching virtue. Disability functions as a sign of vice, a form of stigmata written onto the bodies and minds of his characters, bringing with it a need to dispense blame, punishment and reward. The disabled are divided into two groups:

1) The guilty disabled - those whose disability is a consequence of their own vice and which only their reformation can cure. As a rule, these characters are men. It is linked to a certain extent with physiognomy, which Michael Shortland describes as ‘the notion that a
correspondence exists between the outer appearance of man and his inner character.’ (Shortland ‘The Power of a Thousand Eyes: Johann Caspar Lavater’s Science of Physiognomical Perception’ 379) Michael Hollington, in Dickens and the Grotesque, claims that ‘Dickens’s was a supporter of both phrenology and physiognomy,’ the latter ‘resting on the perception of formal similarities between human and animal features.’ (Hollington 14) Dickens uses these as a form of visual shorthand in many of his characterizations. In this type of character, disability is often linked to villainy and even criminality, making it a clear negative construction. The emphasis is on guilt and punishment; usually, these characters meet a grisly end or are evicted from the narrative. There are very few examples of this type of character reforming; one of them is Eugene Wrayburn in OMF, who I will discuss in Chapter Three.

2) The innocent disabled, who I term ‘moral hostages.’ Their disability is a consequence of someone else’s vice, such as a family member, a social institution or an individual who represents the greater community. This is often linked with the recurrent biblical theme of ‘the sins of the father are revisited upon the children’1. The guilty party is always given an opportunity to make amends. If they do, the affliction on the innocent victim may be erased. But if they don’t, the ‘moral hostage’ will remain disabled or even die. In some instances, the guilty party dies before making amends; textually, this is treated as a lifting of the curse. If an institution is at fault, then members of the community must step in to make reparation to the sufferer. Sloppy in OMF is an example of this; the workhouse is blamed for his intellectual disability, but the good characters, Betty Higden and the Boffins, work together to reverse his diagnosis.

This construction of disability makes it an aberration, a sign of moral wrongdoing, something blameworthy. It combines elements of divine punishment with the fairy tale; the promise that virtuous behaviour may erase disability, while the guilty will be punished. It is in direct opposition to the scientific view that Dickens expressed in his journalistic and non-fiction work, making this a site of ambivalence in his work seen as a whole. If one focuses purely on his fictional world, what is most ambivalent about this kind of construction is that it tends to eradicate disability at the same time as Dickens seeks to include it. Membership in the ‘good society’ (or community) that is established at the end of Dickens’s novels is a reward reserved for the virtuous, who have, as a rule, been ‘cured’.

1 This is based on the citation from Exodus 20:5 ‘For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.’
The terminology of disability

While human beings have always suffered from forms of impairment, the over-arching concept of disability is a relatively modern development. A joint product of the welfare state and an industrialized, standardized society, its diagnosis and measurement have become central in issues of compensation and rights. At the present time, we are accustomed to a pathologizing of disability. Disability is defined in medical terms, and one could argue that the medical profession owns this discourse. But according to Miriam Bailin in The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill, the situation was quite different in Victorian England. She points out that despite ‘the steady rise in the medical profession’s status and advances made in medical research in the nineteenth century…such events had relatively little impact upon the representation of illness and recovery in early and mid-Victorian fiction.’ (Bailin 3) This impression is reinforced by the absence of medical terminology and scientific explanation in the fiction of this time, which applies to Dickens’s work as well. It does not reflect a lack of knowledge on his part; as Dickens’s articles, letters and non-fiction books attest, he visited many institutions, kept himself abreast of developments in the treatment of disability and could count some of the top medical men amongst his friends. I believe that the lack of a medical perspective in his fiction reflects his agenda of framing disability as a moral issue, which seems to me to be a form of ambivalence in itself as it denies what he knew to be the true causes of disability.

The language of disability in early and mid-Victorian fiction is often the language of the layperson. Terminology has changed significantly since then, and some terms require explanation. Concepts we take for granted in the present may have no parallel in earlier times, or may be framed as part of a legal or moral discourse rather than a medical one. This applies especially to what we now perceive as psychiatric disorders and cognitive disabilities. Schizophrenia, for example, was not a medical diagnosis in the Victorian period, but there are ‘mad’ characters in BR whose behaviour might suggest this term. Monomania is a diagnosis that is mentioned in several of Dickens’s novels, including OMF, that has since disappeared from medical discourse. Some terms, like the words Dickens uses to denote cognitive disabilities – ‘idiot,’ ‘imbecile,’ ‘fool,’ and ‘Natural’ and ‘Innocent’ hold several meanings concurrently, and Dickens sometimes plays upon this, especially in BR. Illiteracy, an important indicator of a lack of education in Dickens’s novels, and a badge of the lower classes, is constructed as a learning disability today. Even when a term has been in constant
use over a long period, such as ‘insanity,’ there is no guarantee that its meaning has remained stable.

Many of the terms used to describe disabilities in earlier periods have derogatory connotations today, such as ‘idiot,’ ‘imbecile’ and ‘cripple.’ I use both modern terminology and the terms employed by Dickens, where it makes most sense to do so. When using terms that may be considered offensive, I italicize these to denote that I am using them in their former, non-derogatory sense.

The changing nature of attitudes towards disability presents a challenge when addressing literature from another time period. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder stress in their work *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse,* ‘what one generation of interpreters views as “humane” can be challenged by the next…This is particularly true of the representation of disability because even well-meaning representations often result in violent justifications.’ (Mitchell and Snyder 41) This is important to bear in mind while addressing the work of a man considered at the time of his death to be ‘a sympathiser with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed.’

List of abbreviations for titles of Dickens’s novels mentioned in the text

*BH:* *Bleak House*
*BR:* *Barnaby Rudge*
*DC:* *David Copperfield*
*DS:* *Dombey and Son*
*GE:* *Great Expectations*
*HT:* *Hard Times*
*LD:* *Little Dorrit*
*OMF:* *Our Mutual Friend*
*OT:* *Oliver Twist*
*PP:* *Pickwick Papers*
Chapter Two
Order and Disorder in *Barnaby Rudge*

‘There are degrees of Madness, as of Folly; the disorderly jumbling Ideas together, is in some more, and some less. In short, herein seems to lie the difference between Idiots and mad Men, That mad Men put wrong Ideas together, and so make wrong Propositions, but argue and reason right from them: But Idiots make very few or no Propositions, and reason scarce at all.’ (John Locke *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 161)

**Introduction**

*BR* is significant in Dickens’s oeuvre as the only novel featuring a disabled protagonist, the intellectually-disabled Barnaby. It is also distinctive as one of only two historical novels he wrote, taking the reader back to events of the late eighteenth century. While numerous disabilities are referred to in the text, it is mental disorder which lies at the very heart of this novel, first published in 1841. As a consequence, I have chosen to focus on these ‘invisible’ disabilities in this chapter. The scarcity of intellectually-disabled protagonists in Victorian fiction makes this novel of special interest, and it presented Dickens with a number of challenges, not least the continued presence of Barnaby in the text. Dickens also uses disability extensively as a metaphor, to describe a society gone mad. Of all of his novels, I believe it features the most extensive use disability in connection to theme, rivalling the use of disease in *BH* in this respect.

At the time *BR* was written, what we describe now as intellectual disability could be roughly equated with the term *idiocy* (however, they are not synonymous - *idiocy* is a little nuanced term, unlike intellectual disability, which is perceived as having many sub-groups). This formed one half of the ‘dichotomy of insanity,’ while *madness* or *lunacy* represented the other half. As Anne Digby explains in her article ‘Contexts and Perspectives,’ the ‘dichotomy of insanity’ persisted as a legal concept from the thirteenth century up until the late nineteenth century. It was also embodied in philosophical and medical texts of the time. The terms *madness* and *idiocy* have a long history, and have been defined in many different ways over the centuries. Dickens plays on the varied meanings of these words (both formal and colloquial) and their many synonyms, such as *fool* for *idiot*. He also seems to reflect Locke’s notion that ‘there are degrees of Madness, as of Folly.’ There are many different types of *fools* and *madmen* in this text, contributing to a certain textual confusion about the mental status of
the characters. He uses the ‘dichotomy of insanity’ both literally and metaphorically throughout the text, to create a triangular structure, with the three points of rationality, idiocy and madness standing in opposition to each other. Critics have tended to overlook this distinction, placing idiocy and madness together in a binary opposition to sanity when analysing the text. However, I believe the split is of significance; the idiot has a different function and status in the text than the madman. Their symptoms sometimes seem interchangeable though, which does create uncertainty about identity - who is who?

Psychiatry was in its infancy in the Victorian period and the understanding of these disabilities was quite different to current-day theories. The construction of insanity as a dichotomy is only one example; this model fell out of favour in the early twentieth century. Locke’s definition of madness and idiocy was very influential in the eighteenth century, just as John Haslam’s was in the early to mid-nineteenth century. While Dickens’s text doesn’t overtly refer to medical (or legal) constructions of insanity, there are signs that he was aware of both Locke and Haslam’s work. He had a copy of Locke’s text in his library. (Walder n.1 Ch. 4 214) In their article ‘A Note on Dickens’s Psychiatric Reading,’ Richard Hunter and Ida Macalpine make the claim that Dickens was familiar with Haslam’s work. They argue that he is the ‘the good doctor’ referred to in the article ‘A Curious Dance Around a Curious Tree,’ which Dickens wrote with W.H. Wills and published in Household Words in 1852 (Hunter and Macalpine 50). His writing does appear to show some sense of influence and response to Locke’s and Haslam’s ideas, and I will point this out where I see it as relevant, for example, in his characterization.

This chapter is divided into five main sections. In the first, I examine Dickens’s ambiguous characterizations of the disabled. I look at the factors that contribute to this, including generic hybridity, his multiple sources of inspiration and his technique of using ‘social’ diagnosis. In section two, I focus on Dickens’s moral constructions of insanity, using the models that I outlined in Chapter One. Here I will show that the distinction between ‘innocent’ idiocy vs. ‘guilty’ madness is a central factor in the novel’s ambivalence towards insanity. Section three takes a brief look at how identity factors such as gender and class influence Dickens’s portrayals of insanity. Section four is concerned with the connection of disability to the themes of the novel. I will look at Dicken’s metaphoric uses of insanity and

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2 Haslam was a physician and the Apothecary of Bethlem-Hospital, a mental asylum known colloquially as ‘Bedlam’. In Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901, David Wright states that it was Haslam’s theory (with some moderations) that formed the basis of the 1845 Lunacy Act
address the ambivalent emotions raised by his representation of the mob. Finally, section five addresses ambivalence connected to issues of place and work.

1. Madman or idiot? Dickens’s ambiguous characterizations

John Bowen describes the Victorian historical novel as ‘a hybrid and dynamic form’ that draws on ‘Gothic, melodrama, and farce, satire, romance and tragedy.’ (cited in Duncan 162)

In Dickens’s case, the addition of the sentimental genre is essential, bringing with it the responses of pity and fear, as well as moral lessons. But as I will show when I look at individual characters, he also draws on other narrative traditions and literary influences, which colour his characterizations and sometimes create competing impressions.

The representation of ‘invisible’ disorders provides a challenge for the writer – how does one make the ‘invisible’ visible? Disorders of the mind provide the additional challenge of being subjective in their nature – how can one convey this? Dickens adopts several strategies to solve these two dilemmas. He solves the first by employing melodramatic devices. As Juliet John explains in *Dickens’s Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture*, ‘melodrama is a genre in which surfaces are synonymous with depths.’ (John 111) In this theatrical form, the exterior appearance and dialogue must be made to show what is hidden below the surface. Dickens’s use of gesture, language, and exterior appearances can be described as melodramatic; however, some of the imagery and symbols he uses, for example Barnaby’s ‘costume,’ come from other literary traditions, making this a truly hybrid form.

Dilemma number two remains however – how does one communicate a subjective state of mind? Furthermore, who can judge what constitutes insanity? As I mentioned earlier, the medical perspective on disability is usually absent in Dickens’s novels, and BR is no exception. Subjectivity is created by allowing the ‘so-called insane’ to speak for themselves, and allowing the other characters to offer their opinions on the subject’s mental state. In other words, insanity is represented as a matter of opinion, which I refer to as ‘social’ diagnosis (as opposed to medical diagnosis). The text implies that there is no objective way to pronounce idiocy or madness, which brings the very existence of these mental afflictions into doubt, an extremely ambivalent position. Dickens uses the character of Lord George Gordon to express this opinion within the text:

“It is a bad sign of the wickedness of these times,” said Lord George…“that those who cling to the truth and support the right cause, are set down as mad…”
“He has surely no appearance,” said Lord George, glancing at Barnaby, and whispering in his secretary’s ear, “of being deranged? And even if he had, we must not construe any trifling peculiarity into madness. Which of us” – and here he turned red again – “would be safe, if that were made the law!” (BR 385)

Lord George points to the ease of labelling those we don’t agree with as mad, pointing to the implications this has for individual liberty. His comments also prove that while not everyone perceives Barnaby as an idiot, Lord George fears that others consider he himself is mad.

I believe that his remarks can be linked to extra-textual concerns. As David Wright explains in Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901, there was a great deal of popular and political concern around the issue of the wrongful confinement of sane people in private madhouses in the late eighteenth century, leading to the enactment of the 1774 Madhouses Act. (Wright 47) This issue is contemporary with the time-setting of BR, and Lord George’s anxiety about personal safety appears to reflect this. The issue itself did not go away however; new laws were enacted in 1811, 1824 (a new Madhouses Act) and again in 1845 (Lunacy Act). (Wright 37, 47-48) Thus, it was an issue also contemporary with the writing of the novel, and may provide an analogy to this.

This leads me to another context of a more personal nature for Dickens. In his biography of Dickens, John Forster recalls that Dickens was the subject of extensive rumours in 1840 that he had lost his reason and was being treated in an asylum (Forster 100-01). This infuriated Dickens, leading him to refute ‘the mad report’ in the preface to Master Humphrey’s Clock (Dickens Letters Vol. 2 126 footnote 2). He experienced how easy it is to be framed as mad in public opinion. Seen in this light, Lord George’s remark may be seen as a veiled warning to his readers, not to believe everything they see or hear.

The novel has a third-person omniscient narrator, a convention which normally offers the reader a sense of authority and consistency within the text. However, as Paul Marchbanks points out in his article ‘From Caricature to Character: The Intellectually Disabled in Dickens's Novels Part Two,’ the narrator is inconsistent in his claims about Barnaby, ‘to the last, the narrator continues his contrary claims, insisting in the same breath that Barnaby’s memory has improved and also remains imperfect, that Barnaby largely forgets his London adventures and remembers specific details from them.’ (Marchbanks ‘Part Two’ 82) These contradictions make the narrator an unreliable source of information, contributing to the reader’s uncertainty.
The distinct lack of agreement between all parties creates a deep ambiguity in text. In his analysis of *BR* in *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, J. Hillis Miller refers to the problem of judgement based on comparison, claiming that ‘it is not possible to say that the characters are a little mad, for there is no concept of sanity to which they may be judged.’ (Miller 88) However, I would argue that this is not entirely correct. As I explained in the introduction, the novel is constructed as a triangle, dependent on one point of rationality in opposition to those of idiocy and madness. The rational counterweights to the many ‘so-called insane’ characters and multitude of opinions, remain constant throughout. These are the figures of Gabriel Varden and John Grueby, sentinels of reason. They consistently see two of the main figures in the riots – Barnaby and Lord George, respectively as idiot and madman.

What complicates the text further is that Dickens’s strategy number two, ‘social’ diagnosis, shows the limitations of strategy number one, melodramatic devices. Most of the characters are not able to consistently read the surfaces. The text seems to be critiquing the devices of melodrama at the same time as it employs them, contributing to textual ambivalence. I will now take a closer look at Barnaby, focusing on the opposition in his characterization.

The disabled protagonist

Barnaby as protagonist breaks with a number of literary conventions, which has both intrigued and infuriated critics analysing this novel. Not only is it rare to find an idiot in this role, but it is also unusual to have an absentee protagonist - he actually disappears from the narrative during the central chapters of the novel. This factor draws his protagonist status into doubt. As McKnight explains, ‘Dickens originally intended to entitle the novel *Gabriel Varden—Locksmith of London*, and perhaps, in the end, Varden…is more at the centre of the novel than Barnaby.’ (McKnight 91) Marchbanks links these two issues, claiming that Dickens was hampered by the limitations of the idiot, and solved this by both leaving him out of the mid-section and then finally eliminating ‘his inconsistent disability.’ (Marchbanks ‘Part Two’ 83) This takes the perspective that Dickens ‘made a mistake’ in casting Barnaby as protagonist, a view George Gissing also propounds in his book, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*. Gissing argues that ‘the novel would have been better if the suggestion of a half-witted figure had been discarded.’ (Gissing 127) McKnight, on the other hand, sees this as a sign of Barnaby’s marginal status: ‘Absent from the centre of the novel and silenced at the end, Barnaby is scarcely less marginalized textually than he is in the society Dickens criticizes for
its exclusionary nature.’ (McKnight 89) Her view underlines Dickens’s ambivalence, both reinforcing and criticizing the social status of the idiot at the same time. I will come back to this example of erasure when I address Dickens’s moral constructions of insanity.

Names are often significant in Dickens’s fiction. In Barnaby’s name, there is a connection to the figure of the jester, an entirely different manifestation of the fool. In his book Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English, Eric Partridge refers to this in his definition of the expression ‘Barnaby dance.’ He defines this as: ‘To move quickly or unevenly. ex. ‘Barnaby, an old dance to a quick movement.’ Barnaby, it seems, was a dancing jester.’3 (Partridge 34) This allusion corresponds to Dickens’s character as a quick-moving, dancing fool. However, the connection to the jester, a comic figure whose job it is to make people laugh, is a significant contradiction in his characterization. For throughout the text, Barnaby is one character the reader is never encouraged to laugh at. Chesterton emphasises this aspect of his character in Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, saying that ‘laughter is not the object of Barnaby Rudge’s oddities. His idiot costume and his ugly raven are used for the purpose of the pure grotesque; solely to make a kind of Gothic sketch.’ (Chesterton 70)

While Chesterton sees Barnaby’s ‘grotesque’ appearance as a colourful period detail, an attempt to create the aesthetics of the seventeenth century, Michael Hollington points out that the grotesque meant more than this to Dickens. In the preface of his book Dickens and the Grotesque, Hollington says that ‘Dickens used the aesthetic of the grotesque in a satirical way, to criticize a society which disapproved of the grotesque.’ (n. pag.) As a satirical figure, this suggests a connection between the figure of Barnaby and the traditional role of the fool, one who is licenced to mock order and authority with impunity, turning the order of things on their head. His role in the riots, leading the mob and throwing stones at the guards, while getting a pardon for this afterwards as a consequence of his special protected status, tends to support this idea.

