Reading with Feeling: Revisiting Mr. Dick, Miss Mowcher, and Disability

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To my parents who joyfully made my education possible, to my family of friends who threw the dinner party, and to Karen Chase without whose creative and generous vision I could not have written these pages; they've set a kite flying.

"A weak-minded person… may do what wonderful people may not do."

-- Mr. Dick, from *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens

Here dies another day
During which I have had eyes, ears, hands
And the great world round me;
And with tomorrow begins another.
Why am I allowed two?

-- "Evening" by G.K. Chesterton

Chapter One
Pleasure's Role in Empathy and Wisdom: Rereading the Disabled

I. Introduction

"Where We Stopped Growing": Dynamic Stances on the Praiseworthy Immoveable

Miss Havisham's literary predecessor makes an appearance in Charles Dickens's article "Where We Stopped Growing," published in *Household Words* in 1853. Written to honor the childish fancy that "if we can only prevent ourselves from growing up, we shall never grow old" (4), the article traces a number of childhood memories of figures from literature, followed by a journey through memories of real figures. Dickens couches these real "characters" in terms of universal resonance ("we behold…we have never outgrown"), yet their characteristics are oddly particular. His meditations rest on the figure of the "White Woman." She was, he writes, "another very different person who stopped our growth… She is a conceited old creature, cold and formal in manner, and evidently went simpering mad on personal grounds alone no doubt because a wealthy Quaker wouldn't marry her" (3). Apparently drawn from Dickens's childhood encounter, the White Woman is a prototype for Miss Havisham, essentially the same rejected bride (Stone 280). Harry Stone, in his book *Dickens and the Invisible World,* asserts this connection. Further, Stone points out that the more specific details (her "personality," her "history") surrounding the White Woman in this passage of the article were embellishments from Dickens's imagination, blending memory with fiction.

Dickens portrays the White Woman as grounded, fixed in her rejection. She is not fanciful, but "simpering mad." If her fixity is her pathetic fate, why then does she make her appearance, alongside other mad people doomed to futile repetition, in an article so

commending of the immoveable? What is the fine line between the stasis of the demented and the stasis of the wonderstruck inner child?

One answer to the question is obvious. Dickens is credited with having invented childhood. Dickens and childhood is a field of its own in nineteenth century discourse, and archetypes like the inner child, the adult child, and the child hero comprise its refrain. In *Great Expectations,* everyone knows, Pip's innocence—and dynamism—rescue him from a fate like Miss Havisham's. Similarly, Oliver Twist evades a dark world, and (Little) Amy Dorrit's brave traversal triumphs; but Fagin is supposedly irredeemable, and William Dorrit is pitifully deluded. Dualities like these have been exhaustively analyzed. Yet these binaries, defined by youth versus age, innocence versus guile, and hope versus doom, exclude consideration of the deluded, disabled, or otherwise inhibited figures who redeem and defy fates like Miss Havisham's. Perhaps even more than the young and lovely, the impaired and "deformed" successfully tow the line between the praiseworthy "stopped growth" and the imperative resistance to fixity. If "Where We Stopped Growing" is a Dickensian hymn to the inner child, and *David Copperfield* his autobiography, then the childish and confused Mr. Dick and the peculiarly small Miss Mowcher are the first characters to examine in a study of disabled heroism.

Robert Tracy and Gareth Cordery, writing on Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher respectively, have helpfully explicated these characters' autobiographical threads, namely Dick's name and obsession with Charles I as a sly reconfiguration of *Charles Dick*ens and Miss Mowcher's explicit connection to the real-life Miss Seymour Hill, along with these characters' contributions to the questions of the rising field of disability studies. Julia Miele Rodas takes this up in her article "Mainstreaming Disability Studies?" where

she writes, "the presence of disability in Victorian fiction… points to an underlying anxiety and ambivalence regarding this presence, a grappling with identity, a desire to experiment with places and roles" (372). I see this anxiety not only, as Rodas notes, in the fictional realm of Victorian representations of disabled figures, but also in the interpretive realm of literary criticism.

If our novelist predecessors did not know what to do with the mentally and physically damaged or impaired, it seems that our field of criticism grapples just as much. Scholars have made inroads in the last decade, but there is always more to be done. In the anthology *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*, Rodas expresses a psycho-analytical reading that declares disability where it has not been found by emphasizing a propensity toward autism in the character of Jane Eyre (62). Yva Söderfeldt's and Pieter Verstraete's research findings in "Disability, Happiness, and Education" pronounce the nineteenth century as the historical moment for associating disability with the "educationalisation of happiness," a moment in which the concept of happiness was used to enclose the deaf and the blind within the "ruling norms and beliefs in society" (492). Martha Stoddard Holmes's work illuminates a similar aspect of Victorianism and disability; she performs the difficult work of complicating the "'natural' connection between disability and feeling" in order to "recast it as naturalized rather than natural," pointing to Victorian England's encouragement of understanding disabled bodies in primarily "emotional" terms (4). These are important moves to unmask and trouble Victorian problems with exclusivity prompted by linking disability with feeling and strict definition of the fictional disabled. But I contend that a responsible critical reading of Victorian disabled characters need not preclude feeling and sympathy

altogether. We must not eradicate terms of feeling from our analyses, but rather *redefine the terms* of feeling as we approach disability and literature. My reconsideration of feeling draws on Rebecca N. Mitchell's redefinition of empathy stemming from her study with Emmanuel Levinas's theory of alterity and the Other in her *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference,* to which I will turn later.

In the last decade, and previously, we have characterized the disabled by the indictments they lay on their own societies, or perhaps on our own. We have thoroughly considered how their gaps in their characterization or ostracization reflect poorly on "those Victorians." If we choose to delve deeper, we have used them to defend the causes of the weak in our own time. This is a step further, a legitimate step and indeed a necessary one, if we wish to be responsible readers of the nineteenth century and humane communicators in the twenty-first. I emphatically appreciate these interpretive moves. Where would we be, after all, without the postcolonial and feminist critical literary movements? We would be propagating cruelty by the turning of a blind eye upon every page. If not responsible and humane as we regard these texts, we had better be nothing at all.

On the other hand, I fear that our readings so (necessarily) sensitive to hegemony and oppression too often ignore the richness of the characters themselves. By focusing on Tiny Tim as antithetical to Scrooge, we occlude both characters' capacities as works of art. Tim is not Scrooge, Scrooge is not Tim. Tim is good, and Scrooge is bad. We are upset that we do not know Tim better (Holmes 2). But this says very little about the pathos of Tim's grave and the heart-jolt when we discover that he lives after all, or the sensitivity of Scrooge as a young man and his humor when he flies down the staircase on

Christmas morning. It ignores what is left to our imagination, miming our experience with those disabled whom we encounter and cannot fully know, a miming of our own discomfort and unknowing. Now, this is a simplistic example. But we can all admit that interpretation has credited Tiny Tim with little more than a "pull on the heartstrings," and I think he deserves a great deal more.

It is true that we must always read with a certain degree of dramatic irony; we must be careful to notice and judge not only the characters' but also the author's treatment of the disabled. But I contend that, if we lay this judgment without also considering the pleasure of reading or of the characters themselves, we risk reducing them to the caricatures of "sentiment" for which writers like Charles Dickens are so often left on the shelf to collect dust. If we conclude that Jo from *Bleak House*, for example, is only a sentimental ploy to make us cry, we lose the meaning of the novel, and in turn, we lose a work of art whose range of characterization and plot is (or could be, anyway) a life-giving marvel.

Where criticism *has* succeeded in noticing the "good" disabled figures as foils to the tragically fixed or villainous, it has failed to consider something else as crucial to their roles in the greater milieux of their novels: fun, play, and pleasure. In *David Copperfield,* Mr. Dick redeems the Strong marriage and Miss Mowcher indicts the villainous Steerforth. These traversals from safe realms through dangerous relational territory undoubtedly valorize them. But they prove their goodness by more than moral integrity. In my study of Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher of *David Copperfield,* I focus on their capacity for creating pleasure.

