

INTRODUCTION

In *Bleak House*, Dickens describes a wide variety of losses associated both with increasing industrial development in London and with changing patterns of thought and belief. My aim in this dissertation is to explore representations of loss in the novel and to examine some of the challenges the subject presents.

The concept of loss is understood to mean both the absence of that which previously existed, as well as the lack of something that one might have expected. An example of the first instance is found in the opening chapter of the novel, where the reader is introduced to a world which appears to be sliding backwards into a state of primal chaos, where the conditions for life: love, health, growth and significant communication; have almost ceased to exist. Loss as the absence of that which one might reasonably have expected, is exemplified in Esther's loveless childhood with her aunt and in society's failure to take responsibility for its outcasts, such as Jo.

In the first chapter, entitled Loss upon loss, I have concentrated on examples of the wide range of losses which Dickens uses to develop the cumulative picture of a nation bogged down in political disorder, archaic inefficiency, irresponsibility and pseudo-philanthropy. Of particular significance is the effect of the national situation on the health and wholeness of individuals at all levels of the social scale. It is the evasion of both national and individual responsibility that Dickens is at great pains to stress throughout

the novel. The Court of Chancery ruins the lives of those who seek justice and parental irresponsibility has devastating consequences within families.

While the Great Exhibition of 1851 displayed a wealth of new inventions and achievements, Dickens seeks to counter the national tone of self-confidence and self-congratulation by drawing attention to the negative effects of industrialisation - poverty, unemployment, disease and death - which represent loss rather than gain. Altick, in his exploration of the value of progress, makes the following comment:

All the machinery in the world – express trains, steamships, the secret ballot, representative government, free trade, a cheap and independent press, religious toleration, universal education, mass-produced wallpaper – is worthless unless it somehow contributes to the enrichment of an individual human being's existence.
(Altick 1977:110)

In *Bleak House*¹ Dickens highlights the fact that, for characters like Jo and the brickmakers, the progress to which the Great Exhibition drew attention, had no positive effect.

The second chapter, which I have titled Loss of life, has two areas of focus. The first is the loss of physical life brought about by death, the representation of which, for Dickens, has both a social and religious purpose. On the one hand, he uses the death-bed scenes in the novel to challenge and rebuke his readers and, on the other, they highlight the fact that at a time when many were turning away from traditional belief, philanthropy and benevolence were replacing a false sense of religious duty.

I would argue that when one looks at Dickens's treatment of loss and death, it is essential to make a distinction between 'sentiment' as the term was used and accepted during the nineteenth century, and a modern, pejorative view of 'sentimentality'. Fred Kaplan's point that we cannot assume that the meanings of words remain stable or that we know and understand Victorian assumptions about human nature and moral values, is relevant here.

In representing death, Dickens faces the problem that it remains a fictional construct, presented always from the perspective of the living. His treatment of the subject is complex and problematic, particularly when death is seen both as an exit and an entry, an end point and a new beginning.

The second area with which Chapter Two deals, is the death-like existence of characters such as Lady Dedlock, Tulkinghorn and Vholes who, according to Stewart, live lives which are 'so empty that they are merely extended rehearsals for death' (Stewart 1978.108). For Lady Dedlock and Tulkinghorn physical death is simply an intensification of this death-like existence.

In the third chapter, Representing loss in narrative, I deal with some of the narrative techniques which Dickens uses in representing loss and death in the novel and highlight the problems that the subject presents for language. In particular, there is the problem of reconciling the secular and the scriptural and the fact that in describing death, language has to confront the boundary

¹ Further references to *Bleak House* will be cited as *BH*.

between death and what lies beyond. This chapter also explores Dickens's use of the camouflaging techniques of metaphor, symbol and cliché, and the effect of his multidirectional chapter titles.

The double narrative technique used in *BH* provides Dickens with the opportunity to explore issues viewed from two different perspectives. Although the technique creates an initial sense of two separate worlds, as these worlds are seen to connect and converge, the narrative method reinforces the novel's key theme of interdependence.

In his essay 'The Politics of Dickens' Novels', Monroe Engels asserts that 'there can be no essential separation between Dickens the novelist and Dickens the citizen and man of opinions who lived in England from 1812 to 1870' (Coles 1986:145). I believe that this assumption is flawed and share Coles's opinion that 'fiction and journalism use different modes of presentation, which reflect differing imaginative activities, and differing purposes and occasions for writing' (Coles 1986:145). The fact that Dickens worked within the fields of journalism and fiction enabled him, at times, to express ambivalent, and even contradictory, responses to public issues. In fiction Dickens is able to explore positions that were not always tenable outside of the novels, while his position as editor of *Household Words* and his writings in the journals represent a different position and a different discourse.

Coles also suggests that the fact that Dickens worked both in 'fiction with its immunities and journalism with its responsibilities ... allowed him to

articulate the ambivalence a sensitive member of the middle class must have experienced when so many of the comforts one enjoyed as the fruits of progress were at the same time products of appalling exploitation and hardship' (Coles 1986:173). On the one hand, there was a feeling of euphoria and optimism and, on the other, a sense of loss and despair. I would suggest that another aspect of this 'ambivalence' is the fact that, while novels exposed the effects of industrialisation, they were themselves a highly remunerative part of the literary industry.

It is interesting to identify focus areas in *BH* with which Dickens has dealt previously, in his earlier novels, or to which he returns in the later ones. If one looks at *BH*, with regard to its condemnation of the ills of society, in relation to the novels which precede it, it is evident that there is a shift in emphasis from the private to the public sphere. In *BH*, Dickens moves from restricted criticism of the workhouse in *Oliver Twist* and Dotheboy's Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*, to criticism of an entire social system. In the earlier novels social problems are addressed as self-contained issues, while in *BH*, society is viewed as a whole and social criticism moves from an individual, private sphere to a public sphere. The novels from *BH* onward move towards new methods of form and technique which could better express his deepening social awareness.

This dissertation is an investigation of Dickens's representation of loss within one novel, *BH*. The conclusion suggests other possible related themes of study, such as an exploration of the subject in a wider range of Dickens's

works or a comparison between the ways in which the subject is treated by Dickens, Thomas Hardy or George Eliot. Of particular relevance would be an exploration of representations of loss in England/Britain in the mid-nineteenth century in comparison to the situation within southern Africa today.