McKnight interprets Barnaby’s appearance as a sign of his role as ‘holy fool.’ She perceives his tattered clothing with its collection of feathers and lace as a fairly conventional version of the fool’s motley, a visual sign of his otherworldliness and mystical nature (McKnight 82). He confuses dreams with reality, and interprets the natural world in a poetic manner, seeing gold in the sky and interpreting the moon’s reflection as ‘the other moon that

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3 The full entry reads: ‘To move quickly or unevenly: C. 18-19 coll. Ex ‘Barnaby, an old dance to a quick movement (Grose 2nd ed.) popular in C. 17. Barnaby, it seems, was a dancing jester.’ (Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English).
lives in the water’ (BR 368) Barnaby’s interpretations are full of imagination – whether he is seeing figures in the smoke going up the chimney, or thinking that his shadow is an independent being that leads him. Some of his observations seem to be prescient, such as the scene in which he perceives the clothes hanging on the line as people. He says:

“Do you mark how they whisper in each other’s ears; then dance and leap, to make believe they are in sport? Do you see how they stop for a moment, when they think there is no one looking, and mutter among themselves again; and then how they roll and gambol, delighted with the mischief they’ve been plotting?...” (BR 92-93)

While McKnight sees this as a reference to John Chester’s plotting, it seems to me more likely a premonition of the riots; the plotting of Lord George and Gashford, and Barnaby’s fellow rioters, Hugh and Ned Dennis. It may also echo a particular scene in OT (published prior to BR), referred to by John Carey in The Violent Effigy, in which Fagin observes how ‘vigorous men’ are changed into ‘dangling heaps of clothes’ on being hung on the gallows. (Carey 20) Most of the rioters, Hugh and Ned included, do end up hanging on the gallows. Dickens did sometimes ‘recycle’ ideas and this may be an example.

Barnaby’s imagination stands in strong contrast to Locke’s definition, with its emphasis on the idiot’s absence of ideas; he has ideas but they are often wrong. This has led some critics to interpret Barnaby as a madman rather than an idiot. Gissing reflects this viewpoint in his analysis of Barnaby: ‘Crazy, I call him; an idiot he certainly is not. An idiot does not live a life of exalted imagination. But certain lunatics are of imagination all compact, and Barnaby, poetically speaking, makes a good representative of the class.’ (Gissing 127) Gissing’s point would be valid if Barnaby was a mimetic portrait of idiocy. But he is clearly a mixture of different fool traditions, which creates a many-faceted but confusing figure. I agree with Patrick McDonagh, who says that ‘Barnaby is an idiot because, for Dickens and his readers, the idea of idiocy best performs the appropriate symbolic labour in this novel.’ (McDonagh Idiocy: A Cultural History 181). As I will discuss in section two, Dickens makes an important distinction between madness and idiocy in his moral construction of disability. Barnaby’s congenital affliction is firmly connected to his role as ‘moral hostage’.

Another element in Barnaby’s characterization which creates unsettling oppositions is Dickens’s allusion to the fairy or folk tale figure of the changeling. The Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary describes it as ‘a child taken or left by the fairies in place of another—
usually an undersized, crabbed child.’

This impression, of a sinister otherworldly figure, is expressed in Barnaby’s mother’s remembrances of him as a young child:

The little stratagems she had devised to try him, the little tokens he had given in his childish way—not of dullness but of something infinitely worse, so ghastly and unchild-like in its cunning—came back as vividly as if but yesterday had intervened. The room in which they used to be; the spot in which his cradle stood; he, old and elfin-like in face, but ever dear to her, gazing at her with a wild and vacant eye, and crooning some uncouth song as she sat by and rocked him.’ (BR 202)

This is quite a frightening portrayal of the disabled child, contrasting with the usual image of an infant as innocent and sweet. There is almost something demonic in the description – his deceitfulness, his old face on a young child, and his ‘uncouth’ singing. It completely opposes the eternal child figure Barnaby is otherwise presented as in the text, confusing the issue of his inherent innocence.

The real idiot

It should be clear by now that those expecting to find a mimetic figure of the idiot in Barnaby are looking in the wrong place. As Gissing indicates, it is in fact John Willett who is ‘all but a born idiot, in the proper sense of the word.’ (208). While Gissing admired Dickens’s portrayal, referring to it as ‘one of his masterpieces’ (ibid), I believe that it brings into focus Dickens’s ambivalent attitudes towards intellectual disability. This is one of the examples of Dickens the entertainer coming into conflict with Dickens the humanist. For while it is ‘out of bounds’ to laugh at the idiot Barnaby, the imbecilic John Willett is presented as fair game.

Described by the narrator as a ‘burly, large-headed man with a fat face, which betokened profound obstinacy and slowness of apprehension, combined with a very strong reliance upon his own merits,’ (BR 11) the consistency of his characterization stands in strong contrast to the inconsistency of Barnaby’s. Throughout the text, it is his obstinacy, slow intellect and high opinion of himself that are emphasised, in many variations on the theme. He is frequently portrayed staring insensibly at the boiler, or unable to respond to questions. The butt of much of the humour in the novel, it is his stupidity we are encouraged to laugh at.

In Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter, James Kincaid discusses the aggressive and hostile aspect of laughter, quoting Arthur Koestler’s remark that there is ‘a component of

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4 According to the same dictionary, ‘crabbed ‘ means ill-natured: harsh: rough: rugged: crooked: knotted: undecipherable.’ (Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary). I presume that the figure of the changeling was crooked.
malice, of debasement of the other fellow, and of aggressive-defensive self-assertion … in laughter—a tendency diametrically opposed to sympathy, helpfulness, and identification of the self with others.’ (Kincaid 9-10) His portrayal is fundamentally unsympathetic, and this is emphasized in his violent come-uppance later in the story, which foreshadows the textual treatment of Silas Wegg in OMF, another disabled male target of Dickens’s humour who I will examine in Chapter Three. Just prior to his attack, he is shown laughing inwardly at the ‘folly’ of his friends, who set off for London to see if the rumours of rioting are true. Ironically, it is the rioters who attack him and completely destroy his inn. He is assaulted and made insensible by fear; in what remains of the story, he never recovers from the shock. This textual punishment seems out of proportion for a slow-witted man who is simply a bit of a bully.

2. Dickens’s moral construction of insanity
Guilt vs. innocence

As I outlined in Chapter One, a central site of ambivalence in Dickens’s novels lies in his moral construction of disability, in which there is an opposition between guilty and innocent forms of disability. In BR, this takes the form of two disorders, both classified under the heading of insanity at that time. Madness, in all its variants, is seen as a guilty state, requiring punishment. Idiocy, represented by Barnaby himself, is inherently innocent, requiring protection. While proclaiming the place of the intellectually disabled in society one hand, he demonizes those suffering from psychiatric disorders on the other; yet this latter group was equally marginalized and possibly feared more, because this was an affliction that could affect anybody at any time. If we look at John Haslam’s influential medical definition of 1823, we find a possible reason for Dickens’s division. According to Haslam, ‘idiocy began ex-nativitate and was permanent (incurable); lunacy began at a late stage of life but could be temporary’ (Wright 15). According to my outline of Dickens’s guilty-disabled construction, disability is a sign of moral vice in his novels. An unborn child cannot be morally corrupted; therefore, a congenital disorder must be one that is inherently innocent.

Guilty madmen
According to Forster, Dickens’s original plan for the novel was that the Gordon Riots should be ordered, led and controlled by three escaped Bedlamites\(^5\) (Forster 106). While Forster apparently dissuaded Dickens from this (for reasons he doesn’t expand upon), it is clear that the leaders of the riots are in fact, for the most part, mad. Lord George Gordon, the leader of the ‘No-Popery’ movement, along with the fictional characters of Hugh and Ned Dennis, are all, in their various ways, portrayed as mad. The same applies to the masses who they rallied, referred to in the text as ‘the mob.’ While I shall return to Lord George, Ned Dennis and the mob in other sections, I am going to turn my attention now to another mad character who belongs to a different strand of the plot, namely Old Rudge, Barnaby’s father.

Gothic madness

In Dickens’s characterization of Old Rudge, madness is linked to criminality. This madman is dangerous and frightening, awakening the fear aspect of the sentimental dyad. The murderer’s moral depravity is not just written on his mind; in true melodramatic fashion, his face is also marked clearly with physiognomic\(^6\) markers. Rudge has a ‘naturally harsh expression,’ with a ‘a deep gash, now healed into an ugly seam’ on his cheekbone. ‘His complexion is of a cadaverous hue’ and he is ‘meanly and poorly clad’ (BR 14-15). Like the reader, the man of reason, Varden, notices these markers instantly, saying to Rudge, ‘you don’t carry in your countenance a letter of recommendation.’ (BR 30-31)

Rudge is haunted by his guilty conscience, forced to relive his crime in an existence which appears to be a living hell: ‘I, that in the form of a man live the life of a hunted beast; that in the body am a spirit, a ghost upon the earth, a thing from which all creatures shrink, save those curst beings of another world, who will not leave me…’ (BR 141) Rudge’s madness is not simply a sign of moral vice; it is also a form of punishment. However, it is not sufficient for Dickens’s fictional world. As one of guilty disabled who refuse to repent, he must be eliminated from the ‘good society’. The solution to his madness lies not in the mental asylum, but rather in the prison and ultimately on the gallows. I will return to this point under the heading Place.

The moral hostage

\(^5\) Inmates of Bethlem-Hospital, a mental asylum known colloquially as ‘Bedlam’.

\(^6\) I discussed this concept in Chapter One, under the heading ‘Dickens’s moral construction of disability.’
Barnaby fulfils the role of the ‘moral hostage’ that I outlined in Chapter One. Barnaby is held to account for his father’s bloody double murder. This dark crime has ‘darkened the intellect’ of the innocent Barnaby while still in his mother’s womb, a result of his mother’s shock on confronting her blood-stained husband. Barnaby’s condition is part of a curse that Rudge has brought on his family through his immoral actions, as Mrs Rudge makes clear when she visits Rudge in prison:

“…The hand of Him who set his curse on murder, is heavy on us now. You cannot doubt it. Our son, our innocent boy, on whom His anger fell before his birth, is in this place in peril of his life – brought here by your guilt; yes, by that alone, as Heaven sees and knows, for he has been led astray in the darkness of his intellect, and that is the terrible consequence of your crime.” (BR 586)

Mrs Rudge interprets Barnaby’s condition in a religious framework, as a form of divine punishment.

While the cause of Barnaby’s idiocy may seem like melodramatic exaggeration to today’s reader, it was part of a commonly accepted theory known as ‘maternal impression,’ as Patrick McDonagh explains in *Idiocy: A Cultural History*:

‘The link between women and idiocy expressed itself in many forms, with one of the most powerful being the resilient theory of maternal impressions: that is, the belief that the imagination of the pregnant woman, fed by desires and fear, often expressed itself upon the body of the unborn infant, leaving everything from birthmarks to womanish boys to damaged intellects.’ (McDonagh 124-25)

In addition to his damaged intellect, Barnaby also has a birthmark, which looks like a bloodstain, another visual reminder of Old Rudge’s crime. While Old Rudge never repents, he is brought to justice and finally hanged, lifting the curse on Barnaby. It is at this point in the narrative that the formerly ‘soul-less’ Barnaby begins his remarkable improvement, beginning with his soul:

‘He, a poor idiot, caged in his narrow cell, was as much lifted up to God, while gazing on that mild light, as the freest and most favoured man in all the spacious city; and in his ill-remembered prayer, and in the fragment of the childish hymn, with which he sung and crooned himself asleep, there breathed as true a spirit as ever studied homily expressed, or old cathedral arches echoed.’ (BR 585)

This stands in strong contrast to the first time Barnaby is presented in the text, when the narrator says ‘the absence of a soul is far more terrible in a living man than in a dead one; and
in this unfortunate being its noblest powers were wanting.’ (BR 38) This seems to be a reference to Locke’s theory, that idiots lacked a rational soul (Locke 571).

Not only does Barnaby develop a soul, but he becomes rational as well. At the end of the novel, the narrator tells us that Barnaby ‘became, in other respects, more rational...he had a better memory and greater steadiness of purpose.’ (BR 660) This formerly restless wanderer becomes a settled farmer in the pastoral idyll of the Maypole Farm, able to support his mother, at the end of his fairy-tale transformation. The reward for Barnaby’s virtue is a firm place in Dickens’s ‘good society.’ As I discussed in Chapter One, what is problematic about this form of ending is that it erases the disability Dickens sought to include. Marchbanks lays emphasis on this underlying sense that Dickens didn’t really foresee a place for the disabled in his fictional ‘good society,’ saying that ‘Dickens apparently felt that re-assimilating this important character into a predictable, comedic ending marked by renewed communities and requisite marriages required recasting Barnaby as someone who could be a more equal member of that welcoming circle.’ (Marchbanks ‘Part Two’ 83). This is an important site of Dickens’s ambivalence.

Throughout his writing career, Dickens came back to the figure of the idiot several times. Sloppy in OMF, who I shall return to in Chapter Three, is another example of an apparently intellectually-disabled character who undergoes an improvement. He is taught to read and even learns a trade. However, Sloppy’s improvement seems to be a reflection of changes being made in the treatment of idiots, which Dickens witnessed during a visit to Park House Asylum in 1853 and documented in his article ‘Idiots,’ rather than the magic wand approach he adopts with Barnaby.

3. Other identity factors – gender and class
The gendering of insanity
In this novel, insanity is primarily a male enterprise. Women can be fools however, of the more common variety, as we see in the portrayals of Dolly Varden (a vain fool), Miss Miggs (a fool in love), Mrs Varden (a spoilt and pretentious fool) and Mrs Rudge (a fool for her husband).

In Fictions of Affliction, Stoddard Holmes points to the connection between the adult male disabled and the negative stereotype of the begging imposter; part of the sentimental

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7 This article was co-authored by W.H. Wills, and appeared in Household Words on 4 June 1853. (Rpt. in The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens: Household Words 1850-1859. Volume II. Ed. Harry Stone).
gendering that constructs disabled men as suspicious. (Stoddard Holmes 95-96). While we
don’t find a genuine example of this in BR, Barnaby is confused with this type by the country judge. Nonetheless, like the begging imposter, the madmen of BR are portrayed in a negative manner. This is also consistent with the madmen in some of Dickens’s other novels, such as Gridley in BH, Blandois in LD and Headstone in OMF. They are all dangerous and threatening figures, who create fear in the reader.

_Madwomen_ are much rarer in Dickens’s fiction. While they don’t feature in BR (except as faceless members of the mob), they can be found in some of his other works. Miss Flite in BH and Miss Havisham in GE are examples. They are far less threatening than madmen – in fact, Miss Flite is positively harmless, while Miss Havisham is confined within her self-made prison and can only threaten the world through her proxy, Estella. Dickens seems to be reflecting Victorian gender norms in these portrayals; women are generally confined to a restricted sphere, unable to influence the outside world to the same extent as men.

**Different classes of insanity**

In _Dickens and Crime_, Philip Collins makes the claim that Dickens showed more warmth towards the aristocracy than to the class just above himself (Collins 189). This seems to be reflected in his depictions of upper-class madness in BR, which are far more moderate and civilized than the lower-class madmen of the narrative. This sits rather uneasily with the image of the man alleged to be ‘a sympathiser with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed,’ suggesting he actually had more sympathy for the privileged insane. These class distinctions can be found in the type of language used to describe madness in the two levels of society represented. The afflictions of Lord George and Geoffrey Haredale, the Catholic squire, are described mildly as sadness, melancholy, uneasiness, false enthusiasm, and sorrow. In contrast, Hugh, Ned and the rioters are characterized as frenzied savages and beasts, the very opposite of civilized.

**The deluded lord**

Despite BR being a historical novel, very few of the characters are actually historic. Lord George Gordon is one of the few. Although he instigated the uprising that became known by his name, the Gordon Riots, he gets off surprisingly lightly in Dickens’s novel. Forster reacted negatively to this factor, objecting ‘to some points in his view of this madman, stated
much too favourably.’ (Forster 106) This provoked a response from Dickens which displayed a fundamental sympathy for this particular *madman*:

‘Say what you please of Gordon, he must have been at heart a kind man, and a lover of the despised and rejected, after his own fashion….He never got anything by his madness, and never sought it. The wildest and most raging attacks of the time allow him these merits: and not to let him have ‘em in their full extent, remembering what a (politically) wicked time he lived, would lie upon my conscience heavily.’ (Forster 106)

Dickens makes a clear value judgement here, emphasising the qualities of kindness and love of the despised and rejected, which is very close to the description of Dickens himself on his epitaph. His sympathetic portrayal of Lord George may in part be attributable to shared values; a form of identification with the leader of the Riots.

This sympathetic treatment of the lord’s mental affliction is made clear by the narrator in this passage, as he plans his rally with his secretary Gashford:

It was striking to observe his very bright large eye, which betrayed a restlessness of thought and purpose, singularly at variance with the studied composure and sobriety of his mien, and with his quaint and sad apparel. It had nothing harsh or cruel in its expression; neither had his face, which was thin and mild, and wore an air of melancholy; but it was suggestive of an indefinable uneasiness, which infected those who looked upon him, and filled them with a kind of pity for the man: though why it should do so, they would have had some trouble to explain. (*BR* 283)

The upper-class *madman* is constructed as an object of pity rather than fear in this description, a kind of pity that the narrator cannot explain (which perhaps also reflects Dickens’s own inexplicable sympathy for the man).