A mere analysis of their jokes and humor would unravel the pleasure of reading. A side-by-side alignment would produce nothing but boredom. This study thus derives its interest from reading Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher as part of a system. While T.S. Eliot concluded, "Dickens excelled in character; in the creation of characters of greater intensity than human beings"; not every reader feels the same way. Understandably so, readers often recoil from what they suppose to be Dickensian caricature. But Karen Chase, in *Eros and Psyche,* states, "…so many aspects of the human personality manifest themselves in so many characters that the fiction provides an emotional plenitude. Characters may be simple, but the work becomes a complex of simples" (98). The starting point of any useful Dickensian character analysis must be the whole, the system. In the Dickensian realm, there is no individual without the community. "The dissolution of the self," Chase writes, "creates the fictional community" (126). I will consider Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher individually, but always with a peripheral glance toward *David Copperfield* as a whole and to the novel as a fictional galaxy operating within the literary universe of Dickens's wider body of work.

As Dickens concludes in "Where We Stopped Growing," "We hope we have not outgrown the capacity of being easily pleased with what is meant to please us, or the simple folly of being gay upon occasion without the least regard to being grand" (4). What better place to look for literary manifestations of this hope than Mr. Dick's kite or Miss Mowcher's tagline "ain't I volatile?" But by embodying and producing a sense of fun, these two characters provoke inquiry about the ethics of pleasure. What does it mean to make valuations of mental or physical capacities in the first place? What are the ethical stakes of valorizing disabled characters? What are the stakes of deriving pleasure from

characters who communicate in “non-normative” ways, exhibit mental damage, or look peculiar?

In answer to the first, I must lay the caveat that a true mental or physical valuation of a person (whether fictional or not) as “able” or “disabled” is outside my realm of expertise. This is not, therefore, a psychoanalytical study. I do not intend, in any way, to “diagnose.” I am not interested in my characters to the extent that they are not normative. I do not wish to determine what is “wrong” with them. Other ties bind Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher together, like their perseverance and humor, their wit and skillful derailment of the prideful. Similarly, as I refer to other Dickensian novels and point to Toots, Jenny Wren, and others, I rely upon these threads to stitch my analysis. My conclusion that these characters are disabled rests only upon the fact that they are understood and proclaimed by their respective fictional societies as such, denoted by the novel’s own words: “mad,” “weak-minded,” “queer,” etcetera. Next, valorizing disabled characters risks reducing them to convenient vessels for moral good. We hazard neglecting their ingenuity and trespassing on their forbearance. In short, we condescend and categorize. Finally, this project is not about deriving pleasure *from* any character. It is about assessing the ways in which these particular characters create pleasure for themselves and the characters around them. They must not be poked at or called upon for entertainment. Rather, this is a study of their deployment of humor to resist the fixity to which their societies or physical or mental complications threaten to confine them. Re-approaching feeling as we read these characters in Dickens involves a transfer of our focus from pity to appreciation, from categorization to unpredictability, and from complacent happiness to spontaneous pleasure.

II. Mr. Dick, Maggy, and Jenny Wren: Releasing Pleasure from Pity

David Copperfield first encounters Mr. Dick through the glass of his Aunt Betsey's window. David has just "run away" (170) from his weary work at Murdstone and Grinby's. Still a child, he travels alone, is stolen from, sells his waistcoat for ninepence, sleeps by a haystack like an "outcast" (176), and experiences a different kind of Sunday morning:

> …the peace and rest of the old Sunday morning were on everything, except me. That was the difference. I felt quite wicked in my dirt and dust, and with my tangled hair. But for the quiet picture I had conjured up, of my mother in her youth and beauty, weeping by the fire, and my aunt relenting to her, I hardly think I should have had the courage to go on until next day. (176)

This is David at his lowest and saddest; a child forsaken and homeless. Even the remembrances of peaceful Sundays bring him gloom, as he realizes that he is excluded from their enjoyment. These dreary experiences are followed by another haystack sleep (and "tramps"), until finally, David is found and directed to his aunt's house. But even this is daunting, as David finds himself in a pitiable state of physical appearance: "From head to foot I was powdered almost as white with chalk and dust, as if I had come out of a lime-kiln. In this plight, and with a strong consciousness of it, I waited to introduce myself to, and make my first impression on, my formidable aunt" (184). In his straightforward way, the reflecting, adult David impresses readers with his sad child-self, defenseless and dirty. He has come from his attic under Mr. Murdstone's supervision (where books were his only solace), to Creakle's school Salem House, to Murdstone and Grinby's (where the Micawbers provided a degree of relational warmth), to Aunt

Betsey's. Hers is a possible home for David, but the stakes are high. In David's mind, his Aunt could reject him, leaving him forlorn again. In this state of intimidation and tenuous hope, David sees Mr. Dick for the first time. David reflects,

> The unbroken stillness of the parlor-window leading me to infer, after a while, that she was not there, I lifted my eyes to the window above it, where I saw a florid, pleasant-looking gentleman, with a grey head, who shut up one eye in a grotesque manner, nodded his head at me several times, shook it at me as often, laughed, and ran away. (184)

The image is a strange one, for David and reader alike, and naturally engenders some suspicion about the "gentleman's" presence of mind. But it is also the most pleasant thing David has beheld since before his exile to Salem House. Later, Mr. Dick's "curiously bowed" head reminds David "of one of Mr. Creakle's boys' heads after a beating," indicating that, like David, he has undergone trauma. The trappings of his attire, strangely akin to those of "any other ordinary gentleman," do little to disguise his "vacant manner, his submission to my [David's] aunt, and his childish delight when she praised him" (189). Mr. Dick is the outcast, the strange man in the attic, but he is pleasant. Pleasant to see and feeling pleasant himself, he shows David that there is hope, that he (another *out*cast) could come *in*—and make his home with Aunt Betsey.

While Aunt Betsey voices all sorts of questions and anxieties upon his arrival, Mr. Dick understands better, and more simply, how to address David's physical needs. Julia F. Saville, in her study of "eccentricity" in *David Copperfield,* understands this detail as an indication of Mr. Dick's "childlike ability to dispense with the ceremony and propriety that the Murdstones advocate and get directly to the point of social wellbeing" (789). Mr.

Dick's simplicity upon David's first arrival not only provides emotional and mental pleasure through the exhibition of his peculiar physicality, but also physical pleasure through the provision of what Saville calls "creature comforts the child so badly needs" (789). David's trip to Aunt Betsey's, thankfully, has readied him to accept this help. Only because David is no longer riding on his identity as a Copperfield, as Clara's son, as an employee at Murdstone and Grinby's or a student of Mr. Creakle, he is forced to look up—towards the eccentric Mr. Dick's window—instead of down, at his circumstances or other people more suited, in a worldly sense, to bettering his future. Mr. Dick steps into his role as unwitting advocate for the title character. His advice prompts Aunt Betsey to care for David's immediate needs, but he receives little credit for it (aside from Aunt Betsey's laudatory: "'But no one knows the resources of that man's intellect except myself'" (351)) and takes none for himself. Mr. Dick, by helping David physically, demonstrates the especial capacity for the disabled in Dickens to provide physical comfort, pleasure, and healing to their more "functional" childlike counterparts. These figures are not only childlike themselves, as Saville points out, but also sensitive to the needs of children. Consider Maggy of *Little Dorrit,* who similarly provides care to Amy, a classic Dickensian adult-child.