The novel presents Lord George as the misguided pawn of his conniving secretary, Gashford (a purely fictional character). Gashford is described along conventional melodramatic villain lines, with an ‘overhanging brow, a pair of eyes that seemed to have made an unnatural retreat into his head, and to have dug themselves a cave to hide in. His manner was smooth and humble, but very sly and slinking.’ (*BR* 283) This suggests that Dickens projects any negative traits that might have been attributable to the real-life Gordon over on to this fictional villain. The worst aspect of Lord George’s character, according to the narrator, is weakness, not *madness*: ‘A nature prone to false enthusiasm, and the vanity of being a leader, were the worst qualities apparent in his composition. All the rest was
weakness – sheer weakness; and it is the unhappy lot of thoroughly weak men, that their very sympathies, affections, confidences – all the qualities which in better constituted minds are virtues – dwindle into foibles or turn into downright vices.’ (BR 292-3) While weakness is excusable in a lord, it is worthy of criticism in the oppressed masses who later riot in the streets.

As if to link Lord George’s affliction to the innocent affliction of idiocy, his description is sometimes quite similar to Barnaby. They both have reddish hair, and dress in clothing that distinguishes them from others, causing them to be ridiculed. There is also a suggestion of the visionary in Lord George, who has a premonitory dream about becoming a Jew. Lord George’s ‘very bright, large eye, which betrayed a restlessness of thought and purpose’ (BR 283) is not unlike Barnaby, with his ‘restless looks’ and ‘the glassy lustre of his large protruding eyes’ (BR 37). When they meet, neither of them perceives the other as insane, suggesting that they are alike.

The issue of textual punishment is a vexed one for this sympathetic madman. The text follows briefly the course of the real-life Gordon’s internment, trial and subsequent acquittal. There is no protest from Dickens the social critic, against the inequities of the legal system, with different rules for the rich and the poor. This in itself is surprising, for according to Christopher Hibbert’s historical account of the riots in King Mob: The Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780, the real-life Gordon’s acquittal was nothing short of a miracle, the result of extremely talented legal representation. (Hibbert n. pag.) Instead, Dickens’s narrative highlights his good deeds in prison after he is later jailed for other offences. The epitaph given him by the narrator shows very similar sentiments to Dickens’s own:

Many men with fewer sympathies for the distressed and needy, with many less abilities and harder hearts, have made a shining figure and left a brilliant fame. He had his mourners. The prisoners bemoaned his loss, and missed him; for though his means were not large his charity was great, and in bestowing alms among them he considered the necessities of all alike, and he knew no distinction of sect or creed. There are wise men in the highways of the world who may learn something, even from the poor crazy Lord who died in Newgate.’ (BR 56)

This stops little short of sanctification; it is heroization. The emphasis is on the poor man’s generosity, not his misdeeds. He is constructed as an object of pity to the last, ‘the poor crazy Lord.’
The punishment of Lord George stands in strong contrast to the fictional fate of Ned Dennis, who is loosely based upon the real-life figure of the executioner, Edward Dennis. In reality, Dennis was pardoned for his part in the riots, allowing him to execute some of his fellow rioters. (‘Early English hangmen’ n. pag.) Dickens’s novel, which paints him as a lower-class homicidal maniac, reverses this treatment. He is given ‘poetic justice,’ hanged on his own gallows. I will return to Dennis when I briefly discuss work later in the chapter. Dickens’s selectivity in choosing the facts from the historical accounts of the riots that suit his fictional version of events is quite clear; so too is his lack of hesitation in changing historical figures according to his own sympathies.

4. Metaphoric madness

The madness of the lower classes in BR, whether it affects individuals or the mob as a whole, is seen to be a product of social conditions. Therefore, they are all in a sense ‘moral hostages’ – innocent victims of society’s indifference to their living conditions, poverty and ignorance. This aspect of the novel displays very clearly Dickens’s role as social critic, using madness as a means to show society the effects of its neglect on an entire class. This has been seen by a number of critics as a reference to the Chartist movement, and related forms of unrest in the 1830s.

Barnaby’s twin

Hugh is the individual representative of the lower classes, their ‘human/beast’ face, as opposed to the ‘faceless’ mob. I also see him as a ‘twin’ for Barnaby. Stoddard Holmes discusses the motif of the twin in melodramatic representations of disability, ‘that pairs a disabled woman with a non-disabled one and gives them distinctly different physical, emotional and marital futures.’ (Stoddard Holmes 38) In BR, there is a male variant of this twin structure in Hugh and Barnaby’s relationship.

We also see a double-utilization of the ‘moral hostage’ model; both of these characters can be described as the ‘moral hostages’ of their fathers. However, in a broader sense, they are also examples of society’s ‘moral hostages,’ products of social neglect. In this light, the ‘moral hostage’ model can be seen as connected to Dickens’s role as social critic. The twin structure allows Dickens to present two possible futures for these two ‘moral hostages,’ showing the different consequences if society makes amends for its ‘vices’ or continues to mistreat the lower classes. In Barnaby’s case, the ‘moral hostage’ is saved, by the warm-
hearted intervention and care of society (represented by its upstanding members, Varden and Haredale, who save him from the gallows). He then becomes a useful member of society. However, in Hugh’s case, society refuses to make amends. On his way to the gallows, this character, who describes himself as ‘more brute than man,’ (BR 621) makes an impassioned speech, in which he indicates that his fate is the direct result of his social conditions:

“What else should teach me—me, born as I was born, and reared as I have been—to hope for any mercy in this hardened, cruel, unrelenting place!...On that black tree, of which I am the ripened fruit, I do invoke the curse of all its victims, past, present and to come.’ (BR 622)

Hugh becomes a mouthpiece for Dickens’s criticism of the death penalty which, as Anna Schwan points out in her article ‘Crime,’ he opposed at the time of writing BR (although he would later modify this, becoming an opponent of public executions). (Schwan 305) He wrote that ‘an execution is well-known to be an utterly useless, barbarous, and brutalizing sight, and because the sympathy of all beholders, who have any sympathy at all, is certain to be always with the criminal, and never with the law,’ in his letters to the Daily News in 1846, later published in the article ‘Capital Punishment.’ (Dickens ‘Cap. Punishment’ 38) Through the figure of Hugh and the rioters, Dickens the social critic makes a link between socially-induced madness, crime and the death penalty.

Collective madness

Mental disorder becomes social disorder, in Dickens’s extended thematic expression of madness in BR. The narrator describes the rioters as a ‘vast throng, sprinkled doubtless here and there with honest zealots, but composed for the most part of the very scum and refuse of London, whose growth was fostered by bad criminal laws, bad prison regulations, and the worst conceivable police.’ (BR 393). Society’s corruption has polluted the minds of these individuals, and united them into the form of a ‘mad monster.’ (ibid) In his characterization of the mob, Dickens as social critic again chooses selectively from historic sources to make his point. For while Hibbert makes mention on a number of occasions of gentlemen being among the rioters in his factual account of the riots, these middle or upper class rioters are notably absent from Dickens’s text (despite the fact that Hibbert and Dickens consulted many of the same historical sources). (Hibbert 126)

In a reference to Hugh’s mistaken cry of ‘No Property’ instead of ‘No Popery,’ Lyn Pykett connects the riots in Dickens’s novel with the ‘no property’ riots of the 1830s – the
Poor Law Riots, the Chartist risings at Devizes, Birmingham and Sheffield, and the attempts to free Chartist prisoners in the Newport rising of 1839 (Pykett Critical Issues: *Charles Dickens* 71). She questions Dickens’s stance, asking ‘shouldn’t Dickens be on the side of the common man, rather than demonizing them as a mob?’ (71) This is potentially another side of Dickens’s ambivalence, seemingly at odds with the humanistic ‘sympathizer with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed.’

In his article, ‘Reading the Gordon Riots in 1841: Social Violence and Moral Management in *Barnaby Rudge,*’ Scott Dransfield argues that while it is well-established that the novel has ‘much to say in regard to Chartist demonstrations and threats of working-class violence,’ critics have overlooked ‘its representations of insanity and criminality and the social context from which they emerge.’ (Dransfield 70) I agree with Dransfield; the source of the mob’s *madness* is a central issue, and it is connected primarily with frustration and fury rather than religious or political motivations. As the narrator says, ‘The great mass never reasoned or thought at all, but were stimulated by their own headlong passions, by poverty, by ignorance, by the love of mischief, and the hope of plunder.’ (*BR* 421) Dransfield points out that ‘the mob is constructed essentially as an apolitical entity; it is driven not by any political rally, but by pathological impulses inherent in its nature.’ (Dransfield 83) This second point is, I believe, the most problematic aspect of Dickens’s characterization of the mob – the implication that they have a ‘natural propensity toward madness and criminality,’ as Dransfield expresses it. (69) Their primitive savagery is depicted as existing just below the surface, needing very little encouragement to break out. In essence, it seems to indicate that underneath Dickens’s sympathy lies a sense of repulsion and fear of the base nature of the lower classes.

Another aspect of the mob’s *madness* that requires attention is the fuel that drives it, namely alcohol. One gets the impression that the riots would have been very soon over if their access to liquor had been obstructed. Many of the images of insensible drunkenness that Dickens conjures up are truly horrific, as he describes rioters setting themselves and their friends alight.

Men who had been into cellars, and had staved the casks, rushed to and fro stark mad, setting fire to all they saw—often to the dresses of their own friends—and kindling the building in so many parts that some had no time for escape…’ (*BR* 442)

There were men who rushed up to the fire, and paddled in it with their hands as if in
water; and others who were restrained by force from plunging in, to gratify their
deadly longing.’ (BR 444)

The intensity of these images stands in violent contrast to the moderate drinking of the man of
sense, Varden, enjoying his Toby jug of beer. Again, class distinctions surface in the image of
alcohol consumption in the novel. While the upper and middle class characters know where to
draw the line, the lower-class characters have no control over their drinking.

In both his fiction and his articles, Dickens displays an ambivalent attitude towards
alcohol, arguing that no-one should be deprived of this source of pleasure while at the same
time acknowledging its role in social disorder and abuse. He wrote many articles addressing
the subject; one such example is the pamphlet ‘Sunday Under Three Heads’ published in
1836, in which he describes the taverns of the working classes as ‘crowded, but there is no
drunkenness or brawling, for the class of men who commit the enormity of making Sunday
excursions, take their families with them.’ (Dickens ‘Sunday’ 478) This idyllic image is
contrasted with the following later in the article:

There is a darker side to this picture, on which… I wish to lay particular stress. In
some parts of London…drunkenness and profligacy in their most disgusting forms,
exhibit in the open streets on Sunday a sad and a degrading spectacle…Women with
scarcely the articles of apparel which common decency requires, with forms bloated
by disease, and faces rendered hideous by habitual drunkenness – men reeling and
staggering along – children in rags and filth – whole streets of squalid and miserable
appearance, whose inhabitants are lounging in the public road, fighting, screaming,
and swearing.’ (483-4)

His disgust is clear, but at the same time he perceives the root cause of their misery as
poverty. This scene has its parallel in BR: ‘They lay in heaps around this fearful pond,
husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, women with children in their
arms and babies at their breasts, and drank until they died.’ (BR 547) Alcohol clearly poses a
threat to the sanctity of the lower-class family, destroying men, women and children – a
pitiful picture. At the same time, his drunken rioters are described as savages and beasts, less
than human and beyond pity, a clear example of his ambivalence.

In his descriptions of the mad mob, Dickens uses powerful and sometimes conflicting
metaphors. The oppositions of fire and water are used. The mob’s madness is also likened to
disease – ‘a moral plague ran through the city…The contagion spread, like a dread fever: an
infectious madness’ (BR 421). Dickens is playing on historical fears in his depiction – the
Fires of London, river floods and the Plague – creating powerful images of terror and helplessness. The excitement of the scenes he creates blurs the distinction between his role as social critic and entertainer; one can sense the push-pull combination of fascination and repulsion in his images. His enjoyment of this part of the writing process is confirmed in his letters, as Forster relates:

On the 11th of September he wrote: “I have just burnt into Newgate, and am going in the next number to tear the prisoners out by the hair of their heads…” This was followed by a week later: “I have let all the prisoners out of Newgate, burnt down Lord Mansfield’s and played the very devil. Another number will finish the fires, and help us on towards the end. I feel quite smoky when I am at work.” (Forster 107)

This suggests that he was swept along by the writing process, fuelled by emotion rather than a well-thought out political agenda. I think it is important to bear this in mind when analysing his more melodramatic sections of text; not to ‘over-read’ this, but to be aware of the entertainer at work, sometimes at odds with the social critic.

5. Belonging

Place

While the text of *BR* makes clear that the place for the idiot is within the protecting fold of the community, it is less certain about the place for the mad. Bedlam is a place to be feared – worse than a prison, judging by the fear its inmates inspire in others. The mere threat of the rioters to break it open and let the inmates out is enough to drive ‘many sane men nearly mad themselves.’ (BR 535) However, it remains a threatening shadow in the background, never an explored space in the novel. Despite the abuses of the Victorian insane asylum, this is one institution that Dickens never criticizes in his fiction. In fact, he barely mentions it at all. Dransfield observes that ‘BR is about the lack of care for the insane.’ (Dransfield 71) However, I see no sign in it of a concern with the care of the madman, only the idiot, an example of Dickens’s ambivalent presentation of insanity. As far as the text goes, it seems that prison and the gallows are the only options for the mad.

Dickens avoids going into any detail about the trials of the rioters. Only Barnaby is granted a pardon, although the reader never knows just how Varden and Haredale prove his innocence. The others (with the exception of Lord George) are all hanged. But in the trials of the real rioters, there were pleas of insanity. (Old Bailey Proceedings Online n. pag.) A ruling of insanity at that time was a guarantee of liberty for the accused. Dickens entirely ignores
this issue; it doesn’t seem to fit in with his moral program of eradicating the mad from his ‘good society.’

While he avoids asylums in his novels, he visited them frequently in real life, as documented in many of his letters and articles. In ‘Bedlam Revisited: Dickens and Notions of Madness,’ Mitsuharu Matsuoka makes the claim that Dickens ‘sought to bring to the general public a greater awareness of how mental illness was being treated,’ (Matsuoka 230). While this is true of his non-fiction, his fiction shows them not being treated at all. As Dickens’s non-fiction work suggests, such as the article ‘A Curious Dance around a Curious Tree,’ it cannot have been for lack of critical conditions to protest about. This ambivalence about psychiatric institutions is striking. Matsuoka reports that Dickens refused to publish a story by Wilkie Collins in Household Words ‘because “editorial caution led him to be nervous about upsetting readers whose own families might be afflicted by ‘hereditary insanity’”’ (Matsuoka 230) Yet so many of his own novels, intended for the same audience, portray insanity.

Another theory suggests itself, in Dickens’s broad network of friends. He maintained close friendships with a number of prominent figures in mental health care, such as John Connolly.8 It may be that Dickens avoidance of the asylum as a fictional setting is grounded in a desire to avoid offending his friends.

Work

While work is always in the background in Dickens’s novels, its intersections with disability in BR are less complex than OMF, which I shall discuss in Chapter Three. In Barnaby’s case, the ability to work is a sign of his improvement – a positive image of work, allowing him to contribute to his mother’s welfare and the little community of the Maypole.

The opposite image is presented in the figure of the hangman, Ned Dennis, whose occupation is connected with homicidal mania in BR. Dennis is living proof that in Dickens’s fictional world, there is a job suited to everyone’s talents. However, the text never makes it clear whether his occupation has caused his madness, or whether he has chosen his occupation because he was mad to start with. While he is a parody of the Protestant work ethic, referring to his profession as ‘sound, Protestant, constitutional, English work,’ (BR 301) there is also a more serious message behind his portrayal. Dennis forms a part of Dicken’s social criticism of capital punishment, questioning what the job of state-sanctioned killer does

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8 Conolly was the director of Hanwood Asylum and later co-founder of England’s first exclusive asylum for idiots, Earlswood. Dickens visited both places.
to a man. Dennis is clearly corrupt, and what is worse, has delusions that he is above the law. Dickens returned to the figure of the hangman in his article, ‘The Finishing School Master,’ published in 1851. Dickens refers to him as an educator of the people, pointing out ironically that this is ‘the only State Education the State can adjust to the perfect satisfaction of its conscience.’ (Dickens ‘Finishing School Master’ 334) Once again, he combines humour with this dark aspect of society.

Chapter Three
Mixed messages about mobility disorders in Our Mutual Friend

‘Do the work that’s nearest,
Though it’s dull at whiles,
Helping, when we meet them,
Lame dogs over stiles;’

Excerpt from Charles Kingsley’s poem, ‘The Invitation: To Tom Hughes’ (1856)

“‘No one is useless in this world,’” retorted the Secretary, “who lightens the burden of it for any one else.”

Charles Dickens (OMF 520)

Introduction
First published in 1864-65, Our Mutual Friend was Dickens’s last completed novel. In keeping with his much of his fiction, it features a selection of disabled characters, suffering from physical, mental and cognitive disabilities. The afflicted characters, while not the main protagonists, perform important functions within the narrative, in relation to genre, themes and plot. In Chapter Two, I explored the textual meanings of ‘invisible disabilities’ - mental and cognitive disorders, through Dickens’s use of the dichotomy of insanity in BR. To complement this, I will now turn my attention to the presentation and functions of physical disability - in particular, mobility disorders.

The crippled/lame feature prominently as disability stereotypes, not only in Dickens’s work and other Victorian literature, but also stretching far back in time to biblical narrative and the classical tradition. While Dickens is responsible for creating one of the most widely-recognized sentimental constructions of the cripple in his character, Tiny Tim, I find that his use of mobility disorders defies simple classification according to sentimental stereotypes. It conveys (and at times obscures) many other meanings which contribute to the contradictions in Dickens’s work.

My exploration of this text is divided into four main sections. In the first section I examine how Dickens’s representations of mobility disorders can be identified with a number of different genres, narrative traditions and literary modes, defying critics who insist on consigning Dickens’s disabled to the sentimental genre. I discuss how this mixture of genres and their accompanying stereotypes creates oppositions in the individual characters Silas Wegg, Jenny Wren and Eugene Wrayburn, giving different meanings to their disabilities and making it difficult for the reader to interpret them. I also place Dickens’s moral constructions of disability into the framework of genre. In section two, I look at how personal identity factors, such as gender, sexuality/sexual orientation, and class, impact upon representations of
disability, further complicating the significance and meanings of disability. Probing beyond the surface, I examine the symbolic use of disability to bear the burden of society’s taboos, in addition to its metaphoric functions, used to comment on limitations imposed by society and the class system. In the third section, I explore the issue of belonging, focusing primarily on the related factors of work and place. Here again, I find that Dickens’s fictional projections are not as straightforward as critics have suggested, but are full of contradictions which draw into question his attitude towards the place of the disabled in his vision of the good society. Examples of erasure and omission contribute to this impression of ambiguity. Finally, I examine the connection between disability and one of the overriding themes of the novel, mutuality.

While my primary focus is on the text of *OMF*, I also refer to other texts by Dickens, both fiction and non-fiction. The Victorian context and the texts of other writers and commentators who influenced Dickens are mentioned where appropriate, in assessing whether Dickens challenges or reinforces prevailing attitudes. The sum of this chapter will attest to a lack of unity in his employment of disability which suggest deep-seated contradictions, showing Dickens the writer and entertainer at variance with Dickens the humanitarian and social critic.

1. How Dickens’s idiosyncratic mix of literary genres, narrative traditions and literary modes affect his portrayals of disability

In his pamphlet *The Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine proposes that the distance between the sublime and the ridiculous is never very far, and Dickens’s novels tend to exemplify this theory, not least in his portrayals of disability. These outer points are represented by Jenny Wren and Silas Wegg in *OMF*; Jenny’s spiritual connections to the world beyond this one belong to the sublime aesthetic, while the subplot featuring Wegg shows him often to be ridiculous, especially with regard to his social aspirations. While Jenny’s spiritual dimension is heightened by her suffering, Wegg’s plans to rise in the world are comically hindered by his wooden leg. In *OMF*, Dickens draws on a wide range of literary and theatrical genres and narrative traditions which employ disability in different and at times opposing ways. Sentimental, melodramatic and sensational character and plot elements are combined with

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9 ‘The sublime and the ridiculous are often so nearly related that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime makes the ridiculous, and one step above the ridiculous makes the sublime again…’ Thomas Paine *Age of Reason* (1794). Part II section 6. n.p.
pantomime, fairy tales and biblical parables. There are elements of realism alternating with fantasy and the grotesque. Sometimes these are present concurrently, lending the characters more texture and complexity but at the same time confounding efforts to interpret them. Dickens frequently switches modes, moving between the naturalistic, the tragic and the comic, and creating oppositions between the intellect and the emotions.

The destabilizing effect of parody

At times, it is difficult to determine whether the intention of the text is serious or humorous, bringing to mind John Ruskin’s quote at the start of the thesis: ‘I believe Dickens to be as little understood as Cervantes, and almost as mischievous.’ (Ruskin, cited in Kincaid 7). This is particularly evident when his disabled characters can be perceived as belonging to the sentimental and melodramatic genres and at the same time parodies of these. Tore Rem explores this generic marriage of opposites in his book *Dickens, Melodrama, and the Parodic Imagination*. Referring specifically to *OMF*, he says:

> The narrative method which Dickens had developed throughout his career, namely the tendency to rely on generic parody while simultaneously structuring his fiction according to melodramatic patterns, works against the attempted harmonizing of warring factions with the story, and moves contrary to an unequivocal telos in the novel…Such a hesitant and double pattern may be seen as the epitome of the Victorian psyche torn by unrest and uncertainty: create sense, then undermine.’ (Rem 126-27)

Rem perceives the parody in *OMF* as more hostile towards melodrama than Dickens’s earlier work, and sees it creating ambivalence in the narrative, creating an unsettling feeling in the reader. (Rem 126) Moreover, he points to the cultural context as a possible influence – that this is an expression of the uncertainty of the age. I believe that this ambivalence spills over into the representations of disability in the text. Rem certainly identifies Silas Wegg as ‘one of the chief instruments of parody in *OMF,*’ (Rem 137), although he doesn’t specifically pinpoint his disability as an aspect of this. I believe however that both Wegg’s and Jenny’s disabilities can be seen as parodic elements and I will explain this in more depth presently.

Sentiment and laughter – bitter foes

Sentimental fiction and melodrama are heavily reliant on stimulating strong emotions. Martha Stoddard Holmes explains that the function of disability in these genres is ‘melodramatic machinery, a simple tool for cranking open feelings.’ (Stoddard Holmes 3) She builds onto
Leslie Fiedler’s emotional dyad of pity and fear, adding desire to the mix (Stoddard Holmes 72). This suggests the fairly straight-forward use of disability as a form of ‘narrative prosthesis,’ to use the terminology of Disability Studies scholars, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder. Their definition of this term, as related in Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse, points to the function of disability in literary discourse as a twofold affair: ‘disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device.’ (Mitchell and Snyder 47) Dickens plays on sentimental disability stereotypes, both in the melodramatic strand of the plot but also in his parodies, which complicates the issue: he both uses and ridicules these stereotypes at the same time.

The comic produces an opposing effect on the emotions to the sentimental, and Dickens plays the two off against each other to stop the reader up in their tracks. In his essay, ‘Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,’ Henri Bergson points to this antipathetic function of humour, explaining that ‘to produce the whole of its effect…the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.’ (Bergson n. pag.) Bergson qualifies this by saying: ‘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 affections out of court and impose silence upon our pity.’ (ibid) This shifting, whether it be from the sentimental to the parodic or to any of the other comic modes that Dickens uses, creates an abrupt about-turn in the reader, leading to laughter but also uncertainty.

In his study, Dickens and the Rhetoric of Humour, James Kincaid points out that it is important to distinguish between comedy as a mode, and laughter as a response. He says ‘Though the two are often closely related, there is apparently no necessary or absolute tie between the genre and the effect.’ (Kincaid 8). Furthermore, he points to a darker aspect of laughter, questioning ‘the degree to which it expresses…hostility, aggression, the vestiges of the jungle whoop of triumph after murder, and other unpleasant impulses.’ (9) In an echo of Bergson, he debates ‘whether laughter is incompatible with sympathy, geniality, or indeed with any emotion.’ He cites Arthur Koestler’s observation of ‘a component of malice, of debasement of the other fellow, and of aggressive-defensive self-assertion…in laughter—a tendency diametrically opposed to sympathy, helpfulness, and identification of the self with others.’ (10) Kincaid sums up by saying that ‘even if there is genial or harmless laughter, I think it is very rare in Dickens.’ (ibid) Clearly, this darker aspect of laughter is in conflict.
with the sympathetic, and I believe this opposition comes to a head in the depiction of disability. Humour often treads on a razor’s edge between the ethical and the dubious; in a writer so obviously concerned with morals, this leads to ambivalence.

Dickens’s richly-layered yet unstable mixture of genres, modes and responses is one of the most important factors contributing to textual ambiguity in his representation of mobility disorders. I will now turn my attention to individual characters, to illustrate this with concrete examples from the text.

‘A literary man with a wooden leg’

Speaking generally of Dickens’s villains, Kincaid observes that they are an ambiguous mix of ‘the funny, terrifying and pathetic.’ (Kincaid 7) While Silas Wegg does portray elements of the terrifying and the pathetic, he is predominantly comic. However, the reader’s introduction to this character is coloured by a form of realism more strongly associated with journalism and social criticism, a mode Dickens often used in his articles and early works such as Sketches by Boz. The narrator begins with a description of this ‘man with a wooden leg’ (OMF 44) setting up his street stall with an attention to detail that would not be out of place in the pages of Dickens’s contemporary, Henry Mayhew, in his book London Labour and the London Poor. The depiction of Wegg sitting outside in all weathers, with his remaining foot in a basket to keep it warm, using his umbrella to shield his stock rather than himself in the rain (OMF 44), creates an impression of a man worthy of pity or even admiration, trying to scrape out a living doing whatever he can. As Mayhew points out in his article, ‘The Crippled Seller of Nutmeg Sellers,’ some classes are ‘driven to the streets by utter inability to labour.’ (Mayhew 109) At this point in the text, it is not inconceivable that Wegg belongs to that class.

Very shortly, however, the narrator’s tone changes, revealing an opposing view of the character. By the end of the next page, Wegg has become something other than human – hard and wooden, resembling the material his artificial leg is made of:

Sooth to say, he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally, and rather suggested to the fanciful observer, that he might be expected – if his development received no untimely check – to be completely set-up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months. (OMF 46)

Dickens proposes that Wegg, far from being disabled, is in his natural element – wood. With a face like a ‘watchman’s rattle’ that jerks when he laughs (45), he has been transformed into a comically grotesque and semi-animate object. The humour of this scene is reliant on the
juxtaposition of realistic and absurd elements; it sets up the reader to expect one mode and then ‘wrong-foots’ them. In so doing, it effectively negates any feelings of sympathy the reader started out with. After all, one cannot empathize with a block of wood.

Bergson explains that ‘certain deformities undoubtedly possess over others the sorry privilege of causing some persons to laugh; some hunchbacks, for instance, will excite laughter,’ (Bergson n. pag.) indicating that to some extent, comedy and disability have always been linked. Indeed, there are literary references to the cripple as a figure of ridicule as far back as the ancient Greeks. Leslie Fiedler refers to the lame Olympian god Haiphaistos,\(^{10}\) who was ‘treated as a figure of fun whenever he deserted the smithy for the nuptial couch; thus reminding us that cripples were originally regarded as jokes.’ (Fiedler 57) It could be argued that Dickens is simply following a time-honoured comic tradition; however, it is important to note that it is the prosthesis rather than the affliction that Dickens finds so amusing. As John Carey expresses it in *The Violent Effigy*, ‘Dickens’ most popular lifeless bit is the wooden leg, about which he has a positive obsession.’ (Carey 91) He uses the wooden leg as a comic prop, divorced from its medical/biological function – a quite literal example of the term ‘narrative prosthesis’ that I described earlier.

In Dickens’s case, I would term this use of the wooden leg as ‘comic prosthesis.’ He returns to this feature frequently throughout his writing career; Carey traces a long list of wooden legs in works dating all the way back to Dickens’s first published ‘novel,’ *Pickwick Papers* (92). While Carey states that ‘Wooden legs are introduced into the novels as chance spectators quite without justification in the plot,’ (ibid) I would argue that this is not the case in the two novels I have as my primary focus in this thesis. In *BR*, Sim Tappertit’s ‘moral crimes’ of arrogance and conceit are punished by the loss of his legs (of which he is so inordinately vain). This reduces him to a figure of ridicule quite at his wife’s mercy – ‘she would retaliate by taking off his legs, and leaving him exposed to the derision of those urchins who delight in mischief.’ (*BR* 657) His wooden legs ‘unman’ him, reducing his authority.

This connection between disability and gender is something I will return to later in this chapter. Both Wegg and Tappertit are presented as objectionable characters with overinflated egos, unworthy of pity. There is a sense in both cases that their wooden legs are no less than they deserve. Wegg’s wooden appendage is not only the most constant, central element of his characterization; it could almost be called a character in its own right. An example of this is the conversation between Boffin and Wegg, in which his leg appears to participate actively:

\(^{10}\) Also spelt ‘Hephaestus’ (*Oxford English Reference Dictionary*).
‘The wooden leg looked at him with a meditative eye, and also with a softened air as desiring possibility of profit.’ (OMF 48) In a reversal of Wegg’s objectification, the wooden leg itself is made human.

While Carey is unable to provide a convincing rationale for Dickens’s ‘obsession’ with wooden legs, Peter Ackroyd, in his biography Dickens, suggests that it dates back to the writer’s childhood, growing up in a naval port in which there were many men with prostheses. He recounts one of Dickens’s childhood memories, of hiding a man with a wooden leg in a coal cellar, noting the way the man’s wooden leg bored itself into the small coals, and Ackroyd surmises that this episode inspired the figure of Wegg with his leg stuck fast in the dust heaps (Ackroyd 3). While this is plausible, I don’t think it entirely explains the comic aspect of the character. I believe Bergson provides a clue when he says that ‘a deformity that may become comic is a deformity that a normally-built person could successfully imitate.’ (Bergson n. pag.) This strikes me as significant; the connection with imitation links it to acting. If we believe that an affliction is merely feigned or make-believe, it is easier to disengage any emotional response. The disability becomes part of a disguise or costume rather than something real that demands pity. There is much in Dickens’s fiction that is theatrical and Wegg is a prime example of a character intended to be seen and heard (as opposed to simply read) - his declamation of poetry and his verbal destruction of The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire gains a fuller effect when read aloud, while his leg provides visual humour which is exaggerated enough to be seen on stage. This is no subtle psychological portrait.

In The Dickens Pantomime, Edwin Eigner documents the influence of the Commedia del Arte and 19th century pantomime on Dickens’s work, in particular pointing out his use of pantomime characters such as the Benevolent Agent and the Clown (Eigner 45). Bovine, who tries to help everyone from Wegg to Sloppy, orphan Johnny, Betty Higden and Bella, fulfils the criteria for the Benevolent Agent, while Wegg’s close connection to the pantomime Clown becomes more apparent if we turn to Dickens’s own description of the type in his article ‘The Pantomime of Life:’

the great fun of the thing consists in the hero’s taking lodgings which he has not the slightest intention of paying for, or obtaining goods under false pretences…or to shorten the catalogue, swindling everybody he possibly can, it only remaining to be observed that the more extensive the swindling is, and the more barefaced the impudence of the
swindler, the greater the rapture and ecstasy of the audience. (Dickens ‘The Pantomime of Life’ 503).

Wegg’s prolonged negotiations for his fee as reader to Boffin, which he concludes by saying, “‘I never did ‘aggle and I never will ‘aggle. Consequently, I meet you at once, free and fair, with—Done, for double the money!’” (OMF 52) are a prime example of this form of humour - the bare-faced impudence of the trickster dealing expertly with the naïve Boffin.

Wegg’s come-uppance at the end of the story is a scene which highlights two problem areas contributing to ambivalence: the combination of the genre of realism with pantomime, and the elements of hostility and aggression in the laughter provoked by Wegg’s humiliating treatment. Speaking of Harmon’s attempts to throttle Wegg, Carey sardonically remarks ‘There is something healthy and patriotic about a sailor, which makes it alright to assault a cripple.’ (Carey 29). This brings into focus the inequity of power relations in this scene, in which Wegg is outnumbered four-to-one, far from fair odds. As a one-legged man, he is no match for the able-bodied Harmon, nor the muscular Sloppy. He is also at a social disadvantage, a street-dweller who is soon to be sent back out there; a member of society’s downtrodden masses who Dickens usually took pains to defend (a good example of this is the contrast in his portrayals of Wegg and Betty Higden). As Goldie Morgentaler expresses it in her article ‘Dickens and the Scattered Identity of Silas Wegg,’ ‘what is remarkable in Dickens’s treatment of Silas is that he can muster so little compassion for a man who is not only required to spend his life hobbling about on a wooden leg, but who is very nearly destitute as well.’ (Morgentaler n. pag.)

The sense of injustice that is aroused by contemplating Wegg as a mimetic or realistic character stands in strong contrast to the feelings provoked by the pantomime Clown. This scene resolves the pantomime-inspired ‘play within a play’ strand of the plot, in which the characters’ true identities are revealed – Sloppy is the demon dustman, the humble secretary turns out to be the heir to the Harmon fortune, Mr. Boffin has only been acting the miser and Venus reveals himself to be Wegg’s foe rather than friend. Being deposited in the refuse on the scavenger’s cart is seen as comically poetic justice for the scoundrel Wegg. Even Harmon’s vigorous assault appears to do little harm. Other than looking ‘as if he had a rather large fishbone’ in the region of his throat, (OMF 789) it is Wegg’s pride that takes most of the beating. Dickens reflects on the type of violence that characterizes the pantomime in this excerpt from the article ‘A Curious Dance Around a Curious Tree’. 11

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11 This article was co-written by W.H. Wills, although this section is directly attributed to Dickens.
that jocund world of the Pantomime, where there is no affliction or calamity that leaves the least impression; where a man may tumble into the broken ice, or dive into the kitchen fire, and only be the droller for the accident; where babies may be knocked about and sat upon, or choked with gravy spoons…and yet no Coroner be wanted, nor anybody made uncomfortable…where everyone, in short, is so superior to all the accidents of life, though encountering them at every turn, that I suspect this to be the secret…of the general enjoyment which an audience of vulnerable spectators, liable to pain and sorrow, find in this class of entertainment.’ (Dickens and Wills ‘A Curious Dance’ 384).

Dickens’s emphasis is clearly on the enjoyment of the spectators; their lack of discomfort comes from the knowledge that the players suffer no pain. I believe this this is a key factor in the fictional abuse of Wegg; Dickens assumes that the reader both understands and accepts the rules of the pantomime.

He also assumes that the reader doesn’t question Wegg’s status as comic villain. The humorous viciousness of Wegg’s demise has its counterpart in the character’s own vicious humour - on hearing about the tragic demise of little orphan Johnny, ‘Mr. Wegg chuckled’ and ‘poked out his wooden leg, in the stage-ballet manner, and executed a taunting or triumphant pirouette on the genuine leg remaining to him.’ (OMF 331) But not all of the critics find Wegg’s turn to villainy convincing. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, for example, remarks that Wegg’s ‘humour and his villainy seem to have no particular connection with each other; when he is not scheming he seems the last man likely to scheme. He is like one of Dickens’s agreeable Bohemians, a pleasant companion, a quoter of fine verses. His villainy seems an artificial thing attached to him, like his wooden leg.’ (Chesterton Appreciations 214)

If one perceives sympathetic qualities in Wegg, as Chesterton clearly does, it makes Wegg’s beating and eviction seem violently out of proportion, raising ethical questions about the writer.