We first encounter Maggy in Book I, Chapter IX of *Little Dorrit,* where she runs into Amy Dorrit as Arthur Clennam walks with her to the Marshalsea. The narrative spends a great deal of time in description of Maggy, covering everything from her "large bones, large features, large feet and hands, large eyes" to the minute details of her smile and her bonnet:

> Her face was not exceedingly ugly, though it was only redeemed from being so by a smile, a good-humoured smile, and pleasant in itself, but rendered pitiable by being constantly there. A great white cap, with a quantity of opaque frilling that was always flapping about, apologized for Maggy's baldness. (109)

This description hearkens to our introduction to Mr. Dick, the "florid, pleasant-looking gentleman" with the "grey eyes prominent and large" and the "vacant manner" (184,189). Both Maggy and Mr. Dick have large features, a vacantness about them, and a certain degree of the pitiable (we remember that Mr. Dick's head reminds David of one of "Creakle's boys' heads after a beating"). Like Mr. Dick, Maggy herself has endured trauma, in the form of a fever that has trapped her ten-year old personality and intelligence within her twenty-eight-year-old body. While she calls Amy "Little Mother," and on a surface level, is a dependent of Amy's, a deeper look into the narrative of *Little Dorrit* as a whole reveals Maggy's contribution to the needs of Amy, not only her human needs but also her needs as a fictional character.

It is significant that Maggy makes her entrance in a moment between Arthur and Amy. Their relationship, built on an intensity and mystery that only fully unfolds as the novel begins its conclusion, coupled with the novel's dark setting of the Marshalsea prison and Mrs. Clennam's tragic, decrepit house, sorely needs a lightness that characters like Flora, Mrs. F.'s Aunt, and Maggy bring. Like Flora to Arthur, Maggy brings humor to Amy's story. But she does more than that for Amy and Arthur. Maggy's "idiocy" does not indict her, but instead brings a distillation to her communication; while Amy, especially in her communication with Arthur, vacillates and favors indirectness, Maggy

continually cuts in with the truth. Additionally, Maggy's ten-year-old mental confinement demonstrates the figurative or literal confinement of almost every *Little Dorrit* character. As Natalie McKnight puts it, *Little Dorrit* shows that "everyone is a prisoner" (130). Consider William Dorrit's imprisonment literally, Edmund Sparkler's unhealthy dependence on Fanny, Miss Wade's emotional stagnation, Harriet's oppression and exploitation, Mrs. Clennam's refusal to leave her home, even Pet Meagles's confinement to the status quo and later, her abusive husband. McKnight argues that Maggy has "no redeeming factors to compensate for her idiocy" (120), but I see Maggy as dynamic despite her mental stagnation and unlovely appearance. Understanding Maggy as a clue to the imprisonment of everyone in *Little Dorrit* releases her from existing merely as an object of pity.

Consider the moment in Book I, Chapter XXIV, "Fortune-Telling," in which Maggy encounters Amy in a moment of distress. At first, Maggy takes offence at Amy's unrest and refusal to see Mr. Clennam. But eventually she comes to comfort Amy and to care for her physical needs:

> Her great staring child tenderly embraced her; and having smoothed her hair, and bathed her forehead and eyes with cold water (offices in which her awkward hands became skillful), hugged her again, exulted in her brighter looks, and stationed her in her chair by the window. (293)

Other than the mild attentions of Amy's uncle Frederick Dorrit, Maggy may be the only supplier of tenderness to Amy, a tender character herself. Amy is also prideful, and Maggy shatters Amy's pride by taking such pains to comfort her. When Amy threatens to

harden, Maggy continually arrives to soften her. When Amy's countenance falls, Maggy raises it. In addition, Maggy prompts Amy to story telling. The moment continues:

> Over against this chair, Maggy, with apoplectic exertions that were not at all required, dragged the box which was her seat on story-telling occasions, sat down upon it, hugged her own knees, and said, with a voracious appetite for stories, and with widely-opened eyes: 'Now, Little Mother, let's have a good 'un!' (293)

Aside from Maggy's provision of physical, affectionate care, she also brings mental pleasure here, by encouraging Amy, with a pleasant exclamation, to tell a "good 'un." A similar relational dynamic exists between Jenny Wren and Lizzie Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend.* While Jenny's wit and mental capacity surpass Maggy's, her role as the disabled friend to the gracious ingénue (Lizzie Hexam) is somewhat parallel.

Like Maggy, Jenny Wren crafts a moment of respite by encouraging storytelling. Jenny asks Lizzie to "look in the fire" and tell a story after an unpleasant visit from Headstone (348). Like Amy, Lizzie is distressed in this moment by her circumstances and "Some Matters of the Heart" (this passage's chapter title in *Our Mutual Friend).* Jenny does not remove Lizzie's pain, but instead partners in it as a companion by drawing her to a kind of storytelling that does not ignore or escape reality, but seamlessly melds circumstance with imagination. In the mind's eye of Jenny, Lizzie is the lady of the story, the one that, Lizzie confesses, she can make up by staring into the fire "'More easily than I can make one of such material of myself'" (348). Jenny sees of Lizzie what Lizzie cannot see of herself. So much of Jenny's work in *Our Mutual Friend* is about seeing in the sense of knowing: her "sharpness," her distrust of Headstone and Charley, her

watching through her window as strangers approach, her repeated tagline "I know your tricks and your manners" (439). In a novel about dual-identity, about not knowing who is who and whether it matters, Jenny repeatedly, confidently attests to knowing others from the inside out (even when she is later proven wrong, as in the case of Wrayburn). But Jenny's sense of self-knowledge, though strong, is quiet. She calls herself a "weak creature" (348) but the narrative reveals there is much more to her, and more to her perception of her self, than her "queer legs." After hearing Riah and Abbey Potterson murmur about her, for instance, Jenny *thinks* her tagline:

> Miss Abbey's admiration seems to increase her perplexity. She beckoned the Jew towards her, as she reached down the shrub-bottle from its niche, and whispered: 'Child, or woman?'
>
> 'Child, in years,' was the answer; 'woman in self-reliance and trial.'
>
> 'You are talking about Me, good people,' thought Miss Jenny, sitting in her golden bower, warming her feet. 'I can't hear what you say, but *I* know your tricks and your manners!' (439)

This passage is about Abbey and Riah attempting to understand Jenny, and finding their attempts to categorize thwarted. They can know her, but they cannot know her along the boundaries of child versus woman. She is both, as Riah puts it. Similarly, while Jenny attests to "knowing" Riah and Abbey, she is also making a conclusion about her own character; she is one who knows. Miss Wren is the perfect foray into a discussion of Miss Mowcher, but not because she is small. Like Jenny, Miss Mowcher of *David Copperfield* creates pleasure through wit, but her even greater project involves knowing—but more importantly—acknowledging the unknowable.

III. Miss Mowcher: Modeling Empathy

My understanding of the role of Mrs. Seymour Hill in Miss Mowcher's evolution is informed by the article "Remaking Miss Mowcher's Acquaintance" by Gareth Cordery, who explores the push-back from Hill in her letters to Dickens upon "recognizing herself in the December number for 1849" followed by Dickens's decision to change her portrayal in her subsequent chapters (11). But my analysis is also thankful to Cordery and Michael Hollington (whom Cordery cites) in that they move past this historical basis of Miss Mowcher's story in order to examine her as an "'inherently social,'" and socially reflective, character. "[R]ather than condemning the remade Miss Mowcher as Dickens's knee-jerk reaction to a couple of letters," Cordery writes, "we should appreciate her cultural significance in terms of the historical transformation she registers" (13). Here, Cordery highlights Miss Mowcher's ability to challenge stereotypes about women and the disabled in Victorian society by asserting her integrity and her financial responsibility for her siblings.

But Miss Mowcher, while a force for social good, is, from another angle, a simply pleasurable character, and I must reckon with this. No doubt, David's account of his first impression of Miss Mowcher is disconcerting: "I looked at the doorway and saw nothing…" (318). It is unnecessary to explain the humor deployed in this statement, but its multiple levels of irony are worth mentioning. When viewed from different angles, it is by turns a joke, an admission, and a prophecy. First of all, David (and in the outer level of narrative, Dickens) could be making a joke here, a deft swipe at Miss Mowcher's stature. The statement makes us pause, but the prose rolls on effortlessly to the next

sentence. Secondly, the statement could be an admission of David's. While David is prone to producing little mocking witticisms (who can forget his description of the interactions between his Aunt Betsey, "a formidable personage," and the "mild Mr. Chillip?") he is also frequently wrong (wrong about Steerforth, for one thing). When David says that he "saw nothing," he could be admitting, however subtly, that he truly did not see Miss Mowcher as she entered. At the same time, the statement makes us uncomfortable. When our discomfort is examined, "nothing" here becomes more than physical lack. It is also the nothingness of identity. More than Miss Mowcher's body goes unseen. Her voice and her opinions are also lost on David, at least for the rest of her time in chapter 22. He continues in his description, "Her chin, which was what is called a double-chin, was so fat it that entirely swallowed up the strings of her bonnet, bow and all. Throat she had none; waist she had none; legs she had none, worth mentioning…" (318), no doubt dwelling on what he perceives as Miss Mowcher's grotesque qualities. But these lines are not what make Miss Mowcher pleasurable. Miss Mowcher's pleasure project becomes, subversive to David's socially acceptable presentation of her, about a correction of vision.

As a cosmetic artist, Mowcher's talent lies in the ability to see people as they are and then, to transform their external appearances. While we have no choice but to see Mowcher as she is (little), she wields the power to reverse nature by making others appear different from who they are. As she begins dressing Steerforth's hair with the cacophony of "instruments" from her bag, "small bottles, sponges, combs, brushes, bits of flannel, little pairs of curling irons" (319), she laughs, seemingly out of nowhere, "Ha! ha! ha!...What a refreshing set of humbugs we are…" (320). The power in her words,

whether she knows it at this moment or not, is that a "humbug," in the exact 19th century sense of the word (a trick, a phony) is exactly what Steerforth turns out to be, and David is the duped. If we are already suspicious of Steerforth in this moment, Mowcher's frenetic explication of and artful pointing to disguise, to fakeness, should make us pause. If we, like David, are misled by Steerforth until the denouement of his deceit, we look back on this scene with new eyes. If Mowcher is "grotesque," she reverses the joke, so that it falls on the heads (literally) of her clients. By simply following their own instructions, she makes *them* grotesque: painted, cosmetically-altered dolls. Furthermore, by mentioning the "Prince's nails" in her conversation with David and Steerforth, she pokes at the imbalance of her society's heterosexual and hegemonic-subaltern relational systems, thereby pointing (unintentionally but no less potently) to Steerforth's later exploitation of Emily:

> If Miss Mowcher cuts the Prince's nails, she *must* be all right. I give 'em away to the young ladies. They put 'em in albums, I believe. Ha! ha! ha! Upon my life, 'the whole social system' (as the men call it when they make speeches in Parliament) is a system of Prince's nails!' said this least of women, trying to fold her short arms, and nodding her large head. (321)

According to society's standards, according to David (who sees with society), Mowcher, a freak, is potentially redeemed by her services to the wealthy and/or powerful elite. But the emphasis on "must" here, coupled with Mowcher's laughter and acutely critical statement about "'the whole social system'" depending on "Prince's nails" reveal her comically irreverent disregard for social systems as she subversively participates in them. What's more, by mentioning the "young ladies'" foolish desire to collect the Prince's

fingernails in albums, she points to the pettiness and ridiculousness of the perception that young women idolize elite young men. This may reach as far as the darker implications of the relational dynamics between not only Steerforth and Emily, but also David and Dora, and David and Agnes, connections in which the desire of the subordinate woman is always for the man in a comparatively more powerful, authoritative position. As we re-read this scene with Miss Mowcher, as opposed to with David, we receive a corrected vision, a corrected understanding; we do not have to read her as David first does, as "nothing." Instead, we can read her, not only as a pleasurable, deft, gracious jokester, but also as an ingenious (though as yet unknowing) narrative prophet.

The distinction between being a "joke" and being a joke*ster* is an important one, and Miss Mowcher makes the difference very clear. She later asks David, "'If there are people so unreflecting or so cruel as to make a jest of me, what is left for me to do but to make a jest of myself, them, and everything? If I do so, for the time, whose fault is that? Mine?'" (450). Her questions betray her sense of being wronged, of taking offence, and rightfully so. But they also point to the two fundamental flaws behind her society's (more specifically, David's) belittlement of such a powerful woman. Her questions imply that there is a right kind of humor (characterized by reflection and love) and a wrong kind of humor (fueled by the antitheses of these virtues: failure to reflect and cruelty). She continues:

> 'Be thankful for me, if you have a kind heart, as I think you have,' she said, 'that, while I know well what I am, I can be cheerful and endure it all. I am thankful for myself, at any rate, that I can find my tiny way through the world, without being beholden to anyone, and that in return for all that is thrown at me, in folly or

> vanity, as I go along, I can throw bubbles back. If I don't brood over all I want, it is the better for me, and not the worse for anyone. If I am a plaything for you giants, be gentle with me.' (450)

Miss Mowcher graciously trusts that David, despite his lapse into folly, has "a kind heart." Furthermore, she demonstrates in this speech a commitment to joy that runs independent of how the world may receive and treat her. This is a joy very different from David's "happiness," the safe, middle-class happiness described by Annette R. Federico as the novel's main end. Like Mr. Dick's kite-flying pleasure despite articulation and language, Miss Mowcher's joy complicates and alleviates the possibility of the novel's merely sterile, empty happiness. The full reveal of corrected vision, of David's necessary humbling, comes later, when she clearly declares, "'You are a young man… Take a word of advice, even from three foot nothing. Try not to associate bodily defects with mental, my good friend, except for a solid reason'" (452). Miss Mowcher pertly reclaims David's earlier "nothing," but graciously offers hope for change by pointing to his youth. She demonstrates a new joy of being, one that renegotiates power structures and overturns social expectations.

Drawing on Rebecca N. Mitchell's reconsideration of empathy, I want to express that much of Miss Mowcher's pleasure-giving and vision-correcting power lies in the lesson she teaches David about interpersonal relationships. Mitchell cites Emmanuel Levinas's work on alterity as her inspiration for ethical relating between people and texts. In her words, "Levinas… gives language to the idea that acknowledging alterity, and not overcoming it, is ethics" (Mitchell xii). Similarly, she demonstrates that as we relate to texts we need not throw out empathy, but redefine it. While nineteenth century writers

like Dickens are called "realists," a large part of their project involves acknowledging the gaps in any attempt to realistically represent. In Mitchell's words, "realists illustrate the problems that result when one individual does not or cannot recognize the difference between herself and others…These works [of realism] demonstrate that effective connection between people is predicated on the recognition of such very limits" (2). In other words, as long as we think we are connecting with a character or another person on the basis of knowing them, we aren't. With Levinas, Mitchell posits a mode of empathy that relies not on knowing but on recognizing that one can never fully know. This sort of empathy lends dignity to difference, as opposed to the impossible attempt at empathy (the "I know you, and you know me" kind) that flattens difference. If the Levinas kind of empathy is the kind of realist relating that Dickens's works aspire to model, I would like to present Miss Mowcher as a 'meta-textual' example of this kind empathy at work.

In her confrontation of David, Miss Mowcher demonstrates an ethics of pleasure. As aforementioned, we can read Miss Mowcher as a joke*ster* without reading her as a joke or a jester. A joke*ster* remains distinct, a mystery altogether. To make a joke of Miss Mowcher, as Steerforth and David (at first) do is to assume that we have understood everything about her. But to understand her as a jokester is to maintain the state of her mystery, her "alterity." Reading Miss Mowcher as a jokester (in other words, a figure of humor and cleverness) allows room for unpredictability. This kind of reading allows seriousness even as it focuses on pleasure. It demands that humor must not be summoned, but rather accepted and appreciated when it comes.