Parody of the guilty disabled man

Through the figure of Wegg, Dickens also parodies the moral construction of disability. His disability is a physical manifestation of his own moral corruption; the wooden leg a symbol of a hard, wooden man. Wegg is a parody of the melodramatic villain, turning things upside down as Dickens did in BR, critiquing melodrama at the same time as using it. Morgentaler points to the literary tradition of negative portrayals of wooden-legged characters. One of the
examples she cites is of particular interest here: the character of Pegtop, in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s novel *Uncle Silas*, published in 1864 (Morgentaler n. pag.) It may be more than a coincidence that Wegg’s first name is Silas, and that Pegtop’s real name is Dickon; there seems to be some cross-referencing going on here by these two writers. There were connections between them; they shared the same publisher, Richard Bentley, so it is not impossible that they were acquainted at this time (Le Fanu *Uncle Silas* vii). Later, in 1870, Dickens published some of Le Fanu’s work in *All the Year Round*. (ibid) While the almost contemporaneous dates of publication of these two novels complicate the issue of influence, it should be pointed out that *Uncle Silas* was published in 1864, while *OMF* was published in serialized form over the time period 1864-65. I cannot prove conclusively that Dickens is parodying Pegtop in particular, but there is a great deal of textual evidence to suggest this.

The appearance of their faces is connected to wood: Pegtop’s ‘face was rugged and wrinkled, and tanned to the tint of old oak,’ (Le Fanu 213) while Wegg is ‘a knotty man, and a close-grained, with a face carved out of very hard material…’ (*OMF* 45). Pegtop is the factotum of a once-grand country estate, while Wegg only imagines himself in a similar role, as a retainer owing vassalage to ‘Our House,’ the large mansion near his stall. As one would expect from wooden-legged men, they both ‘stump’ along, although Pegtop’s approach is altogether more threatening, as the narrator/protagonist relates:

> This forbidding-looking person came stumping and jerking along toward me, whisking his stick now and then viciously in the air, and giving his fell of hair a short shake, like a wild bull preparing to attack. I stood up involuntarily with a sense of fear and surprise, almost fancying I saw that wooden-legged old soldier, who was the forest demon Der Freischutz. (Le Fanu 214)

Far from being a Germanic demon like Pegtop, Wegg is likened to a harmless German wooden toy. While Pegtops’s wooden leg sinks into the sod, Wegg’s sinks into the ashes of the dustheaps.

The parodic nature of Wegg’s characterization is clear. Where genuine melodramatic and Gothic villains’ disfigurements make them more terrifying, Wegg’s wooden leg simply makes him ridiculous. Whether it is tripping him up on the dustheaps, tipping him out of his chair or revealing excitation at the prospect of riches, it has a tendency to undermine its owner. By using the wooden leg to deride this stereotype, Dickens actually inverts its meaning as a ‘narrative prosthesis’.
‘Poor ailing little creature’ or ‘crooked antic’?

From the outset, Jenny is presented as an ambiguous figure, described by the narrator as a ‘...a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something...’ (OMF 222) The one word that the narrator avoids here is ‘cripple,’ so firmly established as a sentimental stereotype by the figure of Tiny Tim. At this point, she is not an object of pity. The emphasis here is on her alterity – the word ‘queer’ is reiterated in relation to her legs, her figure, and her face. Dickens draws on the genre of the fairy or folktale in this section of the text, underlining this with references to Jenny’s ‘weird little laugh’ and her ‘elfin chin.’ (OMF 223) But there is also an element of objectification quite similar to Wegg’s characterization; she is likened to a puppet, ‘as if her eyes and her chin worked together on the same wires.’ (ibid) She inspires wonder in her two visitors rather than pity, with her precocity, self-possession and odd behaviour. Her face, which seems ‘at once so young and so old’ (OMF 224) brings to mind the fairy-tale figure of the changeling, to which Barnaby is also likened in BR. Charley insists on framing her as a folk-tale figure – referring to her respectively as a ‘little witch,’ and ‘a little crooked antic of a child, or old person, or whatever it is,’ (OMF 227-28) which enables him to deny her humanity and underlines her status as a curious object.

Lizzie’s entrance onto the scene causes a rapid shift from the fairy tale to the sentimental genre. Using emotionally-loaded language, Lizzie describes Jenny as ‘This poor ailing little creature,’ who has been ‘surrounded by drunken people from her cradle – if she ever had one.’ (OMF 227) While it could be argued that these interpretations of Jenny simply reflect the different standpoints of these two characters, showing who is essentially good or bad, it must be remembered that the narrator’s voice also underpins these generic shifts, just as it did in the case of Wegg. It is the narrator’s voice which introduces Jenny as something strange and indescribable, just as some pages later it echoes Lizzie’s use of the sentimentally-associated word ‘poor’, describing Jenny emphatically as this ‘Poor, poor little dolls’ dressmaker.’ (OMF 243) The effect of this generic swing is to diminish Jenny’s status, from being the self-declared ‘Person of the House’, with all the authority that infers, to being a ‘poor little creature,’ dependent on the goodwill of others. This reveals the sentimental genre as disempowering for the disabled; it reinforces the power relation of able-bodied dominance. In contrast, the fairy tale genre inverts relations; the crippled daughter becomes the parent while her morally decrepit father assumes the role of child.

The ‘moral hostage’ and the shrew
Like Barnaby in *BR*, Jenny is an example of the ‘moral hostage’ model I proposed in my introductory chapter. Her disability is a physical manifestation of her father’s moral vices, a reflection of Dickens’s favourite biblical proverb, ‘the sins of the father are revisited upon the children.’ In the passage mentioned above, Lizzie firmly places the blame for Jenny’s disability on this ‘weak, wretched, trembling creature, falling to pieces, never sober.’ (OMF 227) As if to prove that this is not merely Lizzie’s opinion, the narrator reiterates her verdict:

The person of the house was the person of a house full of sordid shames and cares, with an upper room in which that abased figure was infecting even innocent sleep with sensual brutality and degradation. The dolls’ dressmaker had become a little quaint shrew; of the world, worldly; of the earth, earthy. (OMF 243).

This passage (to which I shall return later) links Jenny to another recurrent female stereotype with long literary and oral traditions – the shrew. A stock character of folktales and theatre, Jan Harold Brunvand’s research shows that this figure is found in ‘taming’ stories from a wide range of Indo-European cultures (Brunvand 346). While Dickens may have been best acquainted with Shakespeare’s version, he brings to this character new attributes of interest – not least the element of disability. Jenny shares her sharp-tongued, misanthropic and sadistic tendencies with a long line of Dickensian shrews: Mrs Joe and Miss Havisham from *GE*, the bitter crippled Mrs Clennam in *LD*, and the facially-scarred Rosa Dartle in *DC*, all of whom it should be noted, are disabled in some way.

In *Idiots, Madmen and Other Prisoners in Dickens*, Natalie McKnight makes the claim that ‘Dickens’s inability to recognize the intensified entrapment of women and his participation in their entrapment through his characterizations and narrative structures underscore his own imprisonment in a patriarchal self created through Victorian norms.’ (McKnight 4). I believe that Dickens’s shrews actually provide evidence to the contrary, although it isn’t until he creates Jenny that he displays any narrative sympathy for the plight of the shrew. Miss Havisham, Mrs Clennam and Rosa Dartle have all suffered at the hands of men who were respectively swindlers, unfaithful or violent and their disabilities bear witness to their ruined and barren lives. The least sympathetic of them all and perhaps the closest to the folktale figure that requires ‘taming’, is Mrs Joe, who is punished with disability when she provokes the wrong man (however Dickens varies the standard story-line by not making her husband the culprit). In answer to McKnight, Dickens shows that Mrs Joe is trapped in a role that gives her no individual identity (her brother Pip doesn’t even know her Christian name until late in the narrative) and no opportunities for social advancement. She has been forced

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by circumstances to be Pip’s surrogate mother and this unwanted responsibility led her to marry someone she clearly feels is ‘below her station.’ While Dickens doesn’t attempt to create any overt sympathy for her, he does display an understanding of what made her a shrew.

McKnight admits that ‘Dickens at least tries to break out of the limiting norms set for women’s behaviour’ in his characterizations of Jenny and Bella in OMF (McKnight 59). While he makes Jenny a figure of intelligence, independence and agency, he also shows her to be a shrew on a par with Mrs. Joe, in the humiliating treatment she subjects her father to. Her sadistic fantasies of how she would torture her prospective husband should he turn out to be a drunkard reveal a twisted nature not unlike Miss Havisham. And the wicked sense of delight she experiences after putting pepper on Fledgeby’s wounds is almost villainous. These aspects of her characterization interfere with the sympathy that the narrator implores us to feel, even if we do accept that she has reasonable cause to be a shrew.

The return of the fool

Like Wegg, Jenny’s character makes an important contribution to the humour of the text. Unlike him, her disability is not a source of amusement. She is a figure to be laughed ‘with’ rather than ‘at.’ Jenny herself makes this clear in her response to Wrayburn’s flippant remarks in the following passage:

“Why, if we were all as industrious as you, little Busy-Body, we should begin to work as soon as we could crawl, and there would be a bad thing!”
“Do you mean,” returned the little creature, with a flush suffusing her face, “bad for your backs and your legs?”
“No, no, no,” said Eugene; shocked—to do him justice—at the thought of trifling with her infirmity. (OMF 238)

This young girl makes this apparently shameless man feel ashamed, succeeding where Headstone fails. This gives her a form of power, despite their disparate social positions. I will return to this passage later in the section on the Gospel of Work.

Jenny’s sharp wit is one of the characteristics that McKnight connects with the long-standing cultural and literary entity of the fool. In fact, McKnight identifies Jenny with two different manifestations of the fool: ‘Both holy idiot and wise fool, she has mystical, angelic visions along with biting, ego-deflating wit.’ (McKnight 40) Jenny’s physical deformities can be seen as an integral part of her construction as fool – a part of the ‘costume’. McKnight
explains that ‘historically, physical deformities are associated with fools…Physical deformities helped separate the fool from those considered normal, the visual cues kept the boundaries safely demarcated.’ (38) McKnight traces a connection between fools and physical abnormality that dates as far back as Roman times, pointing out that it is a role that has traditionally conferred special privileges upon the disabled, such as the licence to mock authority (37). In this sense, it may be considered an empowering construction of disability. We see this in the way Jenny behaves with Wrayburn, Headstone and Fledgeby – she sees through them and is not afraid of showing it.

She is further empowered by the divine privileges of the visionary, which Lizzie intimates with a glance to Wrayburn ‘were given the child in compensation for her losses.’ (OMF 239) The subversive power of the fool allows Jenny to break social codes, reveal unpleasant truths and transcend her own suffering, and her disability is a sign of this special status. But the poetical visions of the holy idiot jar discordantly with the outbursts of the Dickensian shrew, which comes clearly into focus in the passage on p. 239–40. From waxing lyrical about the imaginary flowers she smells, the birdsong she hears, and the dazzling, angelic children who comfort her in her pain, she abruptly switches personality on her father’s entrance, barking at him: ‘Go along with you! Go along into your corner! Get into your corner directly!’ (OMF 240). This transition is unexpected and very unsettling, leaving the reader in doubt about how they should feel towards this character and her disability.

This doubt is further reinforced by a manipulative side of Jenny’s nature, which mixes the wise fool with the sentimental stereotype of the pitiful cripple. When Headstone comes to call on Lizzie, Jenny interrogates him with the acumen of a barrister, using her doll Mrs. Truth as witness. On Lizzie’s arrival, however, she lapses into the ‘poor dependent cripple’ role. Speaking of herself in the third person, she tells her ‘The third party hobbles awfully, you know, when she’s left to herself…her back being so bad, and her legs so queer; so she can’t retire gracefully unless you help her, Lizzie.’ (OMF 342-343). She consciously plays on the sentimental stereotype to manipulate Lizzie, repeating this on a number of occasions, referring to herself as a ‘poor little thing’ in an echo of Lizzie’s sentiments. Again, this leaves the reader in doubt about her status - does she really deserve our pity or are we being played upon like Lizzie?

From ‘idle dog’ to ‘lame dog’
For most of the narrative, Eugene Wrayburn is an able-bodied character, displaying many of
the attributes of the Dandy or Aristocratic villain, found in Gothic romance, melodrama,
sensation fiction and pantomime. Handsome, privileged and selfish, he is a self-proclaimed
‘idle dog,’ who is only motivated to action by the thought of seducing working-class beauties
and tormenting lower-class schoolteachers. In Sacred Tears, Fred Kaplan notes that Dickens’s
villains are usually unredeemable (Kaplan 69). However, in this text, both Wrayburn and the
appropriately named Rogue Riderhood are given the chance to reform after watery near-
deaths. Riderhood fails to repent and is subsequently drowned a second time, while Wrayburn
makes a transformation which is more difficult for the reader to believe.

Not for the first time, Dickens textually inflicts violent punishment on an errant
character to bring them into line: like the shrewish Mrs Joe, a good thrashing is what is
needed to knock some sense into him, as both G.K. Chesterton\textsuperscript{12} and Humphry House\textsuperscript{13} have
indicated. Both Wrayburn and Mrs Joe have provoked their attackers, and must reap what
they have sown. There is clearly a strong element of Christian sentiment in Dickens’s
moralized version of cause and effect. Wrayburn survives but as an invalid, reliant on a nurse
and a walking stick. His own redemption lies in saving Lizzie’s reputation by marrying her.
His physical disfigurement and moral reformation transform him from melodramatic villain to
sentimental crippled hero. This was a popular figure in the so-called ‘women’s novels’ of the
1860s, according to Sally Mitchell. In her article ‘Sentiment and Suffering: Women’s
Recreational Reading in the 1860s,’ she explains the function of this character: ‘The crippled
or feminized hero serves a dual function: he is both a manageable object for the heroine’s
affections and an alternate persona, who provides the daydreamer\textsuperscript{14} with a gender role in
which more interesting adventures are possible.’ (Mitchell 38) This indicates that disability
can reverse traditional gender roles, an important point that I will return to in the section on
gender and disability.

For the moment, I will focus on the issue of credibility. The reader’s sympathy for
Wrayburn’s plight pivots on believing in his transformation. Can we believe this man who
says earlier in the text, ‘But then I mean so much that I – that I don’t mean’? (OMF 283) The
leap from villain to hero is a large one to make, requiring more than a mutilated body. After

\textsuperscript{12} Chesterton writes in Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens that Dickens ‘is also right
in indicating that the only cure for this intellectual condition is a violent blow on the head.’ (Chesterton xxiii)

\textsuperscript{13} Humphry House reiterates this sentiment in The Dickens World, saying ‘It needs assault, battery and all but
drowning to bring Wrayburn to the point of proposing marriage.’ (House 162)

\textsuperscript{14} Mitchell is referring to the common reader when she uses the word ‘daydreamer.’ She states earlier in the
article that ‘it has often been said that popular novels are simply the daydreams of the common reader.’
all, Dickens’s fiction is littered with disabled male villains. In fact, good disabled men are relatively hard to find in his work. While Lizzie believes in him, he doesn’t seem to believe in himself. There is an underlying uneasiness about the authenticity of the ‘new’ Wrayburn; while the outer change of disability is indisputable, the inner change is far more difficult to gauge.

2. The interaction of disability with other key identity factors

The textual representation and significance of disability is, of course, coloured by identity factors such as age, class, gender and sexuality. In Stoddard Holmes’ ground-breaking work in charting disability in Victorian sentimental and melodramatic fiction, she makes the delineation quite clear. Disabled children of both genders are objects of pity, but their fates diverge radically on attaining adulthood. As women, they retain their ‘weak and dependent’ status, remaining objects of pity. As a rule, they are portrayed as unmarriageable (Stoddard Holmes 135). A logical consequence of this is that they are seldom portrayed as mothers; some scholars connect both of these factors with contemporary concerns about heredity. As non-wives and non-mothers, they have low status in Victorian society.

Stoddard Holmes explains that the stereotypes for the adult male disabled in these genres tend to be negative, provoking fear and anger. In her opinion, this reflects social anxiety around the notion of the disabled worker, as well as the difficulty of discerning between the deserving and undeserving poor. It finds expression in the figure of the ‘false beggar’ or ‘begging imposter’ (Stoddard Holmes 95). The latter tends to be a lower-class character, content to lead a parasitic existence rather than contributing their labour-value to society. These stereotypes reflect the rigid class and gender norms of the Victorian middle-classes, in which the man’s role is that of breadwinner while the woman’s is that of ‘Angel of the House’. Stoddard Holmes points out that her work is not exhaustive, and that there are other disabled stereotypes present in this class of fiction.

Dickens portrays a broader cross-section of the classes in his fiction than many of his contemporaries, with consequences for his portrayals of disability. Working children and women, both able-bodied and disabled, emerge as participating characters with voices in his work, unlike many other Victorian writers for whom they remain firmly in the background, if they are depicted at all. As I have already explained, he draws on a wide selection of genres and narrative traditions, so we must look both to and beyond sentimental and melodramatic stereotypes when analysing his work. Dickens was very much a man of his time and his
portrayals of disability reflect contemporary concerns, some of which could not be made explicit in novels written for a family audience, in particular those related to sexuality. Whilst critics such as Natalie McKnight have tended to interpret his work as largely reinforcing existing gender norms, which I agree it often does, one also finds surprising glimpses of insight and resistance to these norms expressed in his use of disability, both literal and metaphorical. This suggests an underlying sense of ambivalence towards conventional gender roles.

Gender and disability
Over the course of his career, Dickens’s views on many contemporary issues developed and changed, sometimes producing results which contradict his earlier work. While it is possible to cite countless examples of both male and female characters who emulate Victorian gender norms, Dickens does at times display insight into the warping effect this has on them. I have already mentioned the example of the shrew, a particularly unpleasant female figure which Dickens sometimes couples with disability. The disabled shrew personifies the shortcomings of the Victorian domestic ideal for women; the sins of man are written onto her body and mind. Jenny is linked to this tradition, albeit as daughter rather than wife. But we also find in OMF that disability can be used to invert Victorian gender norms; both Jenny and Wrayburn are examples of this. Jenny defies the disabled ‘unmarriageable woman’ stereotype which was recurrent in sentimental literature, first foreseeing marriage for herself and having this possibility confirmed in plot development, when she meets Sloppy. Although the narrative doesn’t get as far as her marriage, the implication seems clear. Not only does this projected partnership defy stereotypes for disabled women, it also defies society’s ideas about the intellectually impaired, another group constructed as unmarriageable in earlier times as I discussed in Chapter Two. This relates directly to one of the novel’s main themes, mutuality, which I shall return to later in this paper.