As I said in my introduction, I want to redefine the terms of feeling as we read the disabled in fiction. We do not need to rid terms like sympathy, empathy, and

sentiment from our regard of nineteenth century characters like Miss Mowcher, Jo, or Smike. But we must understand that sympathy is not pity, empathy does not equal total comprehension, and sentiment must not necessarily preclude wit or dynamism. Readers of Dickens must cast off presumption in favor of unpredictability, as Miss Mowcher calls upon David to do. In doing this, we can safely read with feeling even as we are open to complexity and problems. We can experience the pleasure of a joke without devaluing the jokester. While Miss Mowcher's pleasure is wrought primarily through speech, a return to Mr. Dick demonstrates an alternative Dickensian route to joy: delight in the devaluing of language.

IV. Un-rote-ing Pleasure: Repetition with a Difference

Sarah Winter's *The Pleasures of Memory: Learning to Read with Charles Dickens* studies Dickens's novels *The Pickwick Papers* and *The Old Curiosity Shop,* and focuses on their serial nature when published as indicative of a particular didactic experience. Winter uses the theory of association to contend that these serial stories "involved shaping readers' memories of reading in ways that also supported a social reformist agenda" (3). At the same time, her chapter "Learning by Heart in Our Mutual Friend" contrasts characters like Bradley Headstone and Charley with Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren as a counterpoint to the presence of didactic repetition in Dickens. Headstone, for example, relies on rote memorization for education, but gets nowhere morally, in the novel's judgment. The illiterate Jenny Wren, however, demonstrates an "inventive proficiency and creativity" (261). Jenny's character involves repetition but is characterized by an authenticity. Consider the same phenomenon in Mr. Dick.

Mr. Dick makes the distribution of information fun. Except by Aunt Betsey, who continually praises the "resources" of Mr. Dick's intellect" (339) and turns to him for help, Mr. Dick is unheard. But the desire to be heard is a human impulse, and so he communicates his ideas into this cryptic kite-flying: "'There's plenty of string,' said Mr. Dick, 'and when it flies high, it takes the facts a long way. That's my manner of diffusing 'em. I don't know where they may come down. It's according to circumstances, and the wind, and so forth, but I take my chance of that'" (198). Mr. Dick disseminates his writing, scrawled parchment containing his own version of the life of King Charles, by pasting it to a kite and flying it away. He does not "know where they may come down."

In other words, he does not know who the words will reach. But whether they appear to reach anyone at all seems to be of no consequence.

In Dickens there is always the strain of the un-listened to. They want to speak, but if the world of the Dickens novel is about the community, a speaker needs a receptive audience for his words to effect change, or even to satisfy the speaker's human need for connection, relationship, agency, and existence. There is always the threat that if one of these figures speaks, he will be rejected. Gain and greed are always at the cusp of endangering the un-listened to. In considering this phenomenon we might turn again to Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations*, who responds to rejection by refusal to communicate and bitter exploitation of Pip and Estella. On the other hand, perhaps we think of the un-listened to Toots of *Dombey and Son,* who responds very differently to his impulse to communicate against the strains of rejection and silencing.

Dombey and Son is a novel in which the most seemingly articulate characters happen to be the most dysfunctional. Mr. Dombey and the Chicks, for instance, while refined in speech, enjoy nothing but a "bleak fellowship" (63)**.** They insist on calling Polly by the wrong name, "Richards," exhibiting just another version of delusion: domineering pride. Dr. Blimber's stronghold of repetition has driven Toots mad. "No matter what a young gentleman was made to bear, Doctor Blimber made him bear to pattern, somehow or other" (150). This foolish repetition, mirrored by the wider industrialist world of the novel, is a far from ideal setting in which a person like Mr. Toots could ever succeed. With edge, Dickens remarks on the landscape: "In short, the yet unfinished and unopened railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and

improvement" (68). Characters like Toots offer an alternative to this circuitous world of monotony, pattern, and "smooth… disorder**" (**68), this perpetual progress without purpose or end. In his introduction to *Dombey and Son,* G.K. Chesterton names Toots a "masterpiece," an emblem of Dickens's "main contention" that "to be good and idiotic is… an experience of primeval innocence, which wonders at all things." Chesterton points to Toots, emphasizing the impulse to communicate as the main source of pathos in the novel: "all his externals are flashy and false; all his internals are unconscious, obscure and true. He wears loud clothes, and he is silent inside them." Though Toots's un-listened to status warrants self-centered protest, he exemplifies self-forgetfulness. His love of Florence, and by the end of the novel, of Susan, demonstrates a keen awareness that is sadly lacking in the world of *Dombey and Son.* Dombey is tragic because he did not love Florence until the very end. Toots is tragic because he has loved her all along.

In addition to his love and humility, though, Toots also exemplifies delight, an almost entirely forgotten virtue in *Dombey and Son's* literary universe. In Chesterton's words, "It is through the eyes of such characters as Toots that Dickens really sees the whole of his tales. Toots is perhaps the only man, except Dickens, who enjoys everything that happened in the story of D and S [*Dombey and Son*]." But like Mr. Dick, Toots's capacity to experience and create delight exists apart from his verbal capacity. Instead, Toots's delight is made of action. In his relationship with Paul, for example, there is no language needed to secure intimacy: "It was perfectly understood between Paul and Mr. Toots, that they were intimate friends, notwithstanding their distance in point of years and station" (194). Toots's role as "protector and guardian" to Paul carries on unbeknownst to him; he is not even aware of the envy his connection incites in Mrs.

Pipchin (195). Instead, Toots's and Paul's is a companionship wrought without words. Though Toots's actions appear small, their size is inconsequential to their magnitude, for in *Dombey and Son,* there is always a valuing of the small and the singular. The narrator asks upon Paul's death, "And can it be that in a world so full and busy, the loss of one weak creature makes a void in any heart, so wide and deep that nothing but the width and depth of vast eternity can fill it up" (232). The question, of course, is rhetorical, and the answer is a resounding, "yes, it can be." But just as grand losses of the small engender deep grief in the novel, so do small gestures of grand care craft deep joy. Consider Toots's gift of Diogenes to Florence, an expression of care through action where he can speak little but a "chuckle" (265). Like Mr. Dick, Toots disrupts the monotony of a rote world by cutting in with the unconventional. We do not tire of his repeated chuckles, his heavy breathing, his glimmering dress and tagline "it's of no consequence"; they call attention to the vulnerability of language in the face of grief. When Mrs. Chick and Miss Tox are hopeless to communicate through speech, Toots steps in with action, reviving despair with delight and suggesting that there is not always meaning attached to moments of loss and enjoyment.

Similarly, it matters little what words are attached to Mr. Dick's kite. As soon as the words leave his mind, the reader nearly forgets what they say or mean in exchange for the liberty of trauma lifting, flying across sky. Trauma releases itself from meaning, ritual from explanation:

> It was quite an affecting sight, I used to think, to see him with the kite when it was up a great height in the air. What he had told me, in his room, about his belief in its disseminating the statements pasted on it…. might have been a fancy with

> him sometimes, but not when he was out, looking up at the kite in the sky, and feeling it pull and tug at his hand… I used to fancy, as I sat by him of an evening, on a green slope, and saw him watch the kite high in the quiet air, that it lifted his mind out of its confusion, and bore it (such was my boyish thought) into the skies….(210)

The words do not matter any more, only the feel of the kite "pull and tug at his [Mr. Dick's] hand." But while the passage is, at first glance, descriptive of Mr. Dick, it is also a form of self-reflection for David. Like the feel of the kite for Mr. Dick, the tone and feel of the memory, and in turn, the tone and feel of the passage, share pleasure with David and reader respectively."Mr. Dick and I… the feeble efforts he made… made a deep impression on me… It was quite an affecting sight… I used to fancy as I sat by him of an evening… such was my boyish thought…": In these phrases, David continually emphasizes his dynamic, cause-and-effect relationship with Mr. Dick to highlight not only Mr. Dick's pleasure and recuperation through the kite flying process, but David's as well. There are three levels of pleasure and recuperation happening in this passage: Mr. Dick's experience with the kite, David's experience observing Mr. Dick, and our experience reading the passage. Each layer involves a phenomenon of repeated, continuous action.