Arguably, one could say that this portrayal of Jenny simply ‘norms’ the disabled woman, by having her follow the same social conventions as the able-bodied. In Dickens and the Daughter of the House, Hilary Schor refers to the reinforcement of the convention of marriage in fiction as ‘the marriage plot’, with its aim of ‘turning daughters into wives’ (Schor 178-79). As she says, ‘though Jenny Wren seems destined for the marriage plot with the improbable Sloppy, it is hard to imagine her not winning every property battle in sight.’ (207) There is no indication in the text that Jenny will become the Victorian ideal of the
‘Angel of the House’. She fights her own battles and is nobody’s fool, as the scene in which she punishes Fledgeby proves. In economic terms, she is already an independent small businesswoman who understands the basics of capitalism: buying and selling. She manages the family finances, forcing her father to turn out his pockets. Her fantasies of bossing her prospective partner about coupled with her self-proclaimed status as Person of the House point to a future in which she will be the dominant partner – the ‘brains’ of the outfit, defying traditional Victorian gender roles.

In the case of Wrayburn, the life-threatening attack which leaves him disabled is the turning point in this strand of the plot, reversing entrenched gender roles and making the impossible possible with regard to inter-class marriage. I have already discussed Wrayburn’s transition in terms of stock characters, going from villain to hero; it is also possible to describe his change as going from gentleman to gentle man. As Sally Mitchell discusses, mobility disability makes a new kind of man possible, at least in fiction, which she refers to as ‘feminized.’ She perceives him as functioning as ‘both manageable object for the heroine’s affections and an alternate persona, who provides the daydreamer with a gender role in which more interesting adventures are possible.’ (Mitchell 38) The ‘daydreamer’ in this instance is the female reader of this type of literature. I would argue that in the case of OMF, the alternative gender role for the reader is actually provided by Lizzie, who is permitted to take the traditionally male heroic role, albeit temporarily, when she displays ‘masculine’ strength and the skills of a boatman to save Wrayburn’s life.

We already know that she is a morally superior creature, and Dickens’s text suggests that as such it is preferable for her to take the leading role in their marital relationship, which Wrayburn’s tender and dependent state now makes room for. As his nurse, she assumes one of the few authoritative roles allowed to women. Referring to the work of Elaine Showalter, Bailin points out that this ‘reduction of the male to a condition of debility and dependence on the protective care of the woman he loves clearly has as part of its purpose the equalizing of an asymmetrical power structure and even the temporary ascendancy of the female.’15 (Bailin 39) Applied to the relationship between Wrayburn and Lizzie, this is clear evidence of Dickens’s insight into existing power relations and shows resistance towards this. From being

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15 In a note to this, Bailin says the following: ‘Elaine Showalter considers “the permanently handicapped man” to represent the desire to provide a “healthy and instructive” experience of “dependency, frustration, and powerlessness for the hero.”’ (Showalter A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing 150).
one who has abused his superior social and gender status, the tables have completely turned on Wrayburn.

Miriam Bailin’s findings on the space of the sickroom in Victorian fiction correspond with Wrayburn’s convalescence. She perceives the sickroom scene as a ‘rite of passage issuing in personal, moral, or social recuperation.’ (Bailin 5) During this period, Wrayburn is restored to the family fold (reunited with his father), conforms to Victorian sexual norms by forsaking his love for Lightwood (an aspect of his character which I shall return to shortly) and does the morally-right thing in marrying Lizzie. Unlike illness however, disability creates a lasting change in status.

Twinning and the metaphorical uses of disability

I see further evidence of Dickens’s awareness of the disabling nature of Victorian female gender roles in the character I perceive as Jenny’s ‘twin’ – namely Georgiana Podsnap. Stoddard Holmes discusses the twin structure in melodrama, ‘that pairs a disabled woman with a non-disabled one and gives them distinctly different physical, emotional and marital futures’ (Stoddard Holmes 38). While she pairs Jenny with Lizzie (58), I see a more informative kinship between Georgiana and Jenny. Both girls stand on the threshold to adult life, with one foot still tentatively placed in childhood. Both of them are oppressed by the patriarchal figures in their lives, albeit in very different ways. Their violent fantasies of destroying or disarming their future mates suggests that they understand that oppression at the hands of men will not necessarily cease when they leave their fathers’ homes (and Jenny especially fears the prospect of a partner who resembles her father). They are both characterized as prisoners within their own bodies, although in Georgiana’s case this is metaphorical. The description of her ‘nervously twiddling her fingers in a pinioned attitude, as if she were trying to hide her elbows (OMF 137) is suggestive of a bird with its wings clipped. There is a distinct focus on shoulders with both girls – Jenny’s poor shoulders and Georgiana’s high shoulders, as if this is a part of the anatomy in which suffering and restraint cannot be hidden (or the place where burdens are carried).

The narrator introduces Georgiana as ‘a Miss Podsnap. And this young rocking-horse was being trained in her mother’s art of prancing in a stately manner without ever getting on.’ (OMF 129). This is a brilliant insight into the social restriction of women in the upper strata of society: decorative playthings, engaged in meaningless repetitive movement but without any real opportunity of advancement, showing once more that Dickens is aware of the
limitations placed on Victorian women and depicts its results as absurd. Georgiana is metaphorically mobility disabled by both gender and class, living a far more restricted existence than her crippled working-class twin. Her physical and social freedom is severely hindered; she is never allowed out of the house alone, nor does she have any friends of her own age.

Despite her relative poverty, Jenny nonetheless has a greater sense of freedom than Georgiana. She displays independence and agency as she hobbles around London alone with the help of her crutch, seeking inspiration for her work. This freedom coupled with her feisty nature allow Jenny to reap a painful revenge on the man who attempts to swindle Georgiana – ‘Fascination Fledgeby.’ Jenny’s addition of pepper to the dressing she prepares for Fledgeby’s wounds shows that her sadistic side is not limited to the world of imagination, exulting in this twice over as she recollects his suffering as she reads his letter to Riah – finding it ‘delicious to trace the screaming and smarting of Little Eyes in the distorted writing of this epistle.’ (OMF 728) The text allows her this act of vengeance without any moral recrimination, presumably because of Fledgeby’s role as villain. It is unusual for Dickens to portray female ‘violence’ and to do so without negative remark makes it even more worthy of attention. Again, it suggests that disability allows the sufferer to step outside socially-accepted codes of behaviour without ill consequences.

In Dickens’s Villains: Melodrama, Characters, Popular Culture, Juliet John twins Wrayburn with Bradley Headstone, explaining that ‘in Dickens, villains and deviants are often twinned with doubles or alter egos at the opposite end of the emotional scale to themselves.’ (John 9) In this constellation, Wrayburn is the passionless villain while Headstone is the villain overcome by passion. Like Jenny and Georgiana, this pair also occupy different positions in the class system. Despite their different trajectories – Wrayburn goes from bad to good while Headstone goes from good to bad, they share the fate of being feminized in the text. Headstone’s inability to control his emotions and his giddy fits connect him with the stereotypic Victorian woman, given to fainting at inopportune moments. I believe they also symbolize his imminent fall in social standing; he is a rare example of the ‘fallen’ man.

‘Fallen’ women
A much-more common figure in Victorian literature is, of course, the ‘fallen’ woman. Stoddard Holmes observes that the disabled woman can sometimes function as a stand-in for
the ‘fallen woman’ in Victorian melodrama (Stoddard Holmes 69). While this term is often used as a euphemism for prostitute, it can denote any woman who has lost her sexual innocence before marriage, for whatever reason (rape or seduction included). Despite writing for a family audience, Dickens had no qualms about fictionalizing the plight of such women, just as he openly supported the work of Angela Burdett-Coutts at Urania Cottage, an institution founded to give ‘fallen’ women a new start. His work features a number of ‘fallen’ female characters for whom he felt no need to disguise as disabled: the prostitute Nancy in *OT*, the seduced woman Emily in *DC*, and Lady Dedlock in *BH*, who has borne a child out of wedlock.

But what if the ‘fallen’ woman is actually a child? What if she is the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of her father? I propose that Jenny’s disability is in fact a cover for this. Even if Dickens himself was prepared to address the issue directly (and given his family audience, this may have been where he drew the line), this kind of content would no doubt have been subject to bowdlerization at the hands of his publisher. Child sexual abuse and child prostitution were very real concerns of the time, reflected in agitation for changes to age of consent legislation from the late 1850s until the 1870s. At the time *OMF* was written, the age of consent for girls was 12. It should be noted that Jenny is about this age, although there is some ambiguity about whether she should be considered child or woman, an issue which is further clouded by her disability which has stunted her growth.

In her book *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*, Louise Jackson notes that ‘The reports of social investigators and parliamentary committees portrayed brutality, immorality, incest and, therefore, deviancy as the norm amongst the poorer sections of society who lived in dirt and squalor.’ (Jackson 7) Furthermore, she reports that some of the parliamentary blue books made ‘direct links between overcrowding and incest.’ (49) I would now like to return to an expanded form of the citation I referred to earlier, when discussing the stock character of the shrew. I believe the emotive language and apparent exaggeration used in this passage indicates that Jenny’s father is guilty of excesses far worse than alcohol abuse:

The person of the house was the person of a house full of sordid shames and cares, with an upper room in which that abased figure was infecting even innocent sleep with sensual brutality and degradation. The dolls’ dressmaker had become a little quaint shrew; of the world, worldly; of the earth, earthy.
Poor dolls’ dressmaker! How often so dragged down by hands that should have raised her up; how often so misdirected when losing her way on the eternal road, and asking guidance! Poor, poor, little dolls’ dressmaker! (OMF 243).

The reference to ‘sordid shames and cares’ implies ‘moral filth’ rather than simple poverty or drunkenness, and it extends to all members of the household. It is relevant to compare Jenny with the two other motherless daughters of lower-class men in the narrative: Lizzie Hexam and Pleasant Riderhood. Despite their fathers also being drinkers and doing work of a lower moral tone than ‘Mr. Dolls’, they are never described as ‘abased,’ nor are their households described as being full of ‘sordid shames and cares’. There is something different going on in Jenny’s household. I believe that the relationship between Jenny and her father provides a dark mirror to the light-hearted flirtation and ‘marriage’ between Bella and her father, Rumty Wilfer. In the passage above, the description of Jenny’s father seems to indicate sexual violence and depravity, rather than mere alcoholism.

As Jackson notes, many of the cases of incest which came before English courts also made reference to drunkenness, indicating that a link between the two has been established historically (Jackson 50). Clearly, ‘Mr Doll’s’ behaviour that has turned Jenny into a ‘shrew.’ She has become ‘worldly,’ suggesting life experience beyond her years. Even in sleep she is not allowed the innocence that is a child’s right. She is also described as ‘of the earth, earthy;’ associated not only with crudeness but also dirt or soil, suggesting defilement. Jenny is ‘often so dragged down by hands that should have raised her up.’ Interpreted literally, this is an image of force, of violation. This is supported in the passage in which she describes the angelic children who used to visit her, in which she says: ‘…They were not like me: they were not chilled, anxious, ragged, or beaten; they were never in pain…’ (OMF 239) She doesn’t specify the identity of the culprit, but it seems likely that it is her father.

In her essay ‘Homophobia, Misogyny, and Capital: The Example of Our Mutual Friend’, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick advances the idea that Jenny’s real name, Fanny Cleaver ‘hints at aggression – specifically, at rape, and perhaps at homosexual rape’ (Sedgwick 246). While Sedgwick goes on to connect this with what she perceives as male rape in OMF, I believe she is misled into this interpretation by the North American slang meaning for ‘fanny,’ meaning ‘buttocks’ (Oxford English Reference Dictionary). In British slang, it refers to ‘female genitals,’ (OERD, Green16) making it of more direct interest as an expression of

16 According to the online dictionary The Timelines of Slang, this usage dates back to 1835 (Green n. pag.).
sexual violence towards Jenny. While Sedgwick interprets ‘cleaver’ in terms of being a 
violent weapon, possibly a penis (again, American slang, as in the present-day term ‘beaver 
cleaver’), this was in fact a slang term in Britain for a ‘forward or wanton woman,’ dating 
from the late 18th century (Partridge 224). It is significant that Jenny deems it necessary to 
change her name, even though the text doesn’t state her reasons. To someone acquainted with 
the slang of the time, it would have been obvious.

Symbolically, her change of name also distances her from her father. Her feeling of duty towards him is difficult to understand in the light of her history. While she is one of 
several dutiful daughters in the text who have abusive fathers (both Lizzie and Pleasant fall into this category), she is the only one who responds by becoming a shrew, supporting the idea that she has suffered from a worse form of abuse. However, Jenny’s assumption of the role of ‘mother’ actually gives her a form of authority over him. There seems to be an element of sado-masochism in their relationship; he is genuinely oppressed by her sharp tongue, but also by a sense of guilt or shame. When he dies, Jenny blames his ‘upbringing’ for the way he was, indicating feelings of guilt on her part for the way she treated him, but also possibly a reference to his own alcoholised father (OMF 732). Later in the text, when she nurses Wrayburn, she confesses to him that she is hardly ever in pain now, suggesting that the main cause of her pain has disappeared – her father. Her actual grief is short-lived – ‘I must have a very short cry, godmother, before I cheer up for good,’ she confides to Riah (733-4). With ‘Mr. Dolls’ no longer in her life, Jenny senses the possibility of happiness. This is a 
corroborations of the ‘moral hostage’ construction of disability that I mentioned earlier.

Jenny’s disability can be read symbolically: as an example of physiognomy, her 
crippled exterior makes visible her emotionally-crippled interior. Her hostility towards men 
and boys, and her sadistic fantasies about what she will do to her future partner are a plausible 
consequence of abuse. She has learned to distrust men and she desires vengeance; again, an 
echo of Miss Havisham in GE. At one point, Jenny even suspects the kind-hearted old man, 
Riah, of being a ‘bad wolf.’ I don’t believe it is mere coincidence that the fairy tales Dickens 
associates with Jenny’s strand of the plot - Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, and Sleeping 
Beauty, can all be interpreted as tales describing the loss of sexual innocence.

‘The love that dare not speak its name’17

17 From the poem ‘Two Loves,’ by Lord Alfred Douglas, published in 1894. I use it here to refer to the taboos 
around discussion of love between men in Victorian culture.
Prior to his attack, the ‘gentleman’ Wrayburn has come to an impasse in his relationship with the working-class Lizzie: “Out of the question to marry her…and out of the question to leave her. The crisis!” (OMF 698) The assumption has been made that the reason it is ‘out of the question’ is due to their widely differing social status. But there is another way of interpreting Wrayburn’s quandary: his close relationship with his old school chum Lightwood. He appears to be torn between two lovers, and Lightwood has the prior claim. Even their names, (W)Rayburn and Light-wood, complement each other, suggesting that they were made for one another.

Although they co-habit, it isn’t until facing death that Wrayburn is able to openly admit his feelings towards Lightwood, who is as loving and devoted a nurse as either Lizzie or Jenny. In the charged atmosphere of the sickroom, Wrayburn implores Lightwood: “…Touch my face with yours in case I should not hold out till you come back. I love you, Mortimer. Don’t be uneasy for me while you are gone. If my dear brave girl will take me, I feel persuaded that I shall live long enough to be married, dear fellow.” (OMF 742) This display of physical intimacy and declaration of love between men is quite remarkable; what is equally so is what follows – his intention to marry Lizzie. It seems to negate what Wrayburn is saying. However, what I believe is important here is that Wrayburn only decides to marry Lizzie while convinced he is about to die, and his message to Lightwood is a confirmation of this. There is a strong sense in the narrative that he would not take this step unless in the middle of a health crisis. He even tells Lizzie as much: “‘I have been thinking whether it is not the best thing I can do, to die.’” He goes on to explain that “‘If I live, you’ll find me out.’” (754) While Lizzie optimistically chooses to interpret this as meaning “‘I shall find out that my husband has a mine of purpose and energy, and will turn it to the best account?’” Wrayburn’s wistful reaction contradicts this. He ends the conversation by saying ‘There is a sharp misgiving in my conscience that if I were to live, I should disappoint your good opinion and my own – and that I ought to die, my dear!’ (754). Dying would allow him to keep his love for Lightwood secret; if Lizzie were to find out that Lightwood was a rival for her affections, she might indeed be disappointed.

Although Wrayburn’s disability leads him back to the heterosexual fold, removing him from his live-in relationship with Lightwood and establishing his domestic role in more ‘acceptable’ terms (to the Victorian way of mind), his close friendship with his old friend continues. His marriage seems to be an example of ‘keeping up appearances.’ Clearly, there was a widely-held ambivalence towards male-male relationships in Victorian culture, which I
believe Dickens displays in this text. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick maintains that ‘most Victorians neither named nor recognized a syndrome of male homosexuality as our society thinks of it.’ (Sedgwick 257) Nonetheless, a refined, higher form of love between men was both accepted and glorified in literature and poetry. Dickens’s contemporary Tennyson provides an example of this in his poetic homage to his close friend Hallam, ‘In Memoriam.’ In contrast, the ‘vulgar’ physical aspect of male sexual relations was recognized legally as an offence. It came under the category of sexual crimes known as ‘sodomy’ or ‘buggery,’ punishable by hanging up until 1861, when this was modified to life imprisonment (Fordham University ‘The Law in England 1290-1885.’ n.pag.). Constructed as both illegal and unnatural, it is understandable that it needed to be camouflaged in fiction.