Much of the pleasure we experience as we read the scene derives from the temporal qualities of both the described phenomenon and the passage's language. Notice the temporality of the language as in continuum: "very often… Every day of his life… I used to think… sometimes but not when he was out, looking… feeling… I used to fancy…" (210). For Mr. Dick, the experience of repetition is two-fold: consistent labor at

his memorial followed by consistent kite flying. David notes that the labor is often discouraging and chaotic for Mr. Dick but the subsequent kite flying is therapeutic. What's more, the actions in the passage may as well have occurred on any day of the year within this unspecified season of relationship between Mr. Dick and David, implying that they occurred as out of second-nature ritual and emphasizing their therapeutic function through consistency. Mr. Dick's kite-flying is not mere compulsion, but neither is it over-determined ritual. Instead, it is pleasure for pleasure's sake, and for the sake of others. But pleasure is not always detached from speech.

As we have seen in Miss Mowcher, wordplay and laughter in dialogue generate irony, enjoyment, and satisfaction. Elsewhere in Dickens, however, disabled or otherwise disregarded characters exhibit a mystical quality in dialogue, a kind of verbal expression which holds weight of which they may or may not be aware. Smike of *Nicholas Nickleby,* Jo of *Bleak House,* and Sloppy of *Our Mutual Friend,* for example, expose the dynamics of the seemingly inarticulate at play with their especial ironic wisdom. While they differ in this way from the disabled in *David Copperfield,* Smike, Jo, and Sloppy's spoken wisdom demonstrates the breadth of representation and pleasure to be found in Dickens's characterization of the disabled. I mention these characters to encourage boundary-free consideration of Dickens's body of work as a community. The following chapter contextualizes Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher within *David Copperfield,* Dickens's fiction, his journalism, and his Victorian setting to prompt a release from accusations of caricature and over-simplification.

Chapter Two
Contextualizing Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher: Where Misfits Fit In

V. Introduction

"Dickens Universe": Broadening Protagonism

If a study of Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher needs to engage with *David Copperfield* as a whole, then a determination of their capacity for experiencing and creating pleasure needs to engage with the novel's main theme: heroism. The novel begins, after all, with David's own inquiry into who shall be the hero of his life: himself or another? While the novel's plot contains dramatic elements like financial ruin, the elusion of a hateful stepfather, the indictment of a conniving miser, and the scandal of a fallen woman, the heroism spoken of here turns out to be of a different grain than saving the day. While David certainly displays concern for the innocent involved in these conundrums, his utmost concern turns upon the question of his own physical, emotional, and relational existence. Annette R. Federico, drawing on textual evidence as well as Charles Dickens's own biographical background and Victorian theory by the likes of Ruskin and Carlyle, calls the novel's central concern "the pursuit of happiness." Federico argues that Victorian liberals (like Dickens) and utilitarians alike were oriented (although in different ways) toward this pursuit, making the tenuous relationship between the social good and "personal happiness" the defining relationship of the age (71). She writes, "… 'Am I happy?' [was] one of the clearest imperatives of the age. It is certainly the question Dickens asked himself in the 1850s, and it is David Copperfield's essential question" (77). But Federico is also quick to illumine the differences between the ways of pursuing happiness.

For Dickens, she argues, there was no system for achieving happiness. He accepted and embodied "a fragile belief in the power of human desire to recreate the world while facing life's baffling inequities, accidents, and defeats" (71). She then turns to Victorian theorists, whose engagement with the question varied from Carlyle's disapproval of the human orientation toward personal happiness (72) to Bentham's "utilitarian emphasis on human happiness as the most important criterion for making moral choices" (73). Federico returns to *David Copperfield* to show how its title character, as a cipher for Dickens himself, pursues the question of happiness through the pursuit of occupation, relationship, and love. She concludes that, through the character of David, Dickens determines that "to seek happiness means accepting a commitment to look within oneself, and to find there, perhaps, very incompatible desires and values" (84). While I credit Federico with making these invaluable and well-proven claims about Victorian concern and Dickens's questions in *David Copperfield,* I find myself itching for such questions to engage with Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher. Federico argues that happiness in *David Copperfield* is always followed by the shadows of our main protagonist's travails and set-backs. But I also feel that there is no better place to look for what she calls the "subjective perils" that always threaten the "acquisition of happiness" in the life of the novel than in disabled characters. If it takes David the whole of the novel to understand the perils to happiness, Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher seem to know it all along.

These minor characters show that, despite and even through travail, one finds happiness in creating pleasure or finding the pleasure that is already there. Their orientation is less toward the *pursuit* of happiness and more toward gratitude for and

creation of pleasure. An engagement with these characters, I feel, would have added greatly to Federico's analysis of David's happiness. Perhaps David's angst comes from the inability to get right what the disabled in Dickens have right from the start. While some of the disabled in Dickens are prime examples of this right-oriented acquisition of happiness, however, it is important to distinguish that not all disabled characters in Dickens behave this way (Silas Wegg, William Dorrit) and that one need not be disabled in order to do it. Keeping these caveats in mind prevents a reductive reading in conflict with an ethical study of disability.

Federico summarizes the novel's central question this way: "…how do I make sense of these crushing imperfections in my life, and in life generally?" (91). David's answer to this question is "Agnes," the light always "pointing upward." These, the novel's last two words, further what Federico calls a happiness "subdued—a highly civilized, morally correct, middle-class kind of happiness" (92). David gives the last lines of his narrative to the praise of Agnes. This ending, no doubt, affirms the respectable, "disciplined," heterosexual marital relationship for which Agnes has patiently waited and which David has finally embraced. Federico calls Dickens's vision in *David Copperfield* "a collective commitment to freedom and self-determination holds the hope of a better society," coupled with a valuation of "human desires, instincts, and emotions" (92). While the novel's ending is consistent with this vision, Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher answer the novel's central question differently. By creating pleasure despite and even, at times, through their "crushing imperfections," they alleviate and complicate the humdrum, "subdued" happiness to which Federico refers. But it is no surprise that Mr. Dick's and Miss Mowcher's vital contributions to complicating the theme of happiness

were not obvious to Federico, especially since, given his journalistic understanding of disability, they may not have been obvious to Dickens himself.

VI. Dickens's "Idiots"

In her *Idiots, Madmen, & Other Prisoners in Dickens,* Natalie McKnight understands mentally disabled, imprisoned, mad, or otherwise disadvantaged characters as indications of an exclusive vision through Dickens's novels. For example, while McKnight acknowledges Dickens's growing sympathy toward prisoners in his fiction, she concludes her book with the assessment that his increasingly "conservative" attitude toward them in life led to his inevitable enclosure of them in his novels (129-131). McKnight extends this analysis to Dickens's fictional treatment of the figuratively imprisoned as well, looking at disabled characters like Maggy, Toots, and Smike. By creating particular "idiolects" (patterns of speech that "block communication," such as "taglines" that "repeatedly point out the inadequacy or unimportance of the speaker's words") for his already marginalized characters, she argues, Dickens's novels establish a system in which "marginalization and language" create a "vicious circle" that proves the compulsion of his "narratives" to "silence or seclude" the "aberrant" (2, 4, 50, 67). "Inarticulateness," McKnight contests, only furthers "isolation," and in the world of the Dickensian novel, there is little hope for escaping the margins (49). While I have shown how Mr. Dick's and Miss Mowcher's words avail much, Maggy, Toots, and Smike undoubtedly fall under McKnight's consideration of the "inarticulate." But unlike McKnight, who sees Smike as "lifeless, unvisionary, and humorless," and Maggy as having "no redeeming factors to compensate for her idiocy" (74, 119-120), I understand their novelistic limitations as possibilities.

Smike's tragic end, for example, is less a function of the novel's need to "kill him off," and more an indication of his inability to fit into its world, not because of his vices,

but because of the world's. We are not forced to read the Dickensian narrative as suffocating its disabled or inarticulate characters to extinction. Instead, we might consider how the events of the novel do so out of faithfulness to the reality of human greed and oppression. It is up to the reader to consider these characters' abilities to escape this unfortunate dynamic despite the other humans and the events that misread and abuse them, giving them lives and lessons of their own outside of their very novels and outside of Dickens himself.

Perhaps Mr. Dick's most prominent eccentricity, besides his appearance, is his memorial. Robert Tracy, in a psychoanalytical reading, connects Mr. Dick's perpetual and seemingly nonsensical work on an "autobiography" of King Charles to Charles Dickens himself and to the metaphor of "losing one's head" (115, 117). Tracy writes, "This 'Memorial about his own history'… is to be addressed to the Lord Chancellor, who had responsibility for supervising the financial affairs of certain categories of orphans and lunatics. As such it parallels… the book we are reading…" (115). Tracy understands Mr. Dick as Charles Dickens's own reconfiguration of one aspect of himself. *David Copperfield* is, after all, the most autobiographical of his novels. Pointing to Dickens's "reform agenda," Tracy also focuses on Mr. Dick as commentary "on the contemporary treatment of the insane" (119). Besides Tracy's citing of Dr. John Conolly as one of Dickens's contemporary agents for justice in the treatment of the mentally disabled, evidence is sprinkled throughout his non-fiction work in the periodicals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round.* "Idiots," for example, is his treatise of sorts in recommendation of two institutions, Park House and Essex Hall, which Dickens finds to be "deserving of all encouragement and support… humane…." He also stresses the

importance of visiting these institutions and interacting with those of "idiot" status regularly. He argues that although "such an affliction considered by itself is very painful… considered with a rational reference to the alleviations and improvements of which it is plainly susceptible under such treatment, it ought to become the reverse of painful, and ought to do the visitor good." To look at disability head-on is to prevent the kind of "putting away of many kinds of unfortunates" which is inhumane.

Altogether, Dickens's agenda in "Idiots" is a good one, but there are certainly troubling aspects. Dickens essentially posits in his article that these people, "idiots," suffer less acutely the pains of being human. He writes,

> Separation from friends does not affect them much, grief and sorrow hold but slight dominion over them, and the contemplation of death does not distress them… What dim religious impressions they connect with public worship, it is impossible to say, but the struggling soul would seem to have some instinctive aspirations towards its Maker.

Dickens's assertion here needs no explication to prove its dangers. To describe it as belittlement would be gross understatement. His statements here attest to broader nineteenth century gaps in understanding disability.

But Mr. Dick proves that a character may surpass his own author in understanding. He is just one example of how Dickens's fiction reaches farther than his journalism. Mr. Dick, by his responses to hardship, evades the exclusive and condescending understanding of "Idiots." Consider the moment when David tells Mr. Dick that Aunt Betsey, and by extension, David and Mr. Dick themselves, are financially ruined:

> Mr. Dick was so very complacent, sitting on the foot of the bed, nursing his leg, and telling me this, with his eyes wide open and a surprised smile, that I am sorry to say I was provoked into explaining to him that ruin meant distress, want, and starvation, but I was soon bitterly reproved for this harshness, by seeing his face turn pale, and tears course down his lengthened cheeks, while he fixed upon me such a look of unutterable woe, that it might have softened a far harder heart than mine. (501)

In this scene, Mr. Dick demonstrates an acute emotional response to bad news at odds with Dickens's assertion in "Idiots" that the disabled hold little capacity for grief. Perhaps more importantly, Mr. Dick's response performs an extended function by impacting the emotions of his onlooker, David. Yes, David must explain to Mr. Dick in more detail the meaning of "financial ruin." But once Mr. Dick grasps the meaning of ruin, his response is immediate. It is not the feeling of despair that Mr. Dick has failed to understand; it is only the meaning of the signifier, the financial jargon. Mr. Dick's response may betray his worldly ignorance, but he is anything but emotionally unawake or relationally stupid.

It is no surprise: Dickens's understanding of and portrayal of the disabled is wretchedly imperfect. We remember, for example, his aforementioned radical revisions to the character of Miss Mowcher upon reproof from Miss Seymour Hill. But we have also seen, through our analysis of these characters, how our understanding of them as readers holds potential to supersede enclosure (intended or not) by Dickens himself. We have seen how they commit to and create a sense of pleasure, not only through a capacity for fun, but also through engagement with suffering through empathy. So much of the plots of Dickens's novels turn on Victorian notions of home, as we have just seen through the

financial ruin of Aunt Betsey. Similarly, many of his characters stand defined by or against their relationship to family, community, and shelter.

VII. The Problem of Home

As pleasure is always linked to desire, and as desire, for the Victorians, is always connected to domesticity, I turn now to an exploration of these characters' positions within, without, for and against the dominant narratives of home and family for Victorians and for Dickens, more specifically.

Karen Chase and Michael Levenson's work in *The Spectacle of Intimacy* explores the 1851 census of England, demonstrating Victorian preoccupation with defining and conflating the family and the household (7). But the census's and the Parliament's strict definitions of family only reflect a slice of Victorian reality. As Chase and Levenson write, "The anxiety of definition emanates from a social instability" (7). England in the 1840's was actually diverse in terms of socioeconomic standing. To define families based on the external structures of houses and occupants, then, was to exclude entire demographics.

The characters I have studied (Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher) and alluded to (Jo, Smike, Sloppy, Jenny, Maggy, and Toots) have something else in common besides their humor and dynamic relationships to language. Significantly, each one of them lives an unconventional (by Victorian England's standards) relationship to home and family. Jo and Smike are destitute. Sloppy lives in an adopted home. Jenny mothers her father and lives with a roommate, Lizzie Hexam. Maggy wanders the streets but finds solace with Amy. Toots grew up in a school. Mr. Dick lives with his single, female, distant relative, and the unmarried Miss Mowcher provides for her family. Each of these figures demonstrates that "instability" by their society's standards does not necessarily equal misery. Instead, other characters might step in and provide what is typically afforded by a

marriage and a middle-class home: warm family feeling. At the same time, their stories do not cover them with rose-colored glass. While Smike enjoys limited camaraderie with the Nickleby family, it does not erase the tragedy of his threadbare dress and his suffering at the hand of Squeers. Jo is perhaps the most tragic of these figures; he demonstrates what happens when no one steps into the gap that poverty, exclusion, and orphan-hood create. While Mr. Dick has Aunt Betsey and Miss Mowcher has her talent, not everyone has what he needs to survive. While a positive circumstance or a selfless relative may fill a painful family or home life lack, it does not always happen this way. But these characters are not only in the position of need. They also fulfill the needs of others.

In the 1840's, "scandal" and "privacy" meld into one concept. Chase and Levenson call it "the publication of a privacy," highlighting both "scandal" and "ordinary incidents of daily housekeeping" as two sources of material for public portrayal (7). They assert that "one of the consuming facts of Victorian family life" was the issue of making "private life worthy of the public discourse" (10). Domestic scandals in Dickens abound. Think of the explosive relationship between Edith and Dombey or the domestic tragedy of Emily and Steerforth. Quiet, private moments of harmony in the home are also frequent. Consider Florence and Paul Dombey's short-lived domestic happiness or David and Clara dancing in the parlor.