The question is, can this aspect of male-male relations be connected with disability in *OMF*? I believe the answer is yes, and I propose that it finds its expression in the strand of the plot which parodies Wrayburn and Lightwood – namely the partnership between Wegg and Venus. Despite her focus on homosexual/homosocial relations in *OMF*, including a survey of the criticism connecting anality and the dustheaps, Sedgwick surprisingly overlooks this example. Yet it is Wegg who is most often in the vicinity of the dustheaps, which appropriately become his new home. He is the one that does most of the ‘poking around’ in the ‘ashes,’ searching for hidden treasure (or should that be pleasure?). Referring to the critical tradition of connecting the dust heaps with excrement, Sedgwick suggests that ‘Perhaps it would be more precise, then, to say that *Our Mutual Friend* is the only English novel that everyone says is about excrement in order to forget that it is about anality.’ (Sedgwick 246). Read as a symbol of anality, which one must take with a grain of salt considering this is based on Freud’s not-then-known theories, his questions to Venus about how old Harmon worked the mounds are rife with innuendo: “…Did you ever hear him mention how he found it, my dear friend?...Whether he began at the top of the mounds, or whether he began at the bottom. Whether he prodded;” Mr. Wegg’s pantomime is skilful and expressive here; “or whether he scooped? Should you say scooped, my dear Mr. Venus; or should you – as a man – say prodded?” (OMF 301) Mr Wegg himself is clearly practiced in the art of ‘prodding or scooping,’ but he appears to be sounding out Venus’s attitude to the thing ‘as a man.’ In the course of this conversation, Wegg gets very intimate with Venus, moving his wooden leg and chair close and ‘spreading his hands on his visitor’s knees.’ (302) Wegg invites Venus to join him searching the mounds, complimenting his friend’s superior ‘delicate touch.’ (303) Venus finally agrees to join up with Wegg, but only on account of
having been ‘soured’ – after being disappointed by a woman, he goes over to ‘the other side’. And Wegg ‘inwardly drinks with great heartiness to the health and success in life of the young lady who has reduced Mr. Venus to his present convenient state of mind.’ (304) With the love interest out of the way, this leaves the coast clear for Wegg to corrupt Venus, in any way he can. Venus’s love interest, the inappropriately named Pleasant Riderhood, is a double for Lizzie and the daughter of Gaffer Hexam’s former partner, which further connects these two strands of plot – melodrama and parody – together.

 Quite apart from the disputable anality of the mounds, there is other corroborating evidence of Wegg’s aberrance from the Victorian domestic ideal. He is characterized as a loner with no family, who fantasises about belonging to so-called ‘Uncle Parker’s’ household; he shows absolutely no interest whatsoever in women and all of his social relations are with men. He clearly despises children, selling them his tainted gingerbread and reacting with joy to the news of little Johnny’s death. He develops a close friendship with a man named after the Goddess of Love who also happens to be in possession of Wegg’s leg bones, a potent phallic symbol. Incidentally, Wegg refers to these bones as ‘I,’ indicating how closely he identifies with them. As Venus makes clear, there is something peculiar about Wegg’s leg bones – they are clearly different to other men’s and will not fit in a regular skeleton. In fact, the only way he foresees them having any value is ‘as a Monstrosity.’ (OMF 80) Even Wegg’s remaining leg deviates from the norm according to Venus, who tells him: ‘You have got a twist in that bone, to the best of my belief. I never saw the likes of you.’ (80)

 But it is his wooden leg that figures most strongly as a penis substitute, erecting itself at the thought of riches. After ‘pegging’ at Venus a couple of times with his wooden leg while Boffin’s back is turned, Wegg begins to read.

(Here Mr. Wegg’s wooden leg started forward under the table and slowly elevated itself as he read on)...On the way to this crisis Mr. Wegg’s wooden leg had gradually elevated itself more and more, and he had nudged Mr. Venus with his opposite elbow deeper and deeper, until at length the preservation of his balance became incompatible with the two actions, and he now dropped over sideways upon that gentleman, squeezing him against the settle’s edge. Nor did either of the two, for some few seconds, make any effort to recover himself; both remaining in a kind of pecuniary swoon. (OMF 483)

Nudging, squeezing and finally dropping onto Venus with his wooden erection, the climax is the mutual swoon which connects them comically with stereotypical Victorian lovers. Again,
I find it interesting to consider Wegg’s punishment at the end of the narrative, in the light of his interpretation as a ‘bugger.’ Here, he is reunited with the symbol of anality in the scavenger’s cart – the resounding ‘splash’ making it clear exactly what kind of substance is being transported. Assuming that Dickens was aware of the connection between anality and excrement, this comic treatment suggests that Dickens found the notion of male sexual relations ridiculous rather than criminal.

3. Belonging
The Gospel of Work
‘For there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair. Work, never so Mammonish, mean, is in communication with Nature; the real desire to get Work done will itself lead one more and more to truth, to Nature's appointments and regulations, which are truth. The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it.’


With regard to disability, work is often a core issue. The ability to work is often considered synonymous with the state of being ‘able-bodied;’ disability implies impairment that may prevent full, or allow only partial, participation in the workforce. One’s ability to participate in the workforce also defines one’s place in society; it has socio-economic consequences, both for the individual and society itself. Victorian England was a pre-Welfare State reliant on a large industrial workforce, in which the workers had limited rights. Trade unions were banned during much of the period and those who were disabled as a consequence of industrial accidents or other work-related injuries had little recourse to compensation. The Victorian response to the disabled needy came in two principle forms: Charity and the Workhouse. In *OMF*, Dickens takes issue with both solutions. But as Carey observes, ‘though he customarily laments the inadequacy of the successive systems of Poor Relief, he congratulates those who would never deign to accept it. In *Our Mutual Friend* persons seeking public charity are likened to ‘vermin’, while old Betty Higden, fleeing it, remains a “decent person”.’ (Carey 9) What I find even more problematic in the comparison between Betty and Wegg (whom I assume Carey is referring to as ‘vermin’), is the fact that they both carry out the same line of work – as itinerants selling wares at their own stalls. A feeble old woman given to blackouts,
it could be argued that Betty plays more on charity than Wegg. She sets up her stall with money given to her by the Boffins, whereas Wegg works for the money that Boffin gives him. In fact, throughout the narrative, Wegg never begs or asks for charity; he earns his living selling, running errands and reading to Boffin. His disability is not fraudulent, yet critics such as Stoddard Holmes insist on identifying him with the figure of the ‘begging imposter.’ She explains this apparent inconsistency by saying: ‘Authentically missing one leg…Wegg is deeply false in every other regard’ (Stoddard Holmes 99).

These ambiguities in Wegg’s status, genuinely disabled yet false, working yet a beggar, are difficult to resolve. The difference between Wegg and Betty is not simply the obvious one of gender. It seems to me to point back to the issue of Wegg’s aberrant domestic status. Betty proves her ‘deserving’ poor status because she is integrated into the Victorian domestic ideal. Not only has she born and raised her own children, she is still engaged in caring for others, including the Workhouse orphan Sloppy. In contrast, Wegg, as I pointed out in the previous section, deviates from this ideal – shunning women and children, he is greedy and self-serving. Being a worker (or a cripple) is not enough to earn a place in Dickens’s ‘good society.’ I will return to the question of Wegg’s place in the next section.

In The Dickens World, Humphry House observes that ‘Nearly everybody in Dickens has a job’ (House 55), to which I add, ‘including those who are disabled’. In fact, warning lights flash when characters appear who do not work; this is usually a sign of moral decrepitude. In this sense, a certain egalitarianism reigns - the gentleman of leisure is almost as much a target of suspicion as the beggar. Chris Louttit examines Dickens’s attitude to work in Dickens’s Secular Gospel, commenting that ‘The standard critical line is to cast Dickens as an eager disciple of the Carlylean worldview,’ although, as he points out, this is an oversimplification (Louttit 18, 4) However, the spiritual value of work does seem to lie at the core of Dickens’s work, not only his fiction. In the article ‘A Curious Dance Around a Curious Tree,’ he notes that ‘It was a relief to come to a work-room…I observed a great difference between the demeanour of the occupants of this apartment and that of the inmates of the other room. They were neither so listless nor so sad.’ (Dickens A Curious Dance 386-87) But at times Dickens seems to carry the insistence on work so far that it resembles tyranny. The example of Phoebe comes to mind, the profoundly crippled (possibly paraplegic) heroine of the short story, ‘Mugby Junction,’ published the year after OMF. She cannot get out of bed (or even sit up)

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18 This account of a visit to St. Luke’s Hospital for the Insane was co-written by W.H. Wills, and published in Household Words in January 1852.
but insists that she is not an invalid, because she is able to work – making lace and teaching
the local children. Of course, this is intended to be both inspiring and heart-warming, but it
implies that there are absolutely no excuses for not working, regardless of the extent of
disability.

The Victorian sewing girl
Like Phoebe, Jenny is a model of Victorian industriousness. Referring to her, Louttit makes
the claim that ‘Dickens is perhaps most straightforwardly positive about work done by one of
the novel’s most peculiar working women.’ (Louttit 58) I cannot entirely agree with Louttit;
while the narrator shows an enthusiasm for the dexterity with which she plies her needle and
thread, there are aspects of her working life that are far from positive. The necessity to work
has deprived her of a childhood. As she explains to Riah:

“How can I say what I might have turned out myself, but for my back having been so
bad and my legs so queer when I was young!” the dressmaker would go on. “I had
nothing to do but work, and so I worked. I couldn’t play. But my poor unfortunate
child could play, and it turned out the worse for him.” (OMF 732).

Although Jenny expresses this as a humorous paradox, that one must be able-bodied to play (a
reference pointing not only to her father but also to Wrayburn), it seems unlikely that Dickens
saw child labour in a positive light. His own painful experiences working as a child, in
addition to the numerous Government reports on the plight of children forced to work in
factories and mines, suggest otherwise. He had already addressed this issue in Hard Times,
published in 1854 when the Industrial novel was topical; what seems strange is that he should
revive this theme in 1864.

While Jenny indicates that her injuries pre-date her sewing career, they correspond
surprisingly well with those suffered by Victorian sewing girls and boys, forced to sit cross-
legged on hard, cold floors for many hours at a stretch, as described in the following report
from 1832:

Their ordinary hours are ten or twelve in the day, but they are confined not infrequently
from five or six in the morning till twelve at night! The bent posture in which they sit
tends to injure the digestive organs, as well as the circulation and the breathing…From
these causes collectively we find that girls from the country, fresh-looking and robust,
soon become pale and thin. Pains in the chest, palpitation, affections of the spinal and
ganglionic nerves, and defect of action in the abdominal viscera, are very general. (C. Turner Thackrah, n. pag.).

Jenny’s ‘bad back and queer legs’ appear to correspond with ‘affections of the spinal and ganglionic nerves,’ and reference is frequently made to the pain she suffers. Like the girls that Thackrah refers to, Jenny too works long hours. When Headstone asks her if it is a good business, she responds: “No. Poorly paid. And I’m often so pressed for time! I had a doll married, last week, and was obliged to work all night. And it’s not good for me, on account of my back being so bad and my legs so queer.” (OMF 223) Loutitt suggests that her lament about ‘Work, work, work,’ seems to echo Thomas Hood’s ‘Song of the Shirt,’ but he doesn’t pursue the significance of this lead (Louttit 59). However, the fact that her labour is carried out for dolls rather than people places this in a completely different light.

While it is off-limits for Wrayburn to make light of Jenny in the passage I mentioned earlier, “‘Why, if we were all as industrious as you, little Busy-Body, we should begin to work as soon as we could crawl, and there would be a bad thing!’” (OMF 238) it would seem that Dickens himself is not above parodying the figure of the Victorian sewing girl, a popular figure of literature in the 1840s and 50s. Even Jenny’s fantasies about flowers, birdsong and countryside, which she has never experienced in reality, seem to be a reference to these poor country girls, condemned to a form of slavery in the sewing workshop. Her connections to the Jew Riah also reference this; she buys her scraps from him. Jews were often presented as exploitative ‘slave masters’ in the Victorian textile industry. Is she a reincarnation? Her connections with death almost seem to suggest so. Dickens confuses the reader once again when he ‘trifles with her infirmity’ in this way.

‘Those who need not work’\textsuperscript{19}

Providing a direct contrast to Jenny is Eugene Wrayburn, who professes to be ‘a bad idle dog.’ When asked why he doesn’t reform he replies ‘Because, my dear, there’s no one who makes it worth my while.’ (OMF 235) This reflects a selfishness not unlike Wegg’s – they both have only themselves to think about. But unlike Wegg, Wrayburn doesn’t need to earn a living. As I mentioned earlier, the idle rich are almost as suspect as the beggars in Dickens’s fiction. Having too much money can create as many problems as not having enough, which seems to be Lightwood’s message: “‘My own small income…has been an effective

\textsuperscript{19} A title borrowed from Henry Mayhew, one of his 4 categories for workers and non-workers in London Labour and the London Poor. (Mayhew 331)
Something, in the way of preventing me from turning to at Anything. And I think yours has been much the same.’” (OMF 812) This is a reversal of Jenny’s situation; just as Jenny has been robbed of a childhood by having to work, Wrayburn and Lightwood have been robbed of an adulthood by not having to work. Paradoxically however, the textual solution for Wrayburn is disablement, depriving him of the energy and freedom of movement he has thus far wasted on frivolous activities. It is only after he is maimed that he talks seriously of working at his vocation. Like Jenny, it would seem that he can’t play and therefore must work.

Place

I have already mentioned Wegg’s connection to the dustheaps; even if only seen as a depot for rubbish, they are an appropriate location for this villain. As a doubly-marginalized figure, both impoverished and disabled, his place deserves closer examination. To begin with, he ‘belongs’ on the streets – there is no mention of any abode until he is left in charge of ‘Boffin’s Bower’. What kind of abode is it? The narrator informs us that it is ‘a gloomy house…with sordid signs on it of having been, through its long existence as Harmony Jail, in miserly holding.’ (OMF 183) Even after Boffin takes over, it retains its connection to penal institutions, as according to Mayhew’s work, ‘Bower’ was the name of a prison (Mayhew 146, note 455). Symbolically then, Wegg goes from being a homeless disabled man to being imprisoned. Finally, he is ejected from the ‘good society’ of Boffin’s extended family circle. Condemned to the refuse in the scavenger’s cart, this is a true ‘rags to rags’ story. Despite his aspirations to move up the social ladder and take over the Boffin’s wealth and mansion, this one-legged son of a waterman makes no real progress at all.

Jenny, on the other hand, may be doubly-marginalized but she is never homeless. Like the wren she names herself after, she creates her own little nest, and she extends its protection to others – her father, Lizzie and finally Riah find refuge there. Her domesticity and care for others mark her as a ‘good’ character in the same way as Betty, and earn her a place in Dickens’s ‘good society,’ finally being incorporated into the Boffin extended family circle through her connections to Lizzie and Sloppy. But her place is not so clear-cut throughout the narrative. She is also featured out walking the streets alone, which distinguishes her from ‘respectable’ girls like Georgiana Podsnap, who are closely guarded by their parents. While Jenny is apparently getting inspiration for her dolls’ dresses, ‘walking the streets’ is
associated with prostitution. Once again, this brings to mind the fate of the Victorian sewing girl. Working for such low wages, it was a small step to resort to prostitution to make ends meet. As Beth Harris explains, the Second Report of the Children’s Employment Commission brought this factor to the attention of the public when it was published in 1843. Jenny’s entrée onto the street points back to her construction as a parody of the Victorian sewing girl. This is supported by the knowing attitude she assumes with Lizzie, “‘Oh, my dear, all those fellows with their tricks and their manners do deceive!’” (OMF 243)

After becoming disabled, Wrayburn’s place and social status changes dramatically. In his initial position in high society, he seems to be a fish out of water, a reluctant participant in Society soirees like those held by the Veneerings. Disablement opens the door to a new set of values: marriage and domesticity, work, a quiet circle of devoted friends. He only truly finds his place after being disabled, when he is also ‘ejected’ from Society (at least the Tippins/Podsnap segment of it). While Dickens’s ‘good society’ may represent a step down in social standing for Wrayburn, the reader knows that it is nonetheless a moral improvement.

Erasure and the ‘moral hostage’

Dickens’s narrative need for a ‘happy ending’ for the virtuous also leads him to adopt a strategy which virtually obliterates what he sought to include, disability itself. This is an aspect of the model of the ‘moral hostage’ which creates a pattern of ambivalence in his fictional work, especially his novels. In a similar manner to Barnaby’s remarkable improvement at the end of BR, Dickens frames recovery as a form of moral reward which is extended to both Jenny and Wrayburn in OMF. By the end of OMF, the reader is assured by Jenny that she hardly ever feels the pain now, while Sloppy attests that she hardly needs a crutch either. Wrayburn is assured by the doctors that he may not be so disfigured in time and by Lightwood that he is getting better. In Dickens’s fictional project, the ‘good society’, from which Wegg has been unceremoniously ejected, it would appear that disability barely exists. There are very few examples in his novels in which he is able to tolerate continuing disability in the ‘good’ characters, who form a constituent part of the ‘good society.’ Notably, the few examples that do come to mind also belong to the rarest category of his disabled characters: the good men. Here we find figures such as Joe Willett from BR, Phil Squod from BH and Mr. Dick from DC. This is a group worthy of further examination.

Even in Dickens’s short fiction, such as the Christmas stories, one finds the same tendencies towards the erasure of disability. In ‘A Christmas Carol,’ the projected outcome
for Tiny Tim is health, conditional on Scrooge joining the ‘good society.’ In ‘The Cricket and the Hearth,’ Blind Bertha can at least metaphorically see at the end of the tale. His late short stories indicate a slight change in his perspective however. In ‘Doctor Marigold,’ published in 1865, Sophy and her husband remain deaf-mutes, but there is hope for the next generation; their offspring is born ‘normal,’ to the overwhelming joy of Sophy’s father.

Omission

While the disabled undeniably had a place in Dickens’s fiction, representation in itself is not necessarily a sign of inclusion or equality. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, Barnaby is the only disabled character with protagonist status in a novel by Dickens, and even he is absent for much of the narrative. In OMF, Wegg and Jenny are not the main characters but they demand the reader’s attention, perhaps to a greater extent than they were intended to do. They are also marginal within the society of the novel. As one usually finds with Dickens’s disabled characters, they are isolated figures in an able-bodied society; there is no sense of a disabled community. In fact, the only reference I have been able to find in his work to anything approaching a community of disabled people is in the short story ‘Dr. Marigold,’ The character Sophy, who is a deaf mute, is sent to the Deaf and Dumb Establishment in London where she meets her future husband. This is also the only example I have found in his fiction of an institution specifically for disabled people.

Despite Dickens’s real-life fascination for specialized institutions for the disabled and medical developments giving hope of a cure, these are both curiously absent from his fiction. I find this a point of ambivalence in his work; it raises important questions about what he really thought was the proper place for the disabled. In his fiction, his primary focus was on social institutions he could criticize – the prisons, the courts and the Workhouse. He doesn’t envisage specialized institutions for the disabled or communities of the disabled as part of his fictional ‘good society.’ Did the idea of disabled people en masse disturb him at the same time as it fascinated him?

If one compares Dickens with his close friend and fellow writer, Wilkie Collins, one finds a fundamentally different attitude towards the disabled. Collins addresses these issues

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20 The story was entitled ‘Dr. Marigold’s Prescriptions’ the first time it was published.
directly in his novel, *Poor Miss Finch*,
through the characters of Lucilla Finch and Oscar Dubourg, posing two important questions:
1. Is the eradication of disability through medical intervention possible?
2. Is it desirable?
While Collins’s response to both questions is ‘not necessarily,’ (as illustrated in the characters of Miss Finch and her beloved) Dickens seems to operate with two different sets of answers. In his non-fiction – articles such as his visit to the Earlwood Asylum and his articles about Laura Bridgeman and Samuel Howe Gridley, his answer appears to be an unequivocal ‘yes’ to both questions. However, in his fiction his response to question one appears to be that medical intervention is not necessary, given that he frames disability as a moral rather than a medical construction. His response to question two is that eradication is desirable, but the form it takes depends on the moral stance of the character concerned – eradication through death or eviction is appropriate for the morally reprehensible, while miraculous improvement is the solution for the virtuous – a case of divine intervention. This latter point brings Dickens dangerously close to the religious cant that he found so objectionable. It also makes clear that for all his fascination with disability, he didn’t see any positive value in it – it was unquestionably something which was undesirable and had no firm place in his fictional ‘good society.’

This sits very uneasily with a subtype of his sentimental disabled characters, which I will call the ‘Disabled Paragons of Virtue,’ who place a premium on their own value as ‘reminders.’ This is a type more readily seen in his short fiction – such as Tiny Tim in ‘A Christmas Carol’ and Phoebe in ‘Mugby Junction.’ For while a cure may not be possible for these two virtuous figures, they serve the function of telling the rest of us that we have nothing to complain about, or put another way ‘there, but for the grace of God, go I.’ In fact, Tiny Tim’s comment that it might be nice for people to see him in church as a reminder of the group that Jesus healed, is in my opinion an example of religious cant, the kind of humbug that Dickens complained about and lampooned in his clerical characters, (such as the preacher Mr. Chadband in *BH*).

4. Mutuality and Disability

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21 While I recognize that this novel was written just after Dickens’s death (published in 1872), I think the point I am making is still valid.
One of the main themes of *OMF*, hinted at in the title, is mutuality. Chesterton took great exception to the title, believing it to be a ‘vulgarism’ or error on Dickens’s part, showing his lack of formal education. When he says that ‘the very title is illiterate,’ (Chesterton *Appreciations* 207) however, he is quite correct – the title comes from a remark by one of the illiterate characters, Noddy Boffin, who refers to Rokesmith as ‘Our Mutual Friend’ (*OMF* 111). The literate/illiterate binary is a recurrent motif, serving to distinguish characters from each other. It is connected to various mutual relations in the text; depicted as one factor in mutual dependency. In fact, Boffin places his own illiteracy on the same level as disability, comparing Wegg’s position: ‘A literary man—with a wooden leg—and all Print is open to him!’ with his own: ‘Here am I, a man without a wooden leg, and yet all print is shut to me.’ (49-50). Indeed, in social terms, illiteracy is shown to be a form of disability, an impediment hindering progress up the social ladder.

What Dickens understood by the term ‘mutual’ of course can only be guessed at; I interpret it as a reference to the ‘doctrine of mutualism,’ which I see as the foundation for his many fictional representations of the ‘good society.’ It is defined as ‘the doctrine that mutual dependence is necessary to social well-being,’ by the Oxford English Reference Dictionary, and as ‘the doctrine or practice of mutual dependence as the condition of individual and social welfare,’ in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. This term is attributed to the French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who first used it in 1848. Proudhon has connections both to socialism and anarchism, and though Dickens himself did not show any inclination to follow either of these political directions, he did show a sympathy for some of their tenets. I believe that both of the dictionary definitions can be applied to Dickens’s fiction. Where Charity and the Workhouse fail, Dickens will have us believe that mutualism, a less systematized and more personal approach to social relations, can succeed.

Some of Dickens’s projections of mutuality in *OMF* are more successful than others. The friendship between Jenny and Lizzie, in which Lizzie lives with and assists Jenny as recompense for her father’s moral debt, seems to me to be an example of unequal relations. It frames Jenny as the ‘poor’ recipient of the ‘good’ Lizzie’s charity. It is a fitting example of the ‘satellite persona’ which Julia Miele Rodas advances in her thought-provoking article, ‘Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha, and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher: Charles Dickens and the Uses of Disability.’ A brief description of this concept is as follows:

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22 In this instance, I rule out its biological definition.
(presumably) non-disabled person who appears to construct his or her own personal identity around a nexus of disability, which is perceived as requiring mediation. The key is that the identity and/or importance of the satellite be understood (by himself or by others) as residing (even temporarily) in his connection to the central “disabled” subject. (Rodas 93 note 2)

Lizzie’s goodness is constructed around her apparently selfless desire to befriend and assist the ‘poor little creature’ that she promotes Jenny as to others (such as Charley). She also attempts to usurp Jenny’s freedom of expression, telling her essentially how she should behave and think when Jenny fantasises about how she would torment a future mate if he was an alcoholic.

“I’m sure you would do no such horrible thing,” said Lizzie.
“Shouldn’t I? Well; perhaps I shouldn’t. But I should like to!”
“I am equally sure you would not.”
“Not even like to? Well, you generally know best. Only you haven’t always lived among it as I have lived—and your back isn’t bad and your legs are not queer.” (*OMF* 243)

But Jenny resists her, claiming her own version of her disability and refusing to come around to the ‘prettier and better state’ that Lizzie would have her in.

Lizzie’s role as satellite to Jenny turns out to be training for her future role with Wrayburn, as wife/carer satellite to his disability. One is left with the disturbing feeling that this relationship will end up disabling Lizzie. Prepared to sacrifice her own independence to be his nurse, she seems willingly destined for the ranks of Dickens’s ‘legless angels,’ as George Orwell so memorably refers to Dickens’s virtuous women. (Orwell Charles Dickens n. pag.) And being legless, even if only metaphorically speaking, implies a form of disability.

A more intriguing example of mutuality in the text is the Wrayburn/Jenny relationship. Here Jenny assumes the role of satellite to Wrayburn, instinctively interpreting his desires when no-one else understands them and mediating his relations with Lizzie. Jenny’s ability to do this seems to be a consequence of her own disability, a form of sensitivity that is connected to her spiritual qualities. In my opinion, their relationship is one of the more successful examples of mutuality in the narrative. Despite their age difference, Jenny is a better match for Wrayburn than Lizzie. The sparks that fly in their witty repartee stand in strong contrast to the conventional and submissive tone of Lizzie’s conversations. Where Jenny challenges him, Lizzie will no doubt bore him in time.
It is certainly a more convincing proposition than the mutuality of Jenny’s projected union with Sloppy. Schor perceives this as ‘an inappropriate love-match we are meant to admire.’ (Schor 204) I agree; there is something admirable about Dickens’s attempt to challenge both the idea of the unmarriageable disabled woman and the unmarriageable idiot, not purely fictional stereotypes but also cultural ones (and legal, in the case of the idiot, whose legal construction was in part founded on an inability to marry, as I discussed in Chapter Two). He also challenges Victorian domestic ideals, in which the man is undisputed head of the household. Ultimately however, there is an echo of the Gargerys in GE in this pair. I have already commented on Jenny’s similarity to Mrs Joe. Sloppy and Joe also share many of the same characteristics – they are both gentle giants, manual workers, kind-hearted but rather simple men. This is one example where one disability cannot simply be exchanged or compensated for by another, particularly where members of the harmonic ‘good society’ of Dickens’s fictional world are concerned.
Chapter Four
Conclusion: Friend or Foe?

Introduction

When I set out to write this thesis, my aim was to provide an overall view of the functions of disability in Dickens’s work, by looking at several works in detail and observing the patterns repeated there. For that reason, I chose two novels quite unlike each other, one from Dickens’s early career, *Barnaby Rudge*, and his final completed work, *Our Mutual Friend*. This allowed me to see developments in his use of disability in his work. It also gave me the opportunity to examine both disabilities of the mind and of the body, something which I have not seen attempted in the examples of scholarship I have read. This holistic approach to disability seemed appropriate to me, given that the Victorians themselves didn’t make the distinction between body and mind that we do today, a factor Martha Stoddard Holmes points out in her work. (Stoddard Holmes 13-14) I wanted to see if the same patterns applied to both areas of disability, something which I found confirmed in my reading. My thesis, to locate the areas of ambivalence towards disability that I perceived in Dickens’s fiction, required me to look closely at the different aspects of his texts where I believed ambivalence could be found. In particular, I examined his ambiguous characterizations of disabled characters, unravelling the contribution of different literary genres and traditions and their accompanying stock characters and stereotypes; personal identity factors which influence his representation, such as gender, class and sexuality/sexual orientation; issues of belonging – work and place, erasure and omission; his connection of disability to novelistic themes; and the metaphoric use of disability, as a powerful symbol standing for something else. I also found examples in which disability has been used to conceal social taboos which could not be openly represented in Victorian family fiction; in particular, sexual taboos which challenged Victorian sexual mores. I addressed his two different and sometimes opposing roles as social critic and entertainer, which I also found to be a site of ambivalence in his work.

One of my discoveries during preliminary research was a recurrent pattern which I call Dickens’s moral construction of disability. This is based on the ideas of moral sentiment, in which virtues are rewarded and vices are punished, part of Dickens’s ‘moral lesson’ for his readers. He divides the disabled characters into two groups, a ‘guilty disabled’ group and an innocent disabled group which I have named ‘moral hostages.’ I have found that this aspect of
his work creates ambivalence consistently throughout his fiction, contributing to the erasure/eradication of the two forms of disability as framed in this model.

I used a wide range of source material in my research, both literary, historic, and philosophic. I also examined criticism of Dickens’s work over a long time period – from the time he published his work and up to the present. This has allowed me to see different approaches towards literary analysis which highlight different aspects of his representation of disability. I have found the approaches of Gender and Queer Studies, Cultural Studies and not least Victorian Studies, to offer useful insights to this particular aspect of Dickens’s work. The latest of these theoretical directions is the one most closely connected to my thesis statement, Disability Studies, which provided me first and foremost with a lens with which to read Dickens’s work through. In addition, I have examined a wide array of Dickens’s work, only a fraction of which I refer to directly in my paper. Nonetheless, I feel that this has informed my views, allowing me to draw more general conclusions at times. I have compared his letters, articles and non-fiction works with his works of fiction, both novels and short stories, to find out how these connect and provide useful background information.

I will now summarize the results of my research, to provide a concluding view of my findings.

**Dickens’s ambiguous characterization**

The multitude of literary genres, narrative traditions and modes that Dickens drew upon was a clear factor in his ambivalent depictions of disabled characters. I have shown that he used stereotypes in a conventional manner, but also inverted them, as in the case of Jenny, an object of pity and the shrew. In her figure, he also shows that the role of disabled can be powerful, allowing her to step outside the boundary of society’s rules in the manifestation of fool. His villains are sometimes textbook examples of criminality, such as the *mad* Old Rudge in *BR*. Sometimes he allowed himself to be torn by class distinctions into a more sympathetic construction of *madness*, as we see in the figure of Lord George. He draws into question the whole meaning of genre, questioning melodramatic devices in *BR* and using parody to ridicule the disabled villain in the form of Silas Wegg.

Dickens also adds colour and fantasy by mixing in elements of the grotesque, of the fairy and folk tale, and ancient cultural entities such as the fool and the shrew. The latter two types may have been inspired by Shakespeare.
In *BR*, we find one of his few examples of the disabled en masse; however, they cannot be perceived as a community. The mob is as an altogether anarchic entity. Here he also draws on the power of disability as metaphor.

Dickens’s moral constructions of disability

I have addressed the issue of ambivalence arising from Dickens’s moral constructions of insanity, in regard to mental disorders, intellectual disability and mobility disorders. I have found evidence of both the ‘moral hostage’ and the guilty disabled in all categories of disability, and in both novels, suggesting that this is a model he consistently used in his fiction. I have examined examples of ‘moral hostages’ at the mercy of individual characters and also those at the mercy of society, which function to support Dickens’s role as social critic. I have discussed how the ‘moral hostage’ model sometimes works against his attempts to include the disabled in his ‘good society,’ by effectively eradicating this trait in his virtuous characters, creating a significant site of ambivalence in his work. This ‘magic wand’ approach to cure in his fiction also ignores the realities of medical treatment and training that Dickens addresses in his non-fiction and articles.

In my examination of his guilty disabled characters, I have found a predominance of men, suggesting that Dickens took a rather harsh view of his own gender. What is consistent in these generally villainous portrayals is their resistance to reformation; they ‘seem always to have been and always to be unredeemable,’ as Fred Kaplan notes (Kaplan 69). I have also shown how he parodies the guilty disabled in figures like Silas Wegg, challenging at the same time notions of what is acceptable in humour. How far can Dickens exploit comic disabled figures before laughter becomes offensive? The element of malice and feeling of superiority that comes from ridiculing others cannot be overlooked in relation to humour, as I have mentioned in regard to both Wegg and John Willett in *BR*, and this creates a sense of ambivalence in his work.

Dickens makes moral distinctions between the two groups of disabled encompassed by the term insanity. In the process, he frames *idiocy* as an essentially innocent disability, while *madness* is connected with criminality, social uproar and alcoholism – essentially a negative construction. This creates a deep ambivalence in his texts towards these two groups, glorifying one and demonizing the other.
Class and gender

The examination of disability in Dickens’s fictional work sheds light on his projections of gender, class and sexuality, revealing a more nuanced view of his attitudes than has been admitted by other scholars. Dickens’s suggestion that disability can equalize social relationships and reverse gender roles, as we see in the case of Wrayburn and Lizzie, is quite a radical construction, which I believe has escaped many critics. He challenges rigid Victorian conceptions of class and gender roles through the vehicle of disability. This is also worthy of further scholarly attention.

Social critic and entertainer

Dickens is able to harness disability to his hobby horses, as social critic. In BR, this is connected to his depiction of lower classes, both individual characters such as Hugh and also collectively, in the mob. Here, his thesis is that social corruption, in the form of ‘bad criminal laws, bad prison regulations, and the worst conceivable police,’ (BR 393) induces a form of insanity.

I have referred to other social evils which I believe he connects with disability in OMF – such as alcoholism and sexual abuse, which could not be made explicit in ‘family’ fiction in this period. I have also connected some of his male disabled characters in this novel with the issue of male-male romantic and sexual relations, another area that was considered taboo in Victorian society. The use of disability to symbolize taboos is, of course, difficult to prove – by their very nature, these issues are well-hidden. They had to be to defy strict Victorian censorship conventions.

Dickens was a fervent supporter of popular entertainment, as his articles, such as ‘The Amusements of the People’ attest. In Part II, he states his conviction that the ‘people have a right to be amused.’ (Dickens ‘Amusements II’ 196). His consciousness of his own role as entertainer is clear in his work, sometimes affecting his portrayals of disability in ways that suggest less sympathy than we would expect from ‘a sympathiser with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed.’ This is particularly evident when he uses disability to provoke laughter, as I have mentioned above. It also makes itself seen in situations where his enthusiasm for his work comes into conflict with his desire to present social ills, as in the case of the rioting mob in BR. Here, the depiction of the madness of the mob is so excessive that it has led some critics, such as Lyn Pykett (71), to label it as ‘demonization.’ (Pykett 71) This too contributes
to an ambivalent view of the lower classes, suggesting that the disability of *madness* is an inherent part of their nature, bubbling just beneath the surface and ready to ignite if a spark comes along.

**Further research**

In a work of this scale, questions are raised which invite further exploration. There are several aspects of Dickens’s use of disability in his fiction which I believe are worthy of closer examination. This is by no means an exhaustive review of all of his disabled ‘types.’ One of the recurrent figures that I have touched upon fairly lightly is his connection of the traditional figure of the shrew with the adult female disabled character. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, this is an intriguing combination, suggesting that Dickens was far more aware of the oppressive nature of Victorian gender roles for women than many feminist scholars, such as Natalie McKnight, have acknowledged. This is one ‘type’ I would like to research further.

Another type that has been virtually neglected, as the title of my paper suggests, is the ‘good disabled man.’ My focus has been predominantly on Dickens’s villainous disabled men, as a consequence of their frequency in his fiction. But as I have pointed out earlier, there are rare examples of ‘good disabled men,’ such as Joe Willett in *BR*, Captain Cuttle in *DS* and Phil Squod in *BH*. While these are marginal characters, they are exceptions to the rule and therefore worthy of attention.

The consumption of alcohol and the issue of alcoholism has only been brought up briefly in the course of my paper, in relation to the mad mob in *BR* and the character of ‘Mr. Dolls’ in *OMF*. This is another aspect of Dickens’s fiction which is characterized by ambivalence. It is also connected with disability in his work, as a cause of *madness*, a failure of will-power and a source of abuse. Yet Dickens himself was a moderate drinker and a vigorous opponent of the Temperance movement. This is an area of study which calls for further attention, in my opinion.

**Finally…a few words in praise of ambivalence**

Ambivalence is not in and of itself a negative thing. It simply rocks with the illusion of certainty that humans need to orientate themselves in an uncertain world. Dickens was a human; it is unlikely that anyone writing over a long period of time could avoid being ambiguous and changing their minds along the way. While it does sometimes draw his motivations into doubt, suggesting clouded judgement and a propensity to get carried away, I
cannot deny that his work would be much the poorer if there was no ambivalence in it. It creates layers of meaning and food for thought, defying simple categorization. As John Carey points out, ‘his inconsistencies would be damaging if he were a social theorist.’ (Carey 9) But that is the point – Dickens was an entertainer, a social critic and ‘a sympathiser with the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed,’ but he was not a theorist. Perhaps that is asking too much of a novelist in the end.
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Attachments