One invaluable pleasure that Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher provide is their alleviation of scandal. Miss Mowcher indicts Littmer, rescuing Emily from ruin at the hands of Steerforth and the Peggotys from disgrace. Mr. Dick's history, while something of a scandal, does not threaten his outlook on or quality of life. Instead, he intervenes in the situation of Annie and Doctor Strong. In "the grip of unuttered emotion… Mr. Dick

orchestrates a scene of exposure" (Chase & Levenson 98). While the pent up drama of the scene brings the sort of public and private pleasure called for by and delighted in by Victorian audiences, Mr. Dick's release of the stress offers a new kind of pleasure that acknowledges a painful past while rescuing the integrity of the marriage covenant. But characters like Miss Mowcher and Mr. Dick do something else for the home. By entering and complicating the private sphere of the middle class, they demonstrate a new breadth of familial possibility. Karen Chase, in *Eros and Psyche,* highlights the family as a central medium for Dickens in creating personality. "The successful family is the great corrective to the threat of oneness," she writes. "It is the place where the self multiplies and its attributes divide" (132). The most functional familial relationships of the characters I study are most often found outside of blood lines. Many of them are adopted in some way, like Sloppy or Mr. Dick. They mediate the strict lines of community, bringing healthy diversity to bland home life, just as the multiplicity of family brings complexity to personality for Dickens.

Most home issues, for the Victorians, begin with paternity. Tied to inheritance, which is tied to livelihood, comfort, and status, paternity largely impacts how a Victorian is seen and how he or she is allowed to live. As Lieve Spaas mentions in the introduction about her anthology of essays, *Paternity and Fatherhood,* "… a complex picture of fatherhood emerges: filial perceptions of fathers are fraught with ambiguity and conflict…" (1). I am interested, in the works of Dickens, in what is *not* said about fathers. What about those characters whose progenitors are never mentioned? *David Copperfield* only mentions the siblings of Mr. Dick and Miss Mowcher, while it reveals at length David's continual struggle with the father and the father figure. We receive very little

information about the parentage of Maggy and Toots. On the other hand, Smike's relationship to his father is perhaps the central issue of *Nicholas Nickleby,* Jenny Wren is defined by and against her "parenting" of her own father, and Sloppy and Jo are identified as orphans.

Nunokawa's article "Death with Father in *David Copperfield"* in Spaas's book features David's desire, not only for his mother, but also for his dead father. This desire becomes David's longing for both Murdstone and Steerforth, as well. Nunokawa emphasizes David's fantasy life and draws evidence for this branched longing from David's descriptions of Murdstone the "grave" as a "case of full-blown rigor mortis" and the potential homo-social or homosexual elements of his friendship with Steerforth (189).

When David and Steerforth journey to Yarmouth, David takes delight in the nostalgic experience of returning to a childhood haunt. He writes, "For my part, my occupation in my solitary pilgrimages was to recall every yard of the old road as I went along it, and to haunt the old spots… as my memory had often done" (310). David's sentimentality here is an asset. In an otherwise dreary or primitive spot, David finds beauty because of his personal connection to it. For Steerforth, on the other hand, the place holds no pleasure. Of course, the place holds no personal connection for Steerforth. Additionally, though, his very restless character prevents him from enjoying the landscape of Yarmouth. Only the possibility of "a vent in rough toil and hard weather" or "any other means of excitement that presented itself freshly" would provide pleasure for Steerforth (310). The gentle wanderings of David would only bore him. Steerforth is moody and sullen during much of the trip in Yarmouth. When David approaches him "one dark evening," he communicates his emotional ailment in vague terms and a manner

of what David calls "passionate dejection" (312). The novel makes no mention of Steerfoth having had a father. We suppose, therefore, that like David, his father has died. But in a family as dark and suffering as the Steerforths, abandonment should not be out-ruled. I argue that David's and Steerforth's respective connections or disconnections to a paternal presence impact their relationships to pleasure.

Dianne F. Sadoff's understanding in her article "The Dead Father" draws on a psychoanalytical reading of Dickens's background and centers on the oedipal angle of *David Copperfield,* the murderous son plotting to kill off or stave off the "debting" father. This dynamic plays out in David's relationships with his dead father and with Micawber, but his relationship with Mr. Dick is unacknowledged. Mr. Dick, as a potential father figure, interrupts this dynamic by providing a father for David who is guileless, without expectation, burden, or debt. Instead, he offers love. He is the ideal father. On the one hand he is "the best of friends," the kite-flying source of play in David's life. On the other hand, he functions as co-guardian to David; Aunt Betsey constantly appeals to him, checks in with him, and asks for his advice and approval of her decisions regarding their charge. She reveres his wisdom as a partner would. He is immoveable and faithful. As David observes of Mr. Dick regarding his relationship to the Doctor and Mrs. Strong, "He seemed neither to advance nor to recede. He appeared to have settled into his original foundation, like a building, and I must confess that my faith in his ever moving was not much greater than if he had been a building" (649). Mr. Dick's faithfulness to the Strong's marriage later impacts David's own love story when David realizes, like Annie, his "first mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart" (662). By mediating the stress of home life and foiling the pain of loss, Mr. Dick demonstrates a quiet and keen

interpersonal wisdom that floods and heals confusion and pain, bringing clarity and pleasure.

VIII. Conclusion

Even David?

In chapter 18 of *David Copperfield*, "A Retrospect," David describes a moment from his school days in which he fought with the young butcher who challenged any student of Dr. Strong's to a brawl. David describes the moment in terms of boyish impetuosity, sandwiched by nostalgic remembrances: "I am growing great in Latin verses, and neglect the laces of my boots… Mr. Dick is wild with joy, and my aunt remits me a guinea by the next post… I am taken home in a sad plight, and I have beef-steaks put to my eyes… Time is stolen unobserved" (262). But something dark lies behind the memory. My understanding of the passage is indebted to Gareth Cordery's study of Foucault and *David Copperfield*, which confronts the violence in this scene as indicative of David's own "resentment" and "revenge" as well as the problem with Dr. Strong's school: "violence inflicted upon the lower class" (75). Cordery faces David's flaws, namely his threatened pride, his "sense of class superiority, his gentlemanliness, which the lower-class butcher… so openly disparages" (75). Cordery's is a vital interpretive move; unless we are willing to acknowledge the sinister qualities of even novel's hero and narrator (in turn questioning the motives of the author himself; *David Copperfield* is inherently autobiographical in a sense), we cannot responsibly read marginalized characters.

It is dangerous to read entirely against author and hero; here we eradicate the potential for humor and pleasure. But we must also be careful to avoid reading entirely *with* author and hero; here we limit characters like the mentally challenged Mr. Dick and the "lower-class" butcher to David's own lens and presentation. We have already seen how problematic this can be, as in the case of Miss Mowcher. Feeling is not inherently

wrong as we reread the disabled, but we must be careful whom we feel with. Further, we must not equate feeling with knowing. Just as empathy involves working to know a person who is essentially unknowable, so must our interpretation of character favor inquiry. This project has sought to understand just one facet of the richness of Dickensian characterization: the ethics of finding pleasure in a world that lacks and hurts. Mr. Dick, Maggy, and Toots produce pleasure by devaluing elocution in favor of caring and sensing. Miss Mowcher corrects vision and teaches empathy through humor. All of them challenge the concept of home and family, lending complexity to Victorian literature and assuring us that it is not obsolete. But the fundamentally problematic nature of reading the disabled ensures that interpretation is never finished. It must invite conversation, like David's encounter with the "florid, pleasant-looking gentleman" in his aunt's upstairs window.